

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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July 2010 - Volume 18, Number 7

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Should Our Congregation Use Internet Social Media?

The senior pastor of City Church, Rev. Jamie Osborne, serves the world's first "blended-model" congregation—a combination of Web and face-to-face interaction—spanning 100 cities.

Osborne explains the rationale behind the model: "Two hundred and fifty years ago, leaders like John Wesley led a revolution by taking the church outside its walls to where the people are. We're doing the same thing. It just happens that the Internet is where people are."¹

Many institutions and religious communities now value Internet tools and social networking media. The Library of Congress holds an archive of the collected works of Twitter, the micro-blogging service whose users send more than fifty-five million messages daily. Thousands follow the Twitter posts of pastors Rick Warren and Joel Osteen, while thousands of others post on the Facebook "wall" of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.

These examples are a small part of the 400 million active users of Facebook, one-half of whom log on to the site daily. Dozens of new social networking sites and thousands of applications emerge each year.

What Would an Effective Social Media Ministry Look Like? All types of social media offer a technological opportunity for accomplishing ministry.

As with all other communication technologies, the use of Internet social media must serve the congregation's ministry goals. Unrestricted by a set time or place, people can connect regardless of their schedule or location. Social media tools extend the boundaries of traditional ministry and establish a network of people who interact during the week—not just during worship services or on-site activities. Wherever people are gathered—in this case, online—a ministry opportunity exists.

Strengthening relationships. Social media tools can strengthen relationships among church members and between leaders and members. Through Facebook posts, tweets, text messages, or other media tools, members take part in celebrations (birthdays, births, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, new jobs) and learn about others' challenges (illnesses, losses, deaths). Photos are the most popular feature of social media. Many churches post pictures or videos of events that can be shared with extended family and friends. The networking function of

social media allows users to share ideas, resources, encouragement, and friendships.

Expanding evangelism and advocacy. Social media transform the ways churches reach out to people outside the congregation. Different from a congregation's Web site, a church Facebook page creates an interactive tool for people to learn more about the congregation's mission and activities. Anyone can post updates or photos, use it as an on-line bulletin board or discussion room, call for volunteers, or send invitations to church events. Real-time communication encourages learning, sharing faith, and describing how God is working in lives.

Congregations can also use social media to highlight issues, encourage community volunteerism, and raise funds. The success of Red Cross fund-raising for Haiti illustrates this powerful capability. When calls for emergency relief funds spread through social media sites, the Red Cross raised more than five million dollars through individuals' \$10 text-message donations.

Reaching out to younger adults. New forms of social media have replaced email as the communication of choice for youth and young adults: to learn what media



and movies they prefer, what they are concerned about, and check out their profiles on Facebook or other sites. The use of social media allows congregations to express interest in young people's lives.

Encountering the culture. Technology has traditionally been a weak spot for churches. But social media requires almost no additional expense, very little technical knowledge, and a modest amount of time. Congregations already appear in the virtual world through sites that evaluate worship services (such as churchrater.com and yelp.com) and through members who create content (such as blogs or posts). Proactive social media use enables members to show that we are all human, gives others a chance to know what the congregation values, and confirms that worshipers are open to communication with people who might be different from them. Social media use offers a rare opportunity for the Church to become more vital and central in people's networks, more relevant to their daily lives, and more helpful to them in making faith-reflecting decisions.

How Do Pastors Use Social Media? At least one-half of the adult population of the U.S. currently creates content for the Web. Internet social media provides a wide variety of communication opportunities not otherwise available to clergy.

Sharing content. Pastors already create content on a weekly basis—sermons, prayers, teaching materials, and newsletters. Posting that content or writing material on a social networking site becomes a logical next step for reaching a larger audience. Currently, one in seven pastors maintains a blog—to discuss their interests, what they are reading, what conferences or seminars they are attending, and what they are learning.²

Listening to others. Pastors gain real-time feedback from members and non-members when they comment on sermons, weekly columns, or anything else the pastor posts. People tell stories, give personal testimonies, contribute ideas, and share concerns. Some disclose thoughts online that they might never voice face-to-face.

Interacting with a larger network. Pastors use social media to communicate with a larger and wider range of people: to renew and maintain connections with other pastors, former seminary professors, and other professional or supportive networks. Networking tools even make some administration details more manageable (such as sharing documents and negotiating meeting times).

What Are the Reservations about Social Media Tools? Church leaders express misgivings about on-line communication—and for good reason. Caution is warranted because hazards are real. Examples of those misgivings include the following:

“It takes too much time.” All interactions with people take time. Therefore, social media users must always weigh the time investment with the potential return.

Additionally, in the beginning, some time is required to climb the learning curve.

“It makes the message seem less spiritual and personal.” Some argue that on-line interactions demean the message. As one objector stated, “If God wants a personal relationship with us, how can that be accomplished through email, text message, or Twitter?” Any written communication—whether in hard copy or on-line—carries this risk.

“The content can't be controlled.” When anyone can post comments or content, the possibility exists for some user statements to be off-message or negative. The congregation must decide whether it can dedicate staff or volunteer time to monitoring the congregation's on-line presence (such a removing out-of-bounds postings). One benefit of on-line conversations: The congregation knows what others are saying and can respond to it.

“It risks my privacy and security.” While social networking sites offer ways to set privacy levels, in reality, all on-line content carries the prospect of becoming publicly accessible. Therefore, whatever content or messages users post should be done with the recognition that this on-line communication has a long shelf life. Users, especially the pastor and staff, should always use their real names on sites to avoid any suggestion of impropriety in their on-line interactions.

The Bottom Line. Create a list of your congregation's most important ministry goals (such as “build and deepen relationships among members”). How might social media help church leaders achieve those goals?

Make a list of reservations and fears about social media. What steps could our church take to neutralize those liabilities or turn them into assets?

In addition to the pastor, identify three to five people to form a social media ministry team. The team members should include tech-savvy people as well as social media beginners who serve to alert leaders to likely mishaps and misunderstandings. Begin the team's work by reading several excellent resources about social media technology and ministry.³

Expect church members to be located everywhere along the social media spectrum—from non-users to experts. Consider offering a social media workshop for church members, which helps them become involved in the congregation's on-line ministries.

¹See www.onebigcity.com

²*Facebook for Pastors* by Chris Forbes (Ministry Marketing Coach: 2008); <http://ministrymarketingcoach.com/free-e-books/>

³*Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul* by Lynn M. Baab (Alban Institute, 2008); *The Reason Your Church Must Twitter* (<http://www.twitterforchurches.com>)