

Social networking sites benefit pastors, congregations, in many ways

By Kathleen Lourde

In this day of iPhone Bible aps, podcast sermons, and hymn lyrics displayed via computer onto big screens in various corners of a church, perhaps it’s not so surprising that pastors are starting to turn to social networking Web sites to stay in touch with their members and with other pastors.

While Facebook is arguably the biggest and most popular, social networking sites are proliferating. In fact, a new, global, faith-based social media network, www.cross.tv, has been launched out of Slovakia. Members from around the world can post in their native language and an advanced language filtering system will translate the postings into the native languages of other users.

Still, accepting new technologies is a slow process among pastors and congregations, says Paul Steinbrueck, chief executive officer of OurChurch.com, a company that helps churches move into the Internet age by helping them set up state-of-the-art Web sites that integrate social networking.

“Churches haven’t fully embraced [social networking sites] and individuals within churches aren’t fully using them,” Steinbrueck said, but he thinks more pastors and congregation members will see their value. “I think it’s only going to grow,” he said.

The benefits of social networking for a church community

In Alva, several of the pastors are on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, or all of the above and more.

The benefits, they said, are many and varied. One of the biggest benefits is pastors being better able to “listen to their congregations,” as Steinbrueck put it, or to improve their ability to minister to individuals by finding out “where people are hurting” and in need of prayer, as Will Jenkins, pastor of First Assembly of God, said.

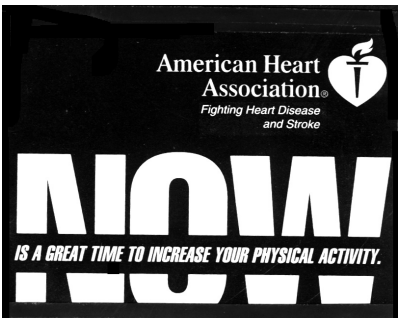
Social networking can result in better mentoring and support among pastors themselves, as Rev. Judy Pistole of the Presbyterian Church said. It can spark more spiritual discussions—“very much so,” as Bill Kalfas, pastor of the Church of the Nazarene, said.

Further, it helps to humanize the pastor, said Steinbrueck. “It gives people within the church a better idea of what the pastor’s life is like; it makes them seem like a regular person rather than a person who’s super-holy or different in some way.”

Jenkins agreed. “I do think that it makes you more human. It takes that pedestal down a few notches,” he said.

Another benefit is that “it can help to keep spiritual issues on people’s minds throughout the week, if the pastor is posting updates or ‘tweets’ about spiritual topics,” Steinbrueck said.

And, finally, pastors’ or youth pastors’ presence on social networking is crucial today to reach youth, when most teenagers and college students have accounts on these sites and often use them several times a day.



First Assembly of God ahead of the curve

Jenkins, who is a self-described “gadget guy,” is on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and LinkedIn. First Assembly of God also has a Facebook page.

Of the four social networking sites, Jenkins prefers Twitter.

“I think MySpace has run its course [although] a lot of the teenagers and even some of the college students still use MySpace very frequently.”

In fact, Facebook is the most popular social networking site of Jenkins’ congregation, many of whom use it.

“But myself, personally, I use Twitter just as much. Twitter is a microblog. You get 140 characters” per post, and users can use their cell phones to “text” their posting to the site, making Twitter a more mobile social networking tool. The 140 characters is enough space to enable users to post a quote from a sermon or conference they’re hearing at that moment, for example, Jenkins said.

The online social networking is beginning to increase the sense of community within the church, Jenkins said.

“I think it’s allowing [church members] to feel more of a connection both with people in the church and with me, because they know that I’m looking out for them and I am checking in on them via Facebook or via MySpace. I think that allows them to feel more connection to church,” Jenkins said.

It also provides for an “easy way to communicate with members: I send one message to the entirety of the group and everybody gets it,” he said.

Not your grandkid’s Web sites anymore

Social networking sites aren’t just for teenagers and college students anymore, said Jenkins.

“There are people in this town who are in their 60s and 70s who are signing up for Facebook because it’s an easy way to find people—old classmates and friends—they’ve lost contact with.”

In addition, while the “status updates” that people provide on Facebook or the ‘tweets’ posted on Twitter may often seem trivial at first glance, it’s knowing the little things about people’s lives that can deepen and broaden existing relationships, Pistole said.

Although only four or five of Pistole’s church members are on Facebook, she seemed to think more will eventually find her online. “I look forward to the time when I have more church members on Facebook,” she said.

Social networking can be a boon to pastors

Pistole prefers Facebook to Twitter because Facebook allows much longer posts, making thorough discussions easier to conduct.

She started using the sites to keep in touch with the younger generation among her congregation who had gone away to college. She hoped it would help them feel more connected with their home church as they explored their new, more independent lives.

And it did. “Most of my college students are fairly regularly on Facebook and post things, and so I can re-

ply” and can be there, virtually, if they’re feeling lost or in need of spiritual guidance, she said.

In the process, she found an unexpected benefit: more connection with other pastors.

It’s easy for a pastor of a rural church to feel isolated, she said, especially when you’re the sole female pastor and the other churches “are theologically very different from yours,” she said.

“I have friends pastoring in Egypt and Africa,” she said—places she’s not likely to pick up the phone and call—“and I really like being able to stay abreast of what’s going on in their lives.”

Along with the emotional support of being more connected with other pastors comes the sometimes invaluable advice that may be offered in response to a post about something giving the pastor trouble.

For example, when Pistole was working on her last doctoral project and it was simply giving her fits, “one of my professors put me in touch on Facebook with another professor at another seminary” who specialized in the subject. Problem (eventually) solved.

The social networking sites can be especially helpful for new pastors, Pistole said. “As they start running into the problems that pastors run into, they may make a statement on feeling overwhelmed or whatever, and immediately five or six people will give them the encouragement they need, and sometimes very practical advice. So it provides a kind of mentoring for pastors that they wouldn’t otherwise have.”

More spiritual discussions can be sparked

“Spiritual conversations do begin via the social networking sites whether it’s Facebook or Twitter,” said Jenkins, who likes to watch his “friends”—or online contacts—status updates go by on the screen of one of his four computers or on his cell phone. “And when somebody’s having a bad day or are feeling low, or feel like God’s not listening to them, they’re venting that through their keyboard and that’s an opportunity for me to see that and send them a message or give them a call and say, ‘Hey, it seems like you’re having a rough day. Can I pray for you?’”

Kalfas has Facebook and MySpace accounts, but hasn’t visited his MySpace account in quite some time. Facebook is more user-friendly, he said.

While being on social networking sites takes up time, Kalfas believes “it’s more investing than wasting” time, he said. “I have done a lot of counseling with folks by chatting [online]—which has become a great tool,” he said.

Monitoring the social networking sites can be something of a distraction, but it’s a distraction that results in improved ministry, said some pastors.

“It can be a distraction; it can take a lot of time up if you let it,” said Jenkins, who says that some days he pops onto a site to check on his friends and gets pulled into a lengthy online conversation with someone about a problem they’re having that displaces the items he’d had on his “To Do” list for the day. “But I have an associate pastor friend who always said ‘Distractions are your ministry.’ When

someone walks into your office or calls you; when someone needs you, distractions are your ministry.”

Choose words carefully in these public forums

Pastors, perhaps more than the rest of us ordinary folk, do have to be mindful of what they post, always keeping in mind that it’s a very public forum and the friends of their friends may see what they write—people they don’t even know.

Pistole never forgets this, and advises all social networking site users to think before they write.

“The thing that happens with a pastor—with anybody, really—you have to be sensible about what you post. If I were to go out and drink to excess, I probably wouldn’t share it on Facebook,” she said, laughing. “But I lead a fairly transparent life. I think that’s part of being a Christian.” Still, “I do try to be careful of my words on Facebook, so if I’m angry about something, I wait,” before saying anything on the topic, to let the anger subside.

Another reason to think twice before posting is that people of many different belief systems will read what’s written and it’s important to be respectful, she said. “You choose your words carefully and you know that it’s a public forum.”

Social networking sites crucial to reaching youth

Jenkins first got interested in social networking sites five years ago when he was a youth pastor. The sites “were great ways to just be part of [youth group members’] world, because [...] that’s how they were communicating: electronically. So if we were going to reach them we had to keep up with the way they were communicating.”

Most, if not all, of the area youth pastors are on social networking sites. The Church of the Nazarene youth leader has set up a Facebook profile for the youth of that church.

Jacobi Collins, youth pastor at Alva Wesleyan Church, has been on MySpace and Facebook for about five years, and prefers Face-

book. He’s set up profiles for his youth group on both sites.

He “very often” finds out things about the members of his youth group that he’d rather not know or that he feels compelled to address from a pastor’s perspective, “but I would much rather see someone being genuine as opposed to hiding things and being fake,” he said.

He has also found that some people “would rather have their updated status and pictures hidden from people who may judge them as a bad person—i.e., youth pastors!” Collins said.

However, the social networking sites have increased the sense of community within the youth group “very much,” he said. “We use Facebook as a form of communication just as much, or more, than texting and talking on the phone.”

Some of the youth group’s members prefer interacting over the Internet over face-to-face interaction, and Collins has no problem with that. The important thing is that the person is communicating.

Collins sometimes finds himself giving spiritual advice to people not affiliated with his church, but he doesn’t see that as not spending his time well. “I never feel like I’m spending too much time on strangers as opposed to something related to my own church, because it’s not about always boosting your own church; it’s about boosting the kingdom of God, right?”

Looking ahead

Social networking sites are both the current big thing and the next big thing in how pastors interact with their congregations, because while it’s begun it hasn’t fully taken hold of the faith community, said Steinbrueck. Meanwhile, as pastors and congregations start to look at social networking, Steinbrueck sees other big changes on the horizon, such as churches that are solely on the Internet and have congregations that span the globe.

It’s a new world in the way we communicate, but maybe what’s being communicated is still as ageless as religion itself.

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portant—often at the center of our lives.

For many ancient peoples, however, children were what you had to put up with until they were old enough to be adults and be useful—children were totally without power; they were the possessions of the father of the home. Culturally, children were not seen as worth much although sometimes they were of some use as simple servants.

Welcoming the powerless—we know some things about welcoming the important. You invite people to your home and you make sure it is clean, you prepare food, you might even provide entertainment—conversation or music or a movie or a football game to watch. Hospitality is something we do know something about. But Jesus calls us to welcome the powerless, the ones that can’t do anything for us, the ones who cannot reciprocate, to welcome regardless of the value we might apply to the person.

We live in a world of networking, of seeking those people who can be of use to us, of value to us, and Jesus suggests we set this idea on its head and start welcoming the ones who do not seem as if they can be of use. See this little child; when

you welcome this mostly useless one, you welcome me. Jesus meets us in the powerless people of the world.

Welcoming the powerless equals welcoming Jesus, and welcoming Jesus is welcoming the one who sent him—it is welcoming God. If we were given the chance to offer hospitality to the Lord God, what kind of party would we throw—how hospitable would we be?

If we believe Jesus meant what he said, and doesn’t it frequently boil down to that, if we believe that Jesus actually means what he says, then how do we shape our lives around this welcoming stance? What do we do to let people know that they are not only tolerated as part of our communities and our congregations but really, truly, wanted and needed? How do we welcome those we meet? How do we move ourselves out of the comfort of being the recipient of the good things of this world into the, perhaps, discomfort of seeking out and welcoming the powerless? Not just giving to alleviate need, but truly welcoming people in! Do we truly believe that Jesus means what he says?