

# Church Now Dabbling in Technology

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

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An Orthodox priest reporting via his laptop from a room at the Christ the Savior Cathedral on the 2009 patriarch elections that gave the post to Kirill. **Igor Tabakov**

While President Dmitry Medvedev is reverently pushing the country toward his sacred goal of "modernization," the clergy has launched its own quest for new ways to reach the flock — offering believers special cell phone tariffs and Bible quotations via text messages.

Last year, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, said priests should go online and use social networks to preach to Internet users. He did not mention mobile services specifically, but church presence is becoming ever more felt in the handset lately.

This year, a Moscow-based youth Orthodox movement started a text messaging service providing pithy sayings taken from the Holy Scriptures in a bid to help people learn the Bible and feel unity.

The "Good Word" [service](#), launched by the Voskreseniye (Resurrection) community, offers quotations from the Bible and writings of the Orthodox saints, abbot Ioasaph Sorokin of the

Church of the Resurrection in Kadashi, the priest behind the project, told The Moscow Times.

Every morning, Sorokin personally selects two quotations to be sent to believers across the country — some of whom write back.

"One woman got back to me texting that she wished she could receive my messages 10 times a day, in order to sin less," Sorokin said in an telephone interview.

One example of a typical message on the movement's web site reads: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

The service counted some 2,000 users as of February, with the number growing by about 60 a day, Sorokin said. Only five people have unsubscribed so far, all without providing any reasons, he added.

The service, provided by Intis, a company based in predominantly Muslim Tatarstan, is available nationwide and has users in most regions, even including two in another mostly Muslim region, Chechnya, Sorokin said.

"People in remote regions are happy to get at least some connection with the rest of the world," he said. One user wrote back to him once: "Hurray! I'm also remembered."

The group plans to expand the Good Word to Ukraine and Belarus, and possibly other countries as well, Sorokin said.

But Alexander Soldatov, a religious expert and editor of Portal-credo.ru, was doubtful about the project's perspectives, saying the initiative is unlikely to get a "broad missionary field" nationwide because people only subscribe voluntarily.

While Sorokin is still offering spiritual services for free, a number of companies use new-generation technologies aimed at believers in a more profitable way.

The regional mobile operator Smarts, for one, provides a range of spiritual services and tariffs for Orthodox believers.

One of them, a tariff dubbed "Zvonnitsa" (Bell Tower), is available in the Samara region and was developed jointly with the local diocese. Users get discounts for calls and text messages on religious holidays.

A variation of Zvonnitsa offered in the neighboring Yaroslavl region by Smarts' local branch allows subscribers to make free-of-charge calls on Saturdays and Sundays.

"We have a stable number of subscribers with the Zvonnitsa tariff, which means that people like the service quality and the tariff itself," Yelena Knyazeva, commercial director of the region's branch of Smarts, Yaroslavl-GSM, said in e-mailed comments.

She did not specify the number of users, but said the tariff was started as part of the company's policy to focus on "certain groups, taking into account their interests."

The operator's subscribers can also listen to Orthodox hymns by telephone, Knyazeva added.

Another tariff called "Prihodskoi" (Parochial) supplies subscribers in Samara with a schedule of church services in the city and reminders about Orthodox holidays throughout the year.

A service called "Spiritual Companion," available for Smarts users in Samara since 2005, allows callers to listen to a student of the city's Orthodox seminary speaking on topics such as "a difficult life situation," "Orthodox holidays" or "how to get to the nearest church." The service, which received the blessing of the archbishop of Samara and Syzran, Sergy, charges a modest 1 ruble (3 cents) a minute.

Neither the central office of the Moscow Patriarchate nor its Samara diocese could be reached to comment for the story on Thursday.

Downloadable images of Orthodox icons, usually depicting popular saints, as well as texts of prayers, are also available online, usually priced at about 20 rubles per spiritually enhancing cell phone message.

Such offers are to be found on many web sites, though the companies behind them usually bear no link to the church.

Still, believer-oriented services remain few and far between, and often fail to succeed, Soldatov of Portal-credo.ru said.

He cited as an example much-publicized stories of a Moscow-based taxi service and cafe, both aimed at Orthodox Christians. Neither project gained much popularity.

It appears the church is more interested in online discussion, not online business. "Patriarch Kirill seems more focused on blogs, in particular LiveJournal.com, and Internet forums," Soldatov said.

"On our own web forum, we have been witnessing a surprising inflow of [religion-minded] commentators criticizing some liberal articles recently, while two weeks ago there were only few," he added.

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