

Sermon via hologram? California preacher 'visits' Auckland congregation using 'teleportation' video



A holographic image of the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez Jr. appears to float above the platform at City Impact Church near Auckland, New Zealand, on July 4. The speaker recorded the sermon in California using technology that made the image look ... more >

By Mark A. Kellner - *The Washington Times* - Saturday, July 24, 2021

The last time the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez Jr., pastor of New Season Church in Sacramento, California, spoke on the platform at City Impact Church near Auckland, New Zealand, he wasn't really there.

The congregation didn't seem to mind one bit, even if the speaker was rather stiff this time. Mr. Rodriguez, an annual in-person guest, didn't roam the platform or gesture as he usually did.

The hundreds of congregants in Auckland saw Mr. Rodriguez, 51, standing before them, but as a holographic representation.

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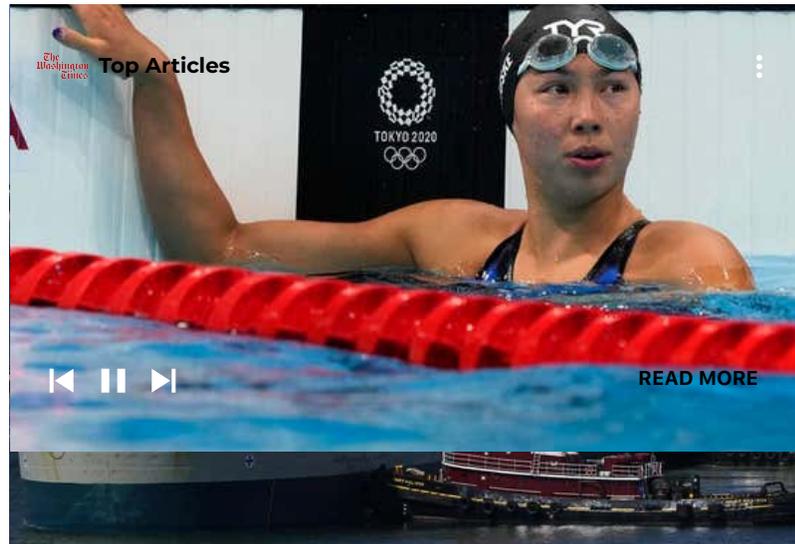
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Inside the darkened auditorium, the guest preacher's image seemed to levitate above the platform, a three-dimensional representation instead of a video's "flat" onscreen image. Apart from the obvious distance between the soles of his shoes and the stage, the hologram appeared lifelike and showed up clearly on video screens scattered throughout the room.

Unable to make his yearly visit in person because of pandemic travel restrictions and scheduling conflicts, Mr. Rodriguez's sermon was recorded using 4K video, vertically, and projected on the stage in New Zealand using a local holographic productions firm.



Writing on Twitter after the July 4 presentation, Mr. Rodriguez referred to his interest in the "Star Trek" franchise: "As a die hard Trekkie, I love to see the church engage technology, innovation, and science all within the confines of our amazing faith to change the world with the gospel of Jesus."

In a telephone interview, Mr. Rodriguez said he had to severely restrict his pulpit style to accommodate the holographic recording technology.

"I'm a little bit passionate on occasion when I speak," he said. "I had to be completely stationary in order for the image to be captured in a way that could be transmitted. So that was my heavy lifting on my end: Sam Rodriguez standing still for 40 minutes while delivering a sermon and standing dead completely still with the minimal movement of [my] hands."

Mr. Rodriguez received direct messages and plaudits via Instagram and Facebook. "You know, Pastor Sam, it felt like you were there. It felt like it was eerie. It was different," he said while quoting one audience member's response. He said he is considering buying the technology, which can cost \$60,000 and up, to link the two New Season Church campuses so he can speak in two places at once.

He said his church has 3,000 members between the main campus in Sacramento and a satellite in Downey, California, 396 miles south. Most of the church's membership is in Sacramento, Mr. Rodriguez said, and 500 attend in the Los Angeles suburb.

"I would speak live in Sacramento, but that transmission will be a hologram in Los Angeles live," he said. "I do believe the future of multisite church ministry is using holograms. I call it a 'holy hologram.'"

Professionals on church growth aren't ready to fully endorse the concept, however.

"I can see a scenario where people use holograms, but until it looks less like the ghosts in Disney's Haunted Mansion, I don't see it as more than a novelty," said Ed Stetzer, editor-in-chief of Outreach magazine and a professor and dean at Wheaton College, an evangelical school in Illinois.

"Going from 2-D to 3-D is not that big of a change," he said. "If you are comfortable watching a multisite pastor on a screen, I imagine you'd be comfortable watching a pastor hologram. But, right now, I imagine that it would be more of a distraction than a helpful innovation."

The Rev. Tim Shapiro, president of the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis, said Mr. Rodriguez is "on the first wave of using hologram technology." Other congregations, he said, might not be ready.

Mr. Shapiro, whose group advises congregations across Indiana, said using holograms "may become inevitable" in larger congregations, particularly those with services in multiple locations.

He said it is "too early to tell whether excitement or interest around [holograms] is primarily fueled by the excitement around the technology or if the energy behind it is that there's some kind of richer worship experience" when it's used.

A 2020 study by the Connecticut-based Hartford Institute for Religion Research estimated that the U.S. has about 1,750 megachurches, defined as Protestant congregations with weekly pre-pandemic attendance of at least 2,000 adults and children. Of those, 70% were found to be multisite enterprises.

One Los Angeles company is trying to hook religious groups on the technology.

"We've spoken at all levels of different religious organizations, from the church, like bishops and preachers in small community churches, all the way up to the megachurches, and even some world leaders that are well known throughout the religion space," said David Nussbaum, CEO of Portl, a Los Angeles firm that makes equipment to create holographic transmissions. Mr. Nussbaum said his firm was not involved in Mr. Rodriguez's New Zealand event.

No religious groups have bought the firm's \$60,000 telephone-booth-style recording setup, but Mr. Nussbaum said that after 1,000 conversations with potential buyers, "something really special happens with that thousandth person."

Mr. Nussbaum said the firm expects to introduce a tabletop model this year with a price tag in the \$2,000 range, along with subscription services for content such as workout routines. The units could also originate high-resolution video transmissions sent via Internet streaming to a network of similar machines.

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