

Innovative app allows churchgoers to light devotional candles from home

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A new smartphone app that lets worshippers remotely light prayer candles in a church from the comfort and safety of their own homes is the latest example of online technologies that have been rapidly adopted during the pandemic, such as videoconferencing and online shopping.

Called Gabriel in honour of the archangel who acts as God's messenger in the Bible, the app was developed by a Niagara College research team, including engineers and students with the Research & Innovation division, for Vendalite Enterprises. They have been providing electronic candles to churches, shrines, mausoleums, and other religious and non-denominational institutions in Canada and the United States for more than 40 years.

"Our market is a very complex entity, steeped in 2,000 years of tradition," said Derek Insley, who manages Vendalite with his wife Judy and son Donovan.

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Originally using small incandescent light bulbs



Derek, Judy, and Donovan Insley run Vendalite, an innovative Ontario-based company that provides electronic candles to institutions who need them. PHOTO SUPPLIED

boxes, Vendalite's electronic lights have become more sophisticated with low-energy LEDs and a cashless 'tap-and-pay' donation system. While convenient for worshippers, the electronic candles also solve several problems for churches, explained Derek.

One notable problem that they eliminate, said Judy, is the copious amount of soot that is generated by traditional candles, thus reducing the need for constant cleaning. The lack of soot also helps protect historic artworks often found in churches such as paintings and frescoes.

In addition, without an open flame, there is little risk of fire from electronic candles, said Derek, so churches not only enjoy reduced insurance premiums,

but they also save a lot of money. The cost of electricity to light electronic candles is significantly lower than the cost of constantly replacing traditional wax candles. That means that more of the worshippers' donations will benefit the church and the local community.



The Insleys hope that their electronic candles will help churches reduce their carbon footprint and save more money.

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And perhaps more importantly, the use of electronic candles significantly cuts down carbon dioxide emissions, added Judy. While a single wax prayer candle might not be the most significant source of pollution, it does emit carbon dioxide when burned, and the amount of pollutants generated begins to add up if you start considering how many candles a church consumes in a year. That's not a problem for electronic candles, which don't emit any CO2 if they are powered using renewable energy.

She noted that in his 2015 encyclical, Pope Francis warned that climate change represented "one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day" and called for a model of energy transition "leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us."

Several Montreal churches currently use Vendalite's electronic candles, including Canada's largest church, St. Joseph's Oratory, and Notre-Dame-de-Montréal Basilica, which has also been testing the Gabriel app.

"During this horrific period of the pandemic, which has limited the mobility of our community and restricted access to our Catholic churches, technology is stepping up to help at least provide us with the

opportunity to share our devotion," said Mathieu Verrault, director of Tourism Affairs at Notre Dame.

"The pandemic of course is the major reason for Gabriel," said Judy. "Shut-ins can now light a candle at the Basilica and satisfy the emotional need of lighting a votive candle to express an intention."

The act of lighting candles is a tradition that has existed in the Catholic church for thousands of years and is one that is shared by other denominations and other religions. In the Catholic church, it can symbolize the act of remembering a loved one, a petition of prayer to a specific saint, or direct appeal to God.

Apps like Gabriel are consistent with the Vatican's initiatives to modernize the Roman Catholic Church. Examples include "The Catholic app" which launched in 2016. It uses GPS technology to guide worshippers to the



Vendalite partnered with St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal to set up their electronic candles.

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closest church for mass or confession. Another example is the "Click to Pray" eRosary wearable device which was introduced in 2019 and serves as a tool for learning how to pray the rosary.

As for the future of Gabriel and Vendalite's electronic candles, Derek sees them as being the perfect complement for crowdfunding and fundraising efforts for things like natural disasters or an international crisis where people can light a candle and make a donation to show their support.