

Churches view social networking as ministry tool

February 11, 2011

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP)—With the Internet closing in on television as Americans' main source of national and international news, churches increasingly are viewing social-networking applications like Facebook as ministry tools.

The Oikos social networking site

"Social networking tools have become an integral part of most people's daily lives and relationships," said Curtis Simmons, vice president for marketing and community at [Fellowship Technologies](#). "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."

The rising popularity of social networking is changing the way people communicate. One in five Americans used social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace to connect with a campaign or some other aspect of the 2010 midterm elections. eHarmony, an online dating service that matches singles based on compatibility factors like religion, claims 542 people a day get married because of the service, accounting for nearly 5 percent of all marriages in the United States. The latest uprising in Egypt reportedly began with a call for civil revolt on Facebook and Twitter.

A search for "Baptist" on Facebook found more than 700 pages. That's in addition to dozens of Christian social-networking sites that have cropped up with names like [ChurchSpeak](#), [HolyPal](#), [Oikos](#), [YourChristianSpace](#) and [Be Linked As Believers](#), also known as BLAB.

“While some people are considering editing their lives to have more time for real face-to-face communications, many people are desperately searching for ways to connect with others and develop meaningful relationships amidst the harried state of their current situations,” writer Lauren Hunter said in a 2007 article for *Church Solutions Magazine*.

While a Web ministry cannot take the place of face-to-face connections, Hunter wrote, “It can enhance and foster growth in relationships that already exist, as well as develop new relationships and provide unique ways to reach out to other nonbelievers.”

[A study by LifeWay Research](#) revealed nearly one-half of Protestant ministers now say they use social networking in some aspect of their church’s ministry. Three-fourths use Facebook to interact with their congregation, while 62 percent use social networking to interact with individuals outside the congregation.

“Churches are natural places of interaction,” LifeWay Research Director Scott McConnell said. “Congregations are rapidly adopting social networking, not only to speed their own communication, but also to interact with people outside their church.”

LifeWay Research discovered:

- *The most popular use of social networking (73 percent) is interacting with the congregation, followed closely with 70 percent who use it only to distribute outbound news and information.*



- *Church staff members also are turning to mobile devices like smart phones to access e-mail (53 percent), access calendars (33 percent) and*

update and respond to Facebook posts (32 percent). Fifteen percent each said they use mobile devices to blog and tweet.

- Three-fourths of churches (78 percent) maintain a website. Most (91 percent) use the website to provide information to potential visitors, while eight in 10 (79 percent) use it to provide information to members of the congregation.*
- Fewer than half (43 percent) use their websites to obtain and distribute prayer requests, and 39 percent allowed people to register online for events and activities.*
- Four out of 10 churches (42 percent) update their websites once a month or less frequently. Forty percent post new material at least once a week, and 15 percent more often than that.*
- One church in four (26 percent) uses blogs in online ministry, but 33 percent said they expect to be blogging this time next year.*
- A quarter of churches (26 percent) said they proactively look for new technology. Half (47 percent) are open to new technology but don't go looking for it. One in four (24 percent) admits to being slow in considering new technology, but 3 percent avoid it altogether.*

Steve McCoy, a Chicago-area pastor who blogs as [Reformissionary](#), said in an online discussion on Christians and the Internet that he uses both Twitter and blogging, but mostly to connect with other church leaders outside of his area.

"I need like-minded friends in ministry," McCoy said. "I can't fully explain the benefit and blessing of being connecting to hundreds of church leaders through my blog and Twitter. It is truly a kind of community. It doesn't replace true community. It compliments it and expands it."

According to the [Pew Research Center](#), Millennials—adults ages 18 to 33—still are significantly more likely to use social networking sites, but the gap for older adults is closing. The fastest growth in Internet usage has come from users ages 74 and older. Social networking site usage for this age cohort has quadrupled since 2008, from 4 percent to 16 percent. Searching for health information, once the primary domain of older adults, is now the third-most-popular online activity for all adult Internet users.

“Human beings are inherently multimedia creatures,” said [Quentin Schultze](#), professor of communication arts and sciences at Calvin College. “So, networking takes many forms across all media, including in-person, print, electronic and digital media.”

Schultze insists the challenge for churches is to find appropriate means of communication in tune with the purposes of the church. Social networking has implications for church governance, as leaders sort through a groundswell of information about innovations and ideas, he added.

Wise preachers use social media to gauge how their sermons and conversations are being applied, Schultze maintains, and social networking is becoming the medium of choice for sharing ideas about topics like worship renewal among others across denominational lines interested in the same issue.

Schultze cautions that the starting point for faith-oriented social networking is recognition that the only “producer” of the sacred is God.

“We begin with a sobering truth, namely, that Christian spirituality is not about what human beings do but about what God does,” Schultze said.

“As I tell my students, we need to keep in mind that Christian spirituality is all about attending to what God has done, is doing, and has promised to do. In other words, God is already at work. Our job—really, our calling—is to attend to the Spirit’s movement here, and there and everywhere, often

where we least expect to see God at work. We can't move ahead faithfully in a Web 2.0 world by pretending to play God."

McConnell at LifeWay Research agreed that social networking has limits. "Biblical community requires feet and faces, not only retweets and fan pages," he said. "But clearly social networking is a helpful tool to build and maintain community."