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James

Using Facebook Appropriately as a Ministry Tool

By Thomas G. James

Facebook has become a part of everyday life for many across the world. In 2010 it was the most visited site on the internet.

There are almost 100 million users in the United States and an estimated 750 million worldwide.

Many pastors find Facebook a useful tool for connecting with other clergy, church members, and potential members. And since 35 percent of all Facebook users in the U.S. are between the ages of 18 and 25, and over two-thirds are under the age of 35, it is properly viewed as an important way of connecting with younger people.

A number of resources can help with the basics.

Facebook for Churches: the Care and Feeding of a Page, (www.ctucc.org/resources/2011_fb_page.html) by UCC minister Eric S. Anderson, explains basic terminology (such as the difference between a “profile” and a “page”) and describes the essential elements of a congregational Facebook page. *Facebook for Pastors*, (resonateordie.com/facebook-for-pastors) a free ebook by nonprofit marketing expert Chris Forbes, discusses how common Facebook features and applications can be used to connect with people, expand evangelistic outreach, and build faith. And pastor/blogger Dan Navarra’s *Ten Ways to Use Facebook in Your Ministry*, (available at www.shrinkthechurch.com) provides a series of practical suggestions for making Facebook posts timely and relevant.

But caution is warranted. Pastors must learn to manage Facebook and other social media in ways that allow personal interaction with friends and family without hindering their ministerial calling, especially when moving from one church to the next. They should invest time in learning to use Facebook appropriately. New Facebook users should allow themselves time to see how others interact through this social media, to master proper Facebook etiquette, and to become familiar with the use of group and fan pages.

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Here are a few tips to help assure that your Facebook presence reflects positively on your ministry on a day-to-day basis and in times of transition.

Wall posts. Wall posts are meant to allow others to share in your life’s journey, which will have its ups and downs. But a pastor is a public figure. Everything you say, do, “like,” share, and click is made public on Facebook. So avoid the temptation to share daily frustrations, vent about church issues and members, or discuss situations best kept private. Even if you have restricted the access to your wall, your comments might be re-posted or read in a way you did not intend. Before posting anything, consider how others might read and interpret the post. United Methodist Communications has on its website (www.umcom.org) a brief *Social Media Etiquette Handbook* to help you steer clear of some common pitfalls and embarrassing situations when using Facebook and other social media.

Maintaining boundaries. Some people create multiple Facebook accounts, allowing them to use one for their professional networks and one for their personal networks. Some pastors have adopted this practice to keep what happens in their personal life separate from what happens in pastoral ministry. However, this practice violates Facebook’s policy that no individual may have more than one account. An alternative is to maintain a single personal account, but create a separate Facebook page to carry out pastoral interactions. Another option is to create sublists within a broader list of friends to keep personal information available only to those with whom you are closest.

Friending church members. Keep in mind, before you friend a church member, you need to be willing to friend them all. Friending only certain church members can cause division in the congregation.

Pastoral transitions. What should pastors do about church members who are Facebook friends when moving to a new pastoral assignment? Members from

the previous congregation may be watching to see if their old pastor posts affectionate notes about the new church, and clergy are watching to see if comments are made about their celebrated departure. If former parishioners remain as Facebook friends, remember you are no longer their pastor. Just as your personal relationship must change, your contact through social media sites must change as well.

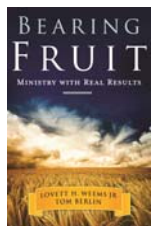
Some moving pastors choose to “unfriend” everyone from their former church, eliminating the temptation to continue to act as their pastor. Another alternative is to move previous church members to a list with limited access to your profile. People on this list would not be able to see new wall posts or pictures of your life in the new church. United Methodist pastor Jeremy Smith has posted detailed instructions on using some advanced Facebook settings, such as creating sublists for different categories of friends and setting different levels of access to segregate Facebook friends from past churches. Go to

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www.churchleadership.com/pdfs/JSmithFacebook.pdf to view his recommendations. Whichever option you choose, it is important to state clearly in advance how you will handle this transition to avoid hurt feelings.

Avoiding the overuse of Facebook. Facebook can easily be abused by posting status updates too often, commenting on others' status updates or pictures too frequently, and repeatedly "liking" or "poking" others. It can easily become a distracting and potentially addictive waste of time if you endlessly scan the personal profiles, past comments, and pictures of others.

Limit the amount of time you spend on Facebook, and never use it as a primary tool for getting to know your congregants. Facebook was designed for staying in touch with others, not as a primary avenue of communication. Use Facebook as a supplementary

way of keeping up to date with people you care about, but never as a substitute for face-to-face ministry.

Complying with denominational expectations.

Increasingly, denominations and judicatories are issuing guidelines on the use of social media by pastors and other religious professionals. For example, the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church recently approved social media guidelines (at www.vaumc.org/ncfilerepository/MinServices/SocialMediaGuidelines.pdf). Inquire about whether such guidelines exist in your tradition, and if so, take time to familiarize yourself with the expectations. †

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