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with Joni Tapp

# BeSocial

## The social media
## Handbook
### for churches

## Imagine this:

It's a weeknight and your family is going out to eat.

Billy wants a burger, Suzie wants spaghetti, Dad wants a steak, and Mom wants a salad.

Based on just this information alone, that helps you narrow down where to go. You will not find what you are looking for at the Mexican place or the pizza joint. However, there are still a lot of places in town where you can find burgers, pasta, steak and salad. How do you make your decision about where to go?

Well, Place A is too noisy. Place B is too smoky. Place C is too crowded. Place D is too expensive. The service is slow at Place E. And the food was nasty that time you went to Place F!

RESTAURANT

# A B C D E F
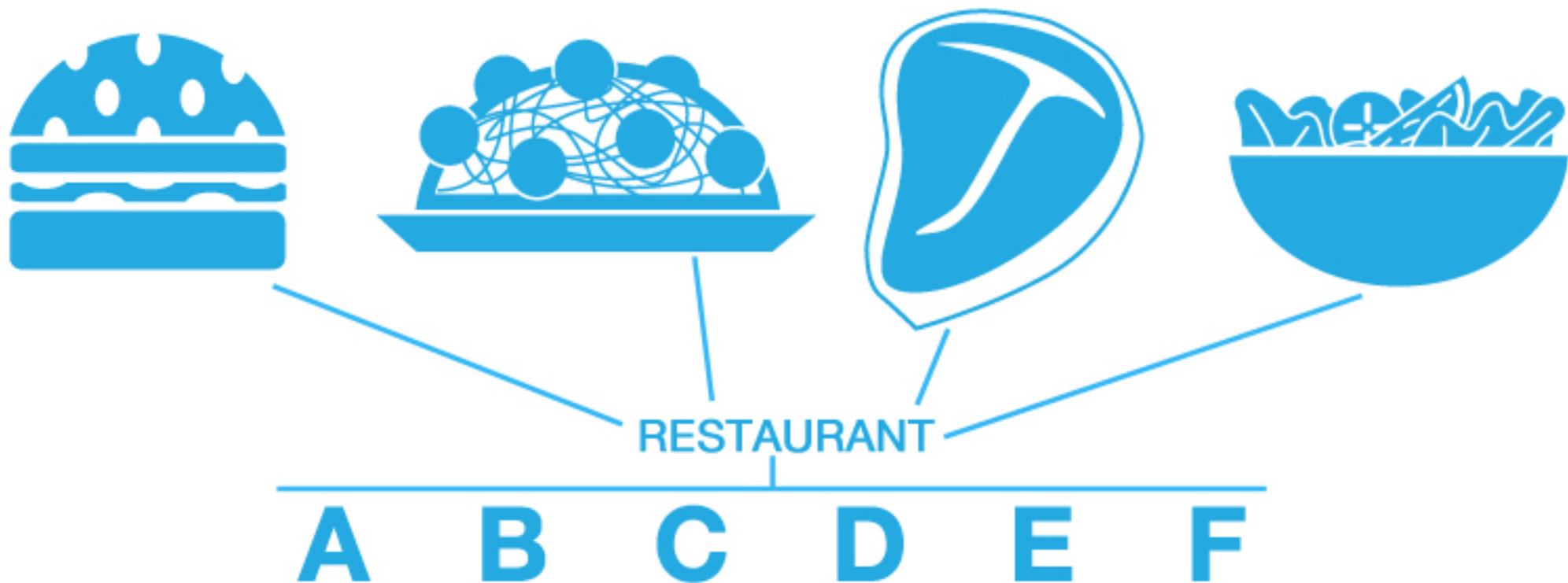
Just because there are a lot of restaurants with similar menus, they are clearly not all created equal. Having the right things on the menu may be the defining choice, but then there are things like environment, quality of service, and value that are contributing factors. One of the most important of these is the quality of the food and how it is prepared and presented.

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So what on earth does this have to do with churches and social media? Well, there are a few questions we need to ask before we can get there. But keep this picture of your family's restaurant dilemma in the back of your mind.

You would not be reading this if your church were not at least considering using social media as part of its ministry.  In order to have a healthy social media strategy, you first need to have a very clear picture of your church's identity and foundation.  Who are you? What are you trying to do? And what do you think social media will do for you?

Before we go one step further, think about the answer to the three questions below.  The extra questions I ask beneath them are not at all meant to be exclusive, you can be any, all, or none of the options I list.  I am just trying to present things for you to think about.  Take my ideas much further until you feel like you have a complete picture of your church's identity and message.

## Type

1. What type of church are you?

Are you traditional, contemporary, or modern?  Do you closely align yourself with a denomination, or do you prefer to be seen as independent?  Do you want to be seen as hip and fashionable, or homey and comfortable?

## Focus

2. What is your focus?

Do you focus on evangelism, discipleship, worship, prayer or service?  Are you trying to bring in nonbelievers or build the faith of believers?  Is most of your energy given to Sunday morning worship, weekday small groups or off-site ministries?

## Vision

3. What is your vision, message, and values?

How do you want the community to see your church?  What do you hope it looks like in 20 years?  What is your basic statement of faith?  What is your mission statement?  Is it most important to you for people to see faith, grace, worship, truth, holiness, or love from your church and its members?  Do you want people to feel comfortable being real in your church?  Do things like clothing, politics, or income affect how comfortable a person will feel at your church?

It is essential for you to be crystal clear on the basics of your church's identity and message, or else they will get lost in the muddle of new technology.

Now we can get back to your family and the restaurant choice. Actually, your way of thinking in deciding where to eat is not vastly different from a person's way of deciding whether or not to come to your church. They may know they want a Christian church, so that rules out any other religion. However, there are quite possibly a whole lot of other churches in your area that offer the same "menu" of Christian faith that your church offers: forgiveness of sin through Jesus, hope through a relationship with God, Christian life through the Spirit, etc. So, then, it comes down to other factors that make your church different from all the other churches around you. Just like with the restaurant choices, environment, quality of service, and value (as far as being worth their time!) are contributing factors. And one of the most important is the quality of the "food," and how it is prepared and presented.

Think about all of your answers to the above questions about your church identity. That's the "food" we're talking about here. Are you offering something that is of the highest quality? If so, how do you prepare and present it? That is to say, how does your church present itself to the community and make the truth of its identity known? How does your church communicate and spread its message? And how does your church enable ministry and relationship?

   This is where social media comes in, and we'll nail down that idea in the next chapter.

Social media is actually not a very good name for the realm it is supposed to define. The issue I have is with the word "media," which is defined as a way to communicate information to large amounts of people.

That calls to mind stacks of newspapers, blaring TVs, and babbling radios—just vast amounts of information flooding out no matter who is (or isn't!) listening. It is kind of like a shotgun blast, spewing out bits of information everywhere in the hopes that maybe one tiny piece will actually find its intended target.

People do not interact with media; they just consume it. This is NOT what social media is supposed to be.

Instead, social media is SOCIAL. Personal. Intentional. You cannot just blast your message out like a shotgun onto social media and expect it to make a difference. You have to view the online social services as an interactive means to making personal connections with individuals. Leveraging social media for your church's mission and message will take effort. However, it can make a huge difference in the people you are able to impact, and the relationships you are able to build with them, if you are willing to put in the work.

Although your goal is personal relationships, the fact is, only a small percentage of people who encounter your online presence will actually go that deeply with you. There are three levels in the depth of relationships you will have with people in the social sphere. Even though you want to move people to deeper and deeper levels, each of these levels can be valuable.

**Influence**

## 1. Arena of Influence

This is everyone in your network. The people who stay in this level, though, are the people who follow you, but you do not know them and rarely interact with them in a personal way. They see your tweets but never reply, they read your Facebook wall but never click "like," they read your blog but never comment. I use the word "arena" here because just like in a sports arena, you have differing levels of commitment and involvement among the fans even though they are all watching the same game. So, in your social arena, you may have a few rabid, face-painting, tailgating fans, but probably more of them will be indifferent fans that leave early because it got too cold or their team was losing.

**Connect**

## 2. Connections

These are the mid-level depth of relationships. They are the ones who follow you AND interact with you regularly. They "like" your Facebook wall, they comment on your blog, they watch your YouTube videos. You know their name and follow their social accounts, too.

**Relation**

## 3. Real Relationships

I hesitate to use the word "real" here, because it IS possible for an individual to be real friends with a person they have never met in real life. However, when it comes to the church, a relationship is not real until it leaves the confines of the Internet and you actually interact face to face. These are people you know and who know you. You have met their families or friends. You have met them for coffee and gotten to know them. And they have gotten to know you as more than the little avatar beside your screen name. This is the ultimate goal of your social media presence—to move offline and become real with the people in your arena.

We've all heard the phrase: "Time is money." When it comes to your church's social media presence, you really need to view it that way. More specifically, what is most valuable is personal interaction. Think of interaction as the currency of social media, and therefore the time and effort you put into it is literally an investment that will have a return for your church and ministry. So, reply to comments. Thank people for their retweets. Answer questions. Be caring and interested. Be present in the lives of people. Let them know you are praying for their issues and then follow up later. Like the shotgun analogy at the beginning of this chapter, it does not really matter how much information you are blasting out on your social media accounts. What matters is how you are interacting with the people in your circles. Remember, your goal is to form real relationships with people, and the way to move them from level one to level three is by investing in them through personal interaction.

From this, we can define three simple rules that will help you decide how to use social media:

## 1. Interact, Interact, Interact

As I just mentioned, interaction is the most valuable thing in the social realm. You have got to take your communication to the personal level and communicate with people as individuals.

One thing to think about, however, is that your church and ministries need to have an online social presence greater than one person. It may not be fun to think about it, but the truth is that sometimes pastors or ministers leave churches. No matter whether it is for a good or bad reason, leadership changes happen within churches and ministries, and you do not want your ministry's social media presence to leave with a pastor! For this reason, it is important to have multiple people within each ministry who participate in online interaction, and who know how to access and run the accounts! If your church is small and there is no way to have another person doing it with you, make sure to leave written instructions about how to use each account for the person who comes after you. On that same note, each church and ministry needs to have its own accounts, not just the minister's personal accounts.

For example, Student Pastor Bob, at Grace Community Church, has his own personal Twitter account, but he also operates the GCCStudents Twitter account. This way, if Bob moves away, he can still maintain his own personal account, but he leaves the password for the GCCStudents account, and the new student pastor can pick right up using it.

## 2. Filter, Filter, Filter

In your haste for getting as much personal interaction as possible in the social sphere, do not forget to stop and think about each word you say before you post it. Filter everything through the lens of your church's identity that we talked about in chapter one. Does this comment fit with who we are and what we want our church to be? Since online interaction is not face-to-face, it is easy to misunderstand and take things the wrong way. You have to be very careful to not offend or hurt people, or give the wrong message. Once you've put the wrong idea out there, it is very difficult to take it back, so FILTER your words before publishing them.

An example of how this negatively affected the work of a nonprofit is told by Matt Flannery, the CEO of micro-lending network Kiva.org. He learned the hard way that he needed to think very carefully about what he chose to post on his Twitter feed. Recently, on a trip to a Latin American country, he tweeted that he was having dinner with a former finance minister, which he just thought was cool. Unfortunately, he later discovered that by tweeting that, he was unintentionally associating himself with a particular political party in the country. That one tweet alienated him from working with certain non-governmental organizations in the county, and severely limited the good his organization could do there. All because of one tweet! So, learn the lesson from him and think carefully about ALL possible ramifications of the words you are considering putting out there.

## 3. Consistency, Consistency, Consistency

This is something else to filter through, but it is important enough that it deserves its own point: You have to make sure that everything you say is consistent with your identity and message. This is especially important if you have more than one person using your church accounts. Make sure that all people who will be publishing words on your website, blog, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, etc., are ALL on the same page with who your church wants to be in the community. Just one inconsistency could seriously damage your message and ministry.

Remember that what goes on the Internet on all of your church's social accounts is permanent. Once it is out there, you cannot take it back. Sure, you can delete it from the account, but you cannot erase it from the minds of everyone that has already read it. So, be alert and mindful of all that you are sharing because your words are powerful and important, and your message is too valuable to risk it being distorted by careless words.

Now that we have a vision for why to use social media and an idea of what to do with social media, it is time to get down to the details of how to use social media. This chapter will focus on the specific social media sites and how to maximize your church's effectiveness on each one. For each, we will talk about its general purpose, the best practices for using it, and then an example of a church or nonprofit that uses it well.

## BLOG

## The Purpose:

Your blog is your mainstay of your online personality. Since there is no character limit, your communications can be longer and express more complex ideas. Use your blog to express thoughts, feelings, truth, and reveal to the public who the individuals in your church's leadership really are. You can choose to have either one church leadership blog where all of your staff members post, or each pastor can have his/her own blog that is linked to the church's website. The point is to be transparent and let people really know you through what you put on your blog. You want to model what a real Christian life looks like in today's culture: I'm not perfect, but I love the Lord and with His help I'm doing my best.

## The Best Practices:

- **Be real.** Use your blog to express the true heart of who you are as individuals. Tell stories, share both struggles and victories, share how God is working in you right now.
- **Mix it up.** Have a variety of things on your blog: personal stories (your own and things God is doing in the lives of church members), Scripture and biblical truths, articles about current events or church life.
- **Be consistent.** Try to blog at least a couple of times a week so people do not lose interest and stop checking it for updates.
- **Encourage interaction.** With each blog you write, ask open-ended questions that encourage people to leave comments to share their own thoughts or stories as well. Remember, social media is not a one-way street. The point is interaction leading to deepening relationships.
- **Link** your blog to your Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and any other online social accounts so that new posts on your blog are automatically announced on the other sites, and new videos, articles, or messages will be automatically posted to your blog. That will make it easy to let people know you have something new posted.

**A Good Example:** Orange (www.WhatIsOrange.org) is an organization that gives vision, passion, and resources to children's and student ministers. Each year, they conduct a nationwide tour to meet in smaller environments across the country with church leaders to help answer questions and provide them with resources and a support network. The Orange Tour also has a blog that serves as an online hub for all information relating to the tour. Using WordPress plugins, the blog is set up to automatically update whenever one of the Orange Leaders posts a new blog, video, or tweet, and the information is constantly being updated as the tour progresses. Check it out at http://blog.OrangeTour.org.

# Facebook

## ThePurpose:

The Facebook status prompt says "What's on your mind?" So, let that question guide you about what to do with Facebook. Facebook has so many diverse features that you can consider it to be an online hangout for your church community to share all about what is going on and what they are thinking about.

## TheBestPractices:

- Create a Community Page for your church that all members of leadership can be administrators of, in addition to their own individual pages. This way, staff members can use their individual pages for their personal lives and families, if desired, and the church community page will be where church stuff is done.

  o Once you have more than 25 followers, you can personalize your URL to make your page easier to find. When choosing your URL, though, make it the same as your church's website URL. For example, if your church's name is Grace Community Church, there are any number of names you could shorten that into to make a Facebook URL. However, if your church's website is www.gracecc.com, then the best choice for your Facebook URL is www.facebook.com/gracecc. That adds continuity to your online presence, and it will help people know that it's definitely you and not some other Grace Church.

- Use the Status bar on your Page's wall to share thoughts, ask questions, share links and publicize events. Make sure at least one thing is posted every day.

- Make sure the Info page is up-to-date and links to all of your other online accounts.

- Use the Photos page to post images from all of your events. Get them up quickly after the event (or even use a mobile phone to post them as the event is taking place), so people can see what is happening at your church. Tag photos of church members so that people know their picture is up on your page, and then their friends will be able to see the photos too, even if they do not follow your church page.

- Use the Discussions page to get people talking about Scripture themes, current events, or anything else that is happening.
- Facebook has a brand-new feature called Subscribers, which will be a helpful tool for large churches because it no longer limits the number of friends a single page can have. It also allows you to choose certain groups of people to send messages or updates to, so this could be very helpful for sending out information to only a specific group of people.
- Be active yourself in following your community's Facebook walls and "Liking" their posts. If you are active in what they are doing, they are more likely to pay attention to you as well.
- For community-wide events, you might consider purchasing a Facebook ad that will be targeted to people in your area. It is simple and inexpensive, and it is a good way to reach local people that might not see other advertising you put out.

A Good Example: The ultimate example of a church using Facebook to absolutely rock ministry is Northland Church in Central Florida (www.NorthlandChurch.net). Northland is already set up to livestream their services to their five different locations throughout Central Florida, so they thought it was a simple jump to take their worship to Facebook. They call themselves "A Church Distributed" because they believe that through online resources, their church can have a strong community regardless of how widespread their geographical locations. They have vibrant interactions on their Facebook wall, good discussions on their discussion page, and they livestream each of their five weekly services, so that people can join in no matter where they are. Their interactive webstream allows people to not only watch, but also participate by having immediate access to an online pastor and the ability to chat instantly with other worshipers. Check out their Facebook page at http://www.facebook.com/northlandchurch

# Twitter

## ThePurpose:

The Twitter prompt says "What's happening?" So let this question be your guide. What are you thinking about? What are you working on? Is your church preparing for a big event? Are you working on a new sermon series? Did something great happen? Did God speak to you in a fresh way today? Use Twitter to share many short thoughts throughout the day.

## TheBestPractices:

- Use Twitter as the place you post most often, several times a day.
  - o In order to minimize the amount of time you spend posting on various sites, it is convenient to use a service that will allow you to post multiple places at once. You can use TweetDeck or HootSuite to select which account to post something to.
  - o Alternatively, in Facebook, you can use the Twitter app to post all of your tweets on your Facebook wall, or you can use the Selective Tweets app to choose which of your tweets will post to your Facebook wall.
- Twitter's 140-character limit is pretty confining, but it is actually better to go even shorter than that. Try to leave enough room in your tweet for someone to be able to easily retweet it.
  - o For example, "RT @roar_pro:" is 13 characters, so we try to leave at least 13 extra spaces in our tweets so that someone can simply click the RT button and post without having to cut anything out.
- Use hashtags (#) and mentions (@) to draw people's attention to your tweets. If you are tweeting about any public person, theme, book, or anything, there is almost certainly a hashtag that will allow anyone following that thing to automatically see your tweet. Perform a search on Twitter for it, and you will be able to see what the hashtag or username is.
  - o If you begin a tweet with a mention (@), it will be semi-private so that only people who are following both you and the user mentioned will be able to see it. Unless that is your intention, rephrase your sentence so it does not begin with the name, or just put a punctuation mark in front of the @ to allow it to be seen by the public.
- Use Twitter intentionally to augment your worship services by tweeting out the theme and some food for thought beforehand. Let people know what Scriptures to read and what to be thinking about before they come. Then, follow up afterward with more discussion questions and things to think about.
- For the more technologically-advanced, you can even incorporate Twitter into your worship services by allowing people to tweet their thoughts and questions during the service. Also, a pastor or church leader could tweet out discussion questions that people tweet their replies to. Read the example below to see how one church does this very well.
  - o If you want to do something like this, make sure your church's wireless Internet connection has enough strength and bandwidth to be able to handle that much traffic at one time. You do not want people distracted and frustrated at the failure of the technology.

# YouTube

## ThePurpose:

YouTube is the number three search engine on the Web. People are using YouTube to search for a LOT of different things. So, why are churches not using this medium to get their message out there and help people find what they are really searching for? YouTube is obviously a forum for videos, but there are a lot of things that can be recorded on video and placed on YouTube for people to see. One great thing about YouTube is that it is already mobile-friendly, so you do not have to worry about making your video content accessible on mobile devices; YouTube does the work for you.

## TheBestPractices:

- Have your own YouTube channel that people can subscribe to. Just like with the personal Facebook URL, if possible, give your YouTube channel the same name as your church's website.

- Put your entire worship service on YouTube every week. If you can, divide up the worship songs from the sermon and post those all individually too. That way, if someone does a search on a certain topic, they will be able to pull up and view your pastor's sermon on that topic.

- To make things searchable, make sure to use tags and keywords so that people will find your content when doing searches.

- It is a great idea for members of your church leadership to do video-blogs (vlogs) occasionally just to get their face and voice out there, and also to make them more accessible. Use YouTube to host them online, and then embed them in your blog as well.

- Upload video clips from church events—concerts, kids' camps, mission trips, youth events, etc. People will be able to see with their own eyes what kind of community your church has and the relationships available to them if they participate.

A Good Example: Westside Family Church in Lenexa, Kan., (www.WestsideFamilyChurch.com) has a stellar YouTube channel where they post everything from sermon clips to funny personal videos to messages from the pastors to event details to leadership training sessions. Check it out at http://www.YouTube.com/user/westsidefamilychurch.

# SMS

## ThePurpose:

SMS, or text messaging, is interesting because it is an older technology, but it is very popular and effective for short and instant communication. Statistics show that 97 percent of all text messages are read by the recipient, which is an unbelievably high percentage. No other medium of personal communication even comes close to that. Because of this, the chance of your SMS actually being received is very high. However, it is very important, then, to be selective about how you use this power; do not abuse it by sending too many texts for unimportant things.

## TheBestPractices:

• Be brief and informational with what you send via text. You know that people will receive your message instantly, and they are extremely likely to read it right away. Be careful to only send something they need to know and they need to know now.

• There are two different uses for text messaging. The first is to use a service like YapTap (www.YapTap.com) or SimplyText (www.SimplyText.net) to deliver mass information via text. This is not interactive because you are not aiming for interaction here, you are just spreading important information. Use this for things like informing parents when the youth group is going to be late returning from their mission trip or when an event's location has been changed.

o YapTap is a cool new resource for managing your various social communications. You can use it to send not only text messages, but also Facebook, Twitter, and email messages, depending on who you are trying to reach and how.

• The second, and in my opinion more exciting, use for SMS is to give people the opportunity to interact with a speaker while he is speaking. People in the congregation can text in a question or comment that the pastor can receive instantly and choose whether or not to address from the stage. If he chooses not to address it immediately, he can reply during the week, which will help the person to keep thinking about the topic throughout the week. It will also give the person the opportunity to personally interact with the pastor.

o If a speaker does not want to give people his personal cell phone number to receive texts during a sermon, he can set up a Google Voice number only for this purpose. He can also have another person filtering the received texts for him so that he is not trying to do that while speaking.

A Good Example: The Student Ministry at Montgomery Community Church (www.mcc.us) in Loveland, Ohio, has a midweek gathering called United that uses texting to deeply impact senior high students. Daniel McKee (senior high director at MCC), Ivo Oliveira (student worship pastor at MCC), and Mark Alliett (student venture staff in Loveland, OH) coordinate their time and resources for this weekly gathering. Early in the week, they text a message to their students letting them know what the topic of that week's United will be, to allow them to begin thinking about it and inviting friends they think might be interested in that topic. They have a Google Voice number set up specifically for United-related texting, and that number is given to the students. At United, the students are asked to text in questions or thoughts related to the subject. All three ministers participate each week, so when one is speaking, the other two can read the texts and decide how to respond to each. Some students' thoughts and questions are read and addressed from the stage right away. Others are replied to instantly via text, and others are replied to during the week. Google Voice keeps a record of the conversation flow of each text, so it's easy to see what has been read and what has been responded to. Daniel says that it is amazing what the students will share and ask since their anonymous texts make them feel free to speak more openly, and there are some really deep truths that are shared with this amazing ministry tool. Google Voice is free, and texting is a fantastic way to reach students. For more information on this ministry, check out http://www.mcc.us/next-gen/epic/sr-high/united.

# APPS

## ThePurpose:

It is a great idea for a church to have an app as the mobile/social hub of all their various online activities. It takes everything a church does online and puts it all in one place in a person's pocket on their mobile device. This way, they can access everything from your church easily, on the go.

## TheBestPractices:

- There are two different types of apps: HTML5 Web apps that function like a mobile website and are accessible only online, and native apps for each platform (like iPhone or Android) that are downloaded and can function offline. The Web app is a great place for a church to start in getting their content accessible on all mobile browsers, but the native apps are much more functional.

- In deciding what to put in your app, simply put in everything you do online, but in a mobile format. Put access to your church's website, along with all blogs, social media accounts, streaming audio and video, online giving, volunteer and event sign-ups, etc.
- Make it social. Use sharable buttons for Twitter and Facebook so that everything in your app can be shared and/or commented on. Remember, your purpose is interaction leading to relationship, not just the spread of information.

A Good Example: Redeemer Church in New York (www.Redeemer.tv) has two stellar apps, one for iPhone and one for Android. Visit http://www.Redeemer.tv/connect/mobile-apps/ to learn all about their apps. The most unique social aspect of their apps is something called the "Prayer Request Feature." In it, church members can list their own requests for prayer, and they can also go in to find ways they can pray for others. They leave comments to encourage and help each other. A very rich community has been created through the people's caring for and praying for each other resulting from their interactions within this app.

## Emerging Technologies:
(Google+, GroupMe, Quora, etc.)

In today's technological age, there are always new social online services coming out, and you never know which ones will make it big. It is an excellent idea for at least one member of a church's leadership to stay very current with all emerging technologies and to adopt them for personal use as soon as possible. If he/she finds that it is a useful site and can see how it would be good for communication with a small group of people such as ministry volunteers or other area ministers, then it is a great idea to use it for that. However, it is wise to wait until it has been adopted by mass audiences before trying to use it for ministry. With a site like Google+, it shows great promise for being valuable in ministry, but there just are not enough people using it yet to make it worth a minister's time and energy. Focus instead on the above sites where your audience is larger and you can have personal interactions with a greater percentage of your congregation and community.

No matter where your church is on the journey of embracing technology and using social media in ministry, this handbook will hopefully give you some ideas about what steps you can take to engage people online. In the words of Pastor Todd Hahn of Next Level Church near Charlotte, N.C., "It's a huge responsibility of a church to leverage whatever's going on in the broader culture, to connect people to God and to each other."3 In my opinion, he is right. And since social media is what is going on in the broader culture, then the church needs to embrace it and leverage its power to engage people for Christ.

With the extreme connectedness of the global world, the church is no longer confined to its own geographical neighborhood. Churches can use online resources to reach people all around the world, and the social tools listed in this handbook make it possible, if not exceptionally simple. While remembering that the church's end goal is always real, offline relationships, it is still better for a person to hear the Gospel and receive loving care from a Christian online than not at all.

Remember to keep your church's identity, mission, and message in mind when embarking in online social ministry, but do not be afraid to get out and do it. Enlist tech-savvy volunteers from your church body to help your church find its social niche. There may be someone in your church that has been longing to serve in such a ministry that fits their gifts, just waiting for you to ask! Talk to your church about it, encourage them that it WILL make a difference in people's lives and the church community, and then get out there are do it! These resources are yours for the taking.

Footnotes

1. From this article: http://Mashable.com/2011/09/20/kiva-matt-flannery-social-media/

2. Information from
http://ChurchTechToday.com/2010/03/24/florida-congregation-plants-church-in-the-nation-of-facebook

3. Quotes and information from this article:
http://www.Time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1900265,00.html