

SOCIAL NETWORKING

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Pros and Cons

The most important message I have is to JUDGE YOUR SITUATION. Online social networking is not a one-size-fits-all, magic bullet. Like any tool, it has pros and cons. Please consider the cons and precautions carefully before deciding to jump in. It can be a good tool in almost any situation, but the context is more important than the tool itself.

Why use online social networking?

- Relationships - The church is about relationships. These sites allow you to reach out and build those relationships. Methods have included simple hellos, learning more about one another, a prayer tool, putting names with faces, and more.
- Free - What more is there to say?
- Meets people where they are - Hiding within the four walls of your church building makes you "present" on Sunday morning, but members (and prospective members) are spending time almost every day on the internet and social networking sites. This allows the church to reach into their everyday life.
- Makes you appear relevant/current - Whether your congregation is traditional or contemporary, being aware of the times and of what your members (current and prospective) are "up to" shows that you know how to connect with them. A common criticism of the church is "they just don't get me" or "it's so out of date" or other such claims. Throw those away and get with it! The claim here is that it only makes you APPEAR relevant or current, you have to do the rest yourself.

Why not to use online social networking (or, questions to ask when considering using online social networking)?

- Takes time - Do you have the time to maintain it? Will the time put in make it worthwhile (considering success of other communications, how many people seem to be on the site(s) you're considering using, etc.)?
- Creates boundary issues - This is HUGE, especially for pastors and youth workers. Facebook especially can lead to an intersection of private and personal life. Some ways to minimize personal exposure to congregation members on Facebook are listed below.
 - Pastors especially also have to be concerned about what will happen to members who are "Facebook friends" when he/she leaves the congregation (unfriending may be the best option).
 - Youth workers in particular have to be aware that they cannot post things that are inappropriate for children or set bad examples.
 - Any church worker may see things from members that they wish they hadn't.
 - Youth workers especially need to have an idea of how they will respond to inappropriate activity. One meeting attendant's example was that she will send a private message (not a wall post) to a youth saying, "Hi, just thinking of you!" just to remind him or her that she is "watching."
 - Another consideration is initiation. Generally speaking, the best practice is for a pastor, youth worker, etc. NOT to initiate friend requests. Some have published their desire to be "friends" with members in the newsletter, linked on the website, etc. so that the members are aware and can initiate if interested. Pastors to adult members do not necessarily have a "best practice" for how and when to initiate contact. Pastors, youth workers, really any adult, generally should not initiate (public) contact with youth. Most

youth would rather not make their relationships with adults public. An example: most parents know their teenagers would rather the parents weren't hanging out at their parties, but understand the need to supervise from a distance; think of Facebook in the same way.

- One way that some pastors, etc. have gotten around the boundary issues that come with the intersection of private and professional is to create a separate profile (or a fan page) JUST for church purposes. Putting an explanation in the "About Me" section would be appropriate, but not absolutely necessary.
- Child privacy issues - Especially important in the photos and videos section, congregations (and their employees) should have policies about what to do with public information about children. Similar to boundaries issues, they should also have an idea of what they'll do if they see minors posting things that should not be posted by minors (personal contact information, inappropriate photos, etc.)
- Detracts from "real" relationships - This is a common criticism and a possible side effect. Simply keep in mind that the online world should be "in addition to" real world relationships, not "instead of." Use these sites to invite people to physically come to church, use things you read to fuel face-to-face conversations, etc.

Facebook

To do anything with Facebook, the individual user must have a profile (this means YOU, not the church, etc.). If you do not wish to use Facebook personally, go ahead and set privacy settings so that only your "friends" can see you. This means that to connect with someone, YOU have to send THEM a friend request. By doing this, there is no way than anyone can ever see you (unless you comment on something public).

How to set up a Facebook profile (personal page):

- Go to www.facebook.com
- Fill in the information requested and proceed through answering the questions
- To go back and adjust privacy settings, go to the top right of any page in Facebook (when you are logged in), between your name and "Logout" is a link to "Settings." From the settings drop down menu or page (after you click on it), select "Privacy" and make your selections.

Fan pages are how organizations connect with their fans/members/etc. I recommend playing around on Facebook BEFORE jumping right in and creating a fan page. If you haven't spent time with the site before, you might break some of the unwritten norms established by the millions of Facebook users. Check out other fan pages, connect with some to see what they "do," get a feel for the site. In the PowerPoint, a pro of being on Facebook is that it makes your organization look relevant. If you're there but not "with it," you still don't look relevant!

How to set up a fan page for your congregation/organization:

- From www.facebook.com, if you're not logged in, click on "Create a Page" (if you don't already have your personal profile, it will eventually ask you to set one up)
- If you are logged in, go to the VERY bottom of the page click on "Advertising" and then, at the very top of that page, click over to "Pages," and finally click on "Create a page" in the green box on the right (the "Advertising" link is on the same line as the copyright information, it may not appear if the page you are on is loading more posts or in some other instances, if you can't find it, try the step above or keep navigating through pages until it comes back)
- When the opportunity arises, I suggest NOT publicly publishing your fan page until you've played around with it for a while.

- All you have to do is fill out the first page of two simple questions and your page is created. Now start adding information! This part is very similar to a profile (without all the preliminary questions, you have more creative control).
- You will need to be a fan of your page if you want to be the administrator. See comments above about privacy settings if you do not want to be found. You can also politely ignore friend requests from congregation members if you'd rather. It may also be possible to remove yourself from the fan list and just re-add yourself when you want to administrate again. (I haven't tried that, though I did remove and re-add myself once.)

A few tips/tools for your fan page:

- The ELCA fan page at <http://www.facebook.com/Lutherans> has an example of some guidelines for use (look under the "Notes" tab (I also think their page has some good examples of how to engage "fans"))
- You can set your page up to have a nice, neat "location." For example, the synod's URL is www.facebook.com/semnsynod and the ELCA one is www.facebook.com/Lutherans
 - To set your page's (or your profile's) go to www.facebook.com/username, there is a link to edit those for pages
- You can restrict fans from posting things
- You can delete *anything* that is posted
- My personal recommendation is to allow all forms of fan posting, provide guidelines (as mentioned above), and monitor for behavior that violates the guidelines or gets out of control. Restricting use or over-censoring violates the purpose of Facebook. However, use your own discretion as it relates to your context.
- One useful application to add to your page is the Static FBML application (click on the link or search "Static FBML" in the Facebook search box). This allows you to add a tab (top of your fan page) or box (side of your fan page) with content that YOU create. It's kind of like a blank slate application. The e-news sign up box on the synod's fan page is an example of what can be done with it.