

MySpace lets youth ministers peek into teenagers' lives

December 1, 2006

Posted: 12/01/06

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Religion News Service

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. (RNS)—Youth minister Lara Blackwood starts her day the same way most of the young people at her church do. She signs on at MySpace.com.

“Any time they post a new blog, I get a message in my e-mail and cell phone that such and such has posted a new blog,” said Blackwood, youth minister at First Christian Church of Fayetteville, Ark., and a regional youth minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana.

“If the title tells me, ‘Gosh, prom was fun,’ I’ll read it within a couple days. If it says ‘I hate my life; I want to die’—which I’ve read some similar to that—I’m on immediately.”

Lara Blackwood (second from left) meets with members of her youth group at First Christian Church of Fayetteville, Ark. Blackwood keeps tabs on students in her church by monitoring their pages on MySpace.com. (RNS photo courtesy of Lara Blackwood)

More youth ministers are discovering the promises and pitfalls of social networking websites such as MySpace.com as they use them to stay connected with their students. It's a place where students can be honest about their lives and keep an open dialogue with their ministers.

MySpace is one of the hottest sites on the Internet. New York-based hitwise.com rated it No. 1 for the week ending Nov. 11, accounting for about 5 percent of all U.S. Internet traffic. Alexa.com, another ratings website, put it in the No. 3 spot among U.S. websites. Either way, MySpace

has more than 100 million accounts with a demographic that is dominated by teens and 20-somethings.

While the site has allowed ministers to advertise activities and keep in touch with students, youth ministers and students alike can be bombarded with pornography, and teens can be subject to predators.

“Social networking is what being a teenager is about,” said Kenda Creasy Dean, associate professor of youth, church and culture and director of the Tennent School of Christian Education at [Princeton Theological Seminary](#). “For people my age (in their 40s), technology is a tool. For kids, technology is the air they breathe. It’s social glue.”

Students in Blackwood’s previous youth group in Abilene initially encouraged her to get an account so she could read their blogs. Her involvement grew from there.

She keeps in touch with her former students, encouraging them and offering advice when asked, on MySpace more than anything else. She currently is working on building her roster of “friends” with the students in her new youth group so she can send out mass announcements about upcoming events.

“They’ll get the word faster if I post it as a MySpace message than if I try to call them,” she said. “Most of them check their profiles so many times each day.”

Julie Richardson Brown, minister of youth and young adults at Beargrass Christian Church in Louisville, Ky., also has used social networking sites to promote church events. Part of the appeal of MySpace for students is the community aspect, she said.

“I think they long to be part of something bigger than themselves and desire to be part of a community,” she said. “My hope is to make them part

of a Christian community.”

Among some Catholic youth workers, MySpace is approached with caution.

“I would encourage our youth ministers to set up their own websites connected with their parishes but to also monitor MySpace,” said Eileen McCann, a consultant for youth and young adult ministries at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “I would advise them to get on MySpace for information but not communication.”

Ministers might be surprised at what they find on their students’ profiles. Some teenagers present themselves online in a different way than they present themselves at church.

“It’s definitely something you can talk about, though,” Blackwood said. “They’ve opened the door to that conversation. It’s easier for me to have a conversation about drinking if on MySpace they’re talking about it all the time. We can actually have a conversation that’s real.”

Some youth ministers serve as watchdogs as they scan their students’ sites. Students post full names and even personal calendars on their profiles. Blackwood says it’s her responsibility to help students be aware when they’re posting too much personal information.

“It can definitely be a dangerous thing for them to have a profile,” she said. “They do it without even thinking about it. They may not say they go to such and such high school, but if they post a picture from homecoming and they’re wearing a letter jacket, you can figure out what high school they go to. It’s easy to hone in on someone with things like that.”

Michael Davison, an associate regional minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kentucky, said he is concerned young people see the Internet as far-reaching but think there is still anonymity in it.

“They are surprised when I say, ‘I saw your MySpace page.’ They’re shocked that an adult might see what’s on their site,” Davison said.

“Most of them don’t equate the website with the fact that everyone in the world has access to them. The young people I work with understand I’m Internet-savvy, and yet they’re surprised when I mention I stopped by their MySpace.”

The church needs to recognize MySpace can be used in good and bad ways, Dean said.

“It’s more helpful for parents, youth ministers and churches to become aware and conversant with MySpace than to spend all our time railing against it,” she said.

[Travis Avenue Baptist Church](#) in Fort Worth is trying to familiarize parents with MySpace.

When Wes Black, a professor of student ministry at [Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary](#), led an instruction session there for parents recently, 30 attended, along with some teenagers enlisted to teach.

“Most of the questions dealt with (parents) struggling with the technology,” Black said.

“They brought laptops, and we met in a room with wireless access.”

Princeton professor Dean thinks few parents will be able to keep up with their tech-savvy kids and said it’s more likely for a youth minister to be on MySpace.

“By definition, youth ministers are people who want to connect with teenagers,” she said. “We all can be conversant in it. And we need to be. This is the world we live in.”

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