

The Church and Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, church administration, executives, and pastors are searching for ways to make the Gospel more relevant. Any Bible-toting church leaders should adamantly oppose this taunting coercion. As Neil Cole puts it, "The gospel does not need to be made relevant; it is relevant and always will be."⁵⁰¹ But like it or not, every church must grapple with what level of influence it does or does not have in this postmodern era.

In post modernity people want to convey and want their religion to convey the concerns of their hearts and minds and to embrace creativity, technological advances, and diverse forms of worship. Social media represents a mere modicum of the postmodern mindset. It is complex and constantly changing. Church goes use a plethora of tools to participate in the phenomenon called social media. Social media relies on web and mobile technologies to communicate. Seemingly every day a new tool springs up to make worship, Biblical inquiry, devotion and spiritual communication easily available via social media.

The formal church must also employ the social media platform to remain influential in the lives of believers and in the world of unbelievers. Many churches do so through websites. But,

⁵⁰¹Cole, Neil. Church Upgrades for the Future of the Church. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2010), 27.

there is so much more. Some churches and church leaders tentatively traverse the social media landscape using text messages, email, tweets, and posting status updates to face book. These examples merely scratch the social media surface. In fact, of those tools. Face book is one of the quickly dissipating tools for teens. These early adopters are abandoning Face book for other tools such as Social Cam and Interest.

With new tools arriving on the scene constantly, how can churches remain influential by using social media? Here are a few recommendations. First, solidify your social media strategy. Next, engage a technologist to educate church leaders and execute the strategy. Last, monitor posts and your maintenance of the strategy.

DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Developing a social media strategy means defining goals and learning about your congregants. When church leaders define a social media goal they simply ask themselves, what are we trying to accomplish by using social media? Goals should relate to the 21st century church make-up. For example, the Church demands relationship, social justice and public witness. Following are but a few of the possibilities helpful for defining your social media goals. Appreciate 21st century demands:

The Contemporary Church Demands Relationship. More than at any other point in history, research demonstrates people yearn for relationship with leaders, each other and Christ 4, 5 Church goers want to talk to each other daily to receive and give encouragement. They want their leaders to be approachable and available."⁵⁰² They want to search for theological answers throughout the day, even while taking a

⁵⁰²Bergquist, Linda and Allan Karr. *Church Turned Inside Out: A Guide for Designers, (Refiners, and Re-aligners.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 56.

break at work. People have started openly and ardently looking for God beyond the walls of the church building. People get it; the church goes wherever a believer goes. Believers build relationships with each other, their leaders and Christ through social media.

The Contemporary Church Demands Social Justice. Look no further than The Jena 6 or Treyvon Martin story to see that people still come to church in droves to petition God, check the country's social system's conscience and to mobilize around societal ills. Injustices receive national attention because of the use of social media by people in the church. People have come to realize their collective power and speak in a unified voice via social media.

The Church Demands Public Witness. For the Gospel to reach the masses, the Church must join the global conversation. Not only must the Church make statements, but it needs to show the world that God is alive, answers prayer, and still manifests miracles. Social media provides a platform to share preaching, prayer, praise, battles and victories.

Know your target audience. Nielsen research says, "Churches active in organizing or mobilizing people can utilize the media consumption trends for outreach and promotional efforts." Researchers report that 54% of African Americans own a smart phone and are more likely to send mass texts. Forty-seven percent own a computer, and 40% of Twitter users are African American."⁵⁰³ The average age of Face book users is 40, and the largest growing groups are 55 - 65 + 8. These statistics identify national USA African American habits. Local Churches may probe their congregants further through surveys and observation. Sample questions to ask include: Are you interested in receiving reminder mass emails

⁵⁰³Martin, David. *One Simple rule: Why Teens Are Fleeing Face book*, (article: june 2001), 83

or texts? If you have a computer, how much time do you spend on it?

Next, engage a technologist to educate church leaders and execute strategies

Many churches make the mistake of trying to do it all in house. They end up with a poor social media presence, irregular and erratic content, and outdated information left on their website too long. Hire a consultant who can help define the church's strategy, recommend tools and build an initial presence. Look for someone with a church social media portfolio. Ask questions about what they would recommend prior to hiring them. Be aware that the goal of a corporation's presence greatly differs from that of a church's presence.

Technologists will try to sell the similarities, but the nuances make a difference. While corporations try to build brand loyalty and increase profits, the church additionally aims for relationship building, social activism, Christian education, and public witnessing of Jesus Christ by its members. After the initial posts, the consultant should transition responsibilities over to a trained staff person or ministry leader."⁵⁰⁴ If you insist on doing it yourself, at a minimum assemble a team to review the initial site and posts prior to launching the full strategy, and make sure your team contains one Christian webmaster. Then pay the person who will maintain your site; that way you will have someone to hold responsible.

THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL MEDIA: AN OVERVIEW

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia defines social media as "media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques.

⁵⁰⁴Barna, George. *Future cast: What Today's Trends Mean for Tomorrow's World*. (Austin, TX: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2011), 43.

Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues. A longer and perhaps more philosophical definition is offered by Jon Lebkowsky, a longtime social media specialist, on his site, weblogsky.com: Social Media is a fundamental transformation in the way(s) people find and use information and content, from hard news to light entertainment.

It's an evolution from broadcast delivery of content created by a few and distributed to many to network delivery, where content can be created by anyone and published to everyone, in a context that is "many too many." Said another way, publication and delivery by professionals to mass audiences has changed now publication and delivery can be by anyone, professional or not, to niche audiences through networks of many channels. This is because the means of production are broadly accessible and inexpensive. As a result of all this, attention and mindshare are fragmented, there's emphasis on relationship, new forms of media are conversational, and transaction costs for communication approach zero."⁵⁰⁵ Social media offer both opportunities and challenges to church organizations. These can be grouped into three primary categories:

- *Visibility
- Community
- Accountability

Visibility

Online social media communities are vast and are growing at a rapid pace. For example, there are more than 400 million active users on Face book, which is greater than the population of the United States. Given the size and scope of

⁵⁰⁵Nielsen Company. *African-American Consumers: Still Vital Still Growing 2012 Report*" Black Press of America, National Newspaper. (Retrieved: accessed 29 November, 2012.

these communities, they offer excellent forums for the Church's visibility and evangelization.

The key question that faces each church organization that decides to engage social media is, how will we engage? Careful consideration should be made to determine the particular strengths of each form of social media (blogs, social networks, text messaging, etc) and the needs of a ministry, parish, or organization. The strengths should match the needs. For instance, a blog post may not be the most effective way to remind students of an event. However, a mass text message to all students and their parents telling them that the retreat begins at 9.00am may be very effective.⁵⁰⁶

Because of the high volume of content and sites, and the dynamics of search engines and computer networking, social media require constant input and monitoring to make the Church's presence effective. To keep members, a social networking site, such as a blog, needs to have new content on a regular basis. In the case of social media, the axiom "build it and they will come" is not applicable. It is important to set internal expectations regarding how often posts will be made, so that your followers can become accustomed to your schedule.

Community

Social media can be powerful tools for strengthening community, although social media interaction should not be viewed as a substitute for face-to-face gatherings. Social media can support communities in a myriad of ways: connecting people with similar interests, sharing information about in-person events, providing ways for people to engage in dialogue etc. A well-considered use of social media has the ultimate goal of encouraging "true friendship" (43rd World

⁵⁰⁶Woodward, Jason. "Twitter Use Highest among African Americans and Hispanic Americans, (Survey Finds, June 2, 2011), 96.

Communications Day message and of addressing the human longing for meaningful community.

Accountability

Social media provide tools for building community. Membership in communities also requires accountability and responsibility. Users of social media expect site administrators to allow dialogue, to provide information and to acknowledge mistakes. The explosion of information available to social media consumers has meant that they often only use information from trusted sites or sites recommended by those whom they trust.

While not every demand or inquiry can be met, it is important that creators and site administrators of social media understand how much social media are different from mass media and the expectations of their consumers."⁵⁰⁷ Creators and consumers of mass media generally accept their one-way conversations (letters to the editor being the exception).

Social media's emphasis is on the word "social," with a general blurring of the distinction between creators of content and consumers of content. Many communication experts are describing the adaptation of social media as a paradigm shift in how humans communicate a development as important as that of the printing press and the discovery of electronic communication.

Resources

There are many resources available. Here are a few popular tools and their purposes.

⁵⁰⁷Vatican Council II, Decree on the Means of Social Communication Inter Mirifica, n. 1.

Multimedia Content Sharing

Face book allows individuals or organizations called "Friends" to send and receive multimedia and text content via an Internet page. Find the free tool at [Face book.com](http://Facebook.com).

Twitter allows individuals to follow each other's posts consisting of text messages and/or hyperlinks to external web content. Find the free tool at Twitter.com.

Blogs allow church leaders to dialogue with the congregation, public at large, or private groups about different topics. Know that blogging is time-intensive, requires someone who writes well, and must be updated at least once each week to maintain the interest of readers. Free blogging tools are at blogger.com, [Web Press.com](http://WebPress.com) and livejournal.com.

Photo Sharing

Instagram allows individual and organizations to take mobile pictures and share them instantly with a network of family and friends. The company that owns Face book now owns Instagram. Find the free tool at instagram.com.

Pinterest allows individuals and organizations to share theme based image collections. Find the free tool at Pinterest.com

Video Sharing

Social Cam allows individual to record on-the-spot video via their smart phones and post them online to share with others. Find the free tool at socialcam.com.

You Tube allows individuals and organizations to post video and share with the world. Find the free tool at youtube.com.

Vimeo allows individuals and organizations to share online videos for non-commercial purposes. Find the free tool at Vimeo.com

CONCLUSION

For all of the influence of digital technology, we who narrate our existence through the revelation of an ancient text have this mandate to form a community a body of individuals who share a perspective on the world and recognize our identity as a member of that affinity group. Yet another contribution to culture, the content of this perspective must capture the attention of both old and young, authoritatively broadcast compelling information, and provide a genuine invitation for others to claim their identity as witnesses to the risen Christ.

Without compromising this identity, Christians actively participate in global affairs impacting culture with a distinctive witness to the presence and power of God. That mandate grants latitude for Roma Downey's A.D.: The Bible Continues, LeCrae's record label, and even posting to twitter during a sermon. William Dyrness captures this in Poetic Theology: "The best human work in any culture is an expression of what the biblical tradition calls wisdom, the human capacity to bring treasures out of the storehouse of the created order. This creative capacity expresses both the divine image in human activity and the general working of God's Spirit in culture." The church is not about great programs, alluring events, or really cool welcome stations in the foyer. It's about community.

The mandate for the followers of Christ to go into the entire world will not be fulfilled by riding a donkey through Jerusalem but going into the virtual spaces made available through digital technology. In the digital culture, as in every era, the task remains for Christians to speak to the world. Nonetheless holding to the textually mediated reality of Christian Scripture, the people of God today must utilize the various tools for community formation in a digital world. To do this, assumes the task of sharing a particular story as the message of the church.

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