

Churches, Media & Technology

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It's not about hunting. It's about farming.

That's how bestselling author [Ivan Misner](#), founder of one of the world's largest business networking organizations, describes social networks, which he says attempt to do one thing—cultivate relationships.

For church leaders—keen to deepen the authentic community at the heart of Christianity—the metaphor is apt. And ever since [Facebook](#) leapt off America's campuses and onto the computers of 850 million people worldwide, churches have regarded social media as essential to missional strategies.

Yet eight years after Mark Zuckerberg famously launched "Thefacebook" in his Harvard dorm room, congregations largely remain uncertain about their engagement with social media.

"The fact is, if churches don't know why they have a Facebook page, it doesn't matter what they do with it," says [Natalie Aho](#), a Mobile, Ala.-based social media consultant.

Part of the dilemma, say specialists, is failure to distinguish between web sites—which are primarily about communicating information—and social networks such as Facebook, [Twitter](#) and [Foursquare](#)—which aim to create ... well, social networks.

The distinction is important if churches hope to maximize the power of social media, which primarily lies in its interactive, community-developing potential rather than its information-distribution ability, said Aho. If an organization uses social media like a web site, "they won't get out of it what it's intended to do."

Less than half of Protestant churches—about 47 percent—actively use Facebook, according to a survey conducted last year by [LifeWay Research](#), an arm of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention. Far fewer (3 percent) use [MySpace](#) or church-specific social networks like [The City](#).

Fully 40 percent of churches use no social networking tools at all, the research found.

And while LifeWay Research found more than three-quarters of churches have web sites, most aren't attempting to use their sites'—admittedly less effective community enhancing tools—as substitutes for social media. More than 90 percent use them to provide information to potential visitors and almost 80 percent to provide information to the congregation.

"If churches desire to connect with their congregation and community in meaningful ways, then they need to establish a strategy for actively engaging in the social media conversation," said Curtis Simmons, vice president for marketing and community at [Fellowship Technologies](#), a LifeWay partner. "Thousands of individuals are sharing support and encouragement through these tools. The church needs to be an active participant in these conversations and connections."

For some churches, reluctance to fully embrace social media may be simply bewilderment at navigating a world of newly invented technical incarnations with newly coined names—[Ning](#), [Pinterest](#), [Tumblr](#), [Xanga](#).

But for others, there may be a more deep-seated theological suspicion that social media is a superficial substitute for authentic, embodied community. For Christians serving a God who "became flesh and dwelt among us," anything that undermines incarnation is problematic.

But [Claire Diaz Ortiz](#), who leads social innovation at Twitter, says social media is a natural tool for religious organizations.

"'Religion' is about relationships, and social media is about relationships," she told *Christianity Today* at last fall's Catalyst conference. "A lot of companies don't understand that. They think it's a new way to market themselves. In contrast, religious organizations have been relying on word-of-mouth marketing and relational marketing for forever."