

Utilizing Social Networking for Ministry

By Lane Corley

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is big news. It's a message to be declared, proclaimed, announced, and distributed to as many people as we can as often as we can. God's work among His people is also news and a story that needs to be told. The tools that churches have relied upon to announce their message and distribute their stories are the pulpit, newsletters, letters and post cards, phone trees, scrolling power point announcements, and email. As a Pastor, my church utilized each of these tools and still I heard regularly from people in my church – "I didn't know anything about that." Communication is definitely one of our biggest challenges. Also challenging is the fact that a generation is here that is abandoning paper and phone lines for wireless messaging and social networking. It's time for the church to take communication to another level and engage the world in the fastest growing means of messaging that we have today and utilize the world of Social Media.

Why?

So you're not a computer geek, you don't enjoy video games, you hate hype and fads. These are some of the reasons given for not engaging in the popular social networking domains. Here are four reasons why you should put all excuses away and just do it:



- 1) **It's where the people are.** In February, Facebook announced that it now has close to 1 billion users and with 669 million logging in every day! Twitter boasts 550 million users and growing at a rate of 135,000 per day. Currently there are 58 million tweets everyday, about 9,000 tweets per second. These interfaces are growing and people are using them more and more each day. If we've got a message that we want to get out to as many people as possible, it seems that we'd want to get it where the people are and social media seems to be that place.
- 2) **Message saturation is possible.** A few years ago I asked a group of Church Secretaries and Administrative Assistants if the teenagers in their church are reading the church's publications. 100% expressed uncertainty. We recognize that a hard copy newsletter does not reach all of our audience. Utilizing social media will allow you to get the exact same information to them in a way that does attract their attention. It is possible to saturate your message throughout the different age-grades and audiences in your church today like never before.
- 3) **It's Free.** The most compelling reason for utilizing the fastest growing communication tools today is the cost. It's completely free! At every level of social networking, free is an option that gets you out to where millions of people are interacting every second of everyday.
- 4) **You Might Have Fun.** Why has Facebook grown so fast? It's enjoyable. People like having info at their fingertips in real time. They like talking about themselves and connecting with people. They will enjoy connecting with your church and discovering what it's all about as well. And it's ok to have fun while we proclaim His message and tell our story.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

With so many different social networking sites popping up, here are three types that can definitely help ministries communicate their message in this new age. I'm sharing personal discoveries and what I've learned over the last few years as I've waded into these waters, so I'm certain my knowledge is far from exhaustive, but here goes:

Blogging

A blog is a website that is maintained by an individual through posting regular updates that can include information, pictures, or video. There are several ways that a blog can support a church's message.

- The church newsletter can be cut and pasted onto a blog all at once or incrementally. This extends the newsletter to many other potential readers and puts it into a medium that speaks to younger generations.
- Church and community events can be announced, reviewed, updated so that the stories of God's work among the people of God can be journaled. That's why I enjoy my personal blog. It's like a journal of God's work in my life and my church.
- The pastor can use a blog to post supplemental information to the sermon. This is why I originally started blogging. I realized it was free, easy, fun and I recognized it as a way to repost illustrations that really spoke to people or share the points that I just couldn't work in to the Sunday message because of time constraints.
- The Pastor and staff can review and recommend books that they would like their members to know of or check out for themselves.
- A church can also have a blog that's accessible to all members so that anyone can log on and tell their God stories or prayer request.

Some of the popular blogs utilized today are, www.wordpress.com and www.blogspot.com. You can register for free in a matter of minutes and begin creating, writing, and posting the same day.

Digital Publishing and Document Sharing Sites

These are sites that allow an individual or organization to upload their documents for storage and/or distribution. There is no limit to the amount, size, or type of documents that can be uploaded. It's a great way to make your documents available for members of the church or for other churches and ministries to view. This is especially helpful to churches with no web presence or without the ability to upload documents directly to their website. Once uploaded, the documents can be shared with a simple link through an email.

A few of the ways these may be used in ministry:

- The church newsletter or bulletin can be uploaded and sent out via email with a link attached. Those who are still suffering under the oppression of dial up internet will love you, because you won't shut down their email inbox for the day by sending them the huge file that is your newsletter.
- The minutes from meetings can be uploaded and kept visible for historical purposes or to just offer another avenue for knocking the legs out from under the retort, "I don't remember when we made that decision." Most of these sites do allow you to make documents private or allow you to select a few users that can open them.

- If someone wants a copy of an old report, newsletter, or document, instead of taking the time of the assistant to find it and run a copy, a link to the document can be sent directly to them to have at their disposal and/or to print using their ink instead of the churches.

These sites can really save time for the Administrative and secretarial staff of a church. Just get in the habit of taking 60 seconds to upload a document while you're printing it for the meeting or right after its saved and its done.

Three of these sites that I have used are Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>), Scribd (www.scribd.com), and Issuu (www.issuu.com).

Social Networking Sites

These are sites that build on people's natural relational connections and allow sharing of ideas, happenings, and almost anything else that one wants to share with the world. Of course, the three that are most dominant are Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and we'll focus on the first two for ministry purposes, but there are actually dozens of social networking sites worldwide. The popularity of Facebook, etc., has gone from teenage fad to personal novelty to worldwide utility in a few short years. Personally, I've connected with friends from college, my entire family tree, missionaries as far away as Siberia, and most of my elementary school teachers! Through our churches page we've advertised our services to 360,000 users in Southeast Louisiana, promoted events, and distributed links of interest to our members.

So let's think about a few ways Facebook and Twitter can be useful ministry tools.

Facebook



- **For Church Leaders**, a personal Facebook page is a great low-impact way to mentor and lead and make your life accessible to others. As you share, real time events, thoughts, quotes, ideas, etc., that are going on in your life, you can demonstrate what it means to be a disciple. I say low-impact, because of the distance and the lack of vulnerability that one can have over the internet. I fight becoming an ancient ruler that only allows the victories of my life to be written and not the struggles. You will have the greatest impact if you let your guard down and be authentic and vulnerable along with sharing your favorite theologians quotes and footnotes. After writing this I took a look at my Facebook page and it looks like its become a little wooden and impersonal over the last few days, so I updated my status: "A home office would be a great idea, if my wife would quit buying Blue Bell." Just keeping it real.
- **The Fan Page**. Anyone with a free Facebook account can create a fan page for an organization and invite friends to be fans, fans can then invite their friends, etc., etc. Some churches utilize the Groups Page instead of the Fan Page. There is one drawback for the purposes of Networking. The Groups Page does not get your information and message into the News Feed. The News Feed is what people see and follow when they get onto Facebook. It's where your message will interact with your fans and friends. You want to be in the News Feed, so a Fan Page is the best option for your church.
- **The Groups Page** is a great tool for small groups within the church to interact or for a private discussion board with leaders in the church. Don't expect to get the same amount of traffic that you would with a fan page or regular page.

- **The Events Application** can be utilized to get invites, RSVP's, or just regular buzz out about a special event at your church. It works just like you are preparing a flyer, but this will be sent out to invites through Facebook. People can then respond with Attending, Not Attending, or Maybe Attending. Then, they can choose on their on or at your request to invite others in their social network.

What about Twitter?

Twitter is known as a micro-blogging service that allows users to send messages called tweets that are limited to 140 characters or less. While Facebook utilizes friends and social networks, with Twitter you can choose to "Follow" certain people, organizations, or groups.

While Twitter is not near as popular as Facebook (70 million users compared to 400 million) it is beneficial for a couple of reasons:

- 1) **Exercising Simplicity.** It is my personal belief that every Pastor should have a Twitter account for the lessons in brevity and simplicity. One of my favorite exercises is getting what I want to say into 140 characters. I believe this has helped my communication. I follow some of my favorite authors and leaders and I love getting their thoughts and ideas boiled down to 140 characters. I get my news each morning through CNN and the Times Picayune Twitter feeds. And all they are doing is Tweeting the headlines in 140 characters. The world is moving at such a rapid pace, people are busier than ever. A great question for communicators: Is my message and communication too wordy? Could you get a message from your church into 140 characters? Try it. It's free.
- 2) **Twitter's Applications & Clients.** The best thing about signing up for a free Twitter account is that you'll be able to access Twitter's Clients that make social networking simpler and less time consuming. The two that I've found most helpful are www.tweetdeck.com and www.hootsuite.com. Both have corresponding iPhone Applications. From these Twitter Clients you can send your message across multiple social networking mediums.



That leads us to the communication gold mine of social networking today...

INTEGRATION

I know what some of you are thinking. "I've got to sign up for a blog, for a document sharing site, for Facebook personal and Fan page, and a Twitter account! When am I going to have the time to manage all of that?" Actually, you don't have to. With 30 minutes of sign ups, social networking can increase your communications impact without greatly increasing your time at work. How? Integration.



If you choose to have a Facebook personal and fan page, and a personal and church Twitter account and you want to send a message across all four of these networks, you can do it from ONE place – www.tweetdeck.com. Tweetdeck has integrated Twitter, Facebook, and Myspace into one place. So I can type my message, choose where I want it to go, hit send once and that's it.

Now, If you choose to have a Facebook personal and Fan page, a Twitter for you personally and for the church, AND a personal or ministry blog, and you want to send a message across all SIX of networks, you can do it from ONE place –



www.hootsuite.com. Hootsuite has integrated Twitter, Facebook, and Wordpress Blogs into one place, allowing you to send one message to six different networks or target one of your audiences at a time. Hootsuite also allows you to schedule messages to be sent at just the right time and will automatically update your Facebook and Twitter pages each time you update your blog.

If you upload a document to your document storage site, www.scribd.com or www.issuu.com, with one click you have the option to let your Facebook friends/fans and Twitter followers know that the document is there. You can even enable the site to do it automatically.

Integration allows you to go deep into multiple domains with one click. So, send that newsletter to the Seniors through snail mail, to the professionals through email, to the young adults and teenagers through Facebook and Twitter. Get your message out. And I hope you'll continue to explore new ways of communicating God's story.

Still lots of communication avenues to explore with ministry implications. Like:

- www.youversion.com - Upload sermon notes for people to follow the sermon on their phone during your service.
- www.youtube.com - Tons of implications for ministry.
- www.mailchimp.com, www.constantcontact.com, www.verticalresponse.com, www.icontact.com - Email marketing clients.
- www.eyejot.com - Video email client.
- www.instagram.net - Social network built around personal pics.

And we'll see what comes next that may help us communicate the greatest Good News ever told.