

Beyond Facebook: Scanning the social media landscape

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Facebook has become the social network of choice for the vast majority of people—it's hard to argue with 850 million users around the globe—and it's not likely to disappear any time soon.

But some specialists see a growing market for "niche" networks.

"Some are predicting that we'll stop seeing movement toward one platform and more toward niche groups," said social media consultant [Natalie Aho](#). "None of these platforms will be as large a market as the ones that preceded them," but exploring them can enhance churches' community-building efforts.



- [LinkedIn](#). A professional networking site, LinkedIn's no-nonsense approach—there are no distracting games, for instance—leaves it virtually free of spammers. LinkedIn Groups allow churches to network with others around similar interests and start discussions without requiring email addresses, eliminating the need for frequent database updates.
- [Pinterest](#). The virtual pinboard allows members to organize and share

visual images reflecting their interests. Churches looking to engage the arts can identify "the beautiful things of the world" that represent its values, like social justice, or liturgical seasons, said Aho.

- [Google+](#). The newest kid on the social media block, Google+ (or Google Plus or G+) integrates a variety of social networking functions, backed by the mighty Google empire.

Apps allow users to create documents, edit photos and listen to music without having to install complicated software, and are especially useful for browsing church web sites on smart phones or tablet computers. [Randolph Memorial Baptist Church in Madison Heights, Va.](#), is typical of churches that have created an app on iTunes at a modest cost. "It offers church news, information about us, directions to the church, sermons and items off our web site," says Pastor Derik Hamby. "It's an easy weekly connection for our members, and they love it." The church is developing an app for the Droid as well.

- [Foursquare](#). A location-based social network, Foursquare allows users to "check in" at locations around the globe and lets followers know where they are. "I have a client who encourages church members to use Foursquare because it signals to their followers how important church life is to them," said Aho. "It offers opportunities for conversations about spiritual matters."
- [QR codes](#). Not a social network, QR (Quick Re-sponse) codes are barcodes from which a website URL can be read by smart phones loaded with the appropriate software. Churches have placed QR codes near their entrances. They allow worshippers to access online giving sites to make financial contributions or to download the service's order of worship on phone or tablet.
- [Instagram](#) allows users to snap photos on an iPhone and send to Facebook, Twitter or Flickr—another photo sharing site—without first

loading them on a computer.