

# FACEBOOK FAITH: SOCIAL NETWORKING IN A FAITH BASED COMMUNITY

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## Abstract

*Social networking provides a high impact and efficient ministry to the moveable generation. Through social networks such as Facebook, ministry from a pastoral perspective can become more authentic and meaningful. A young person's digital identity often reflects one's faith due to increased openness. A minister can engage in a non-hierarchical manner. Prayer and bible study as well as pastoral care through social networking occur as relationships deepen via social networking and making people real. Spiritual and religious views are freely shared, creating sacred spaces in the midst of life practicing a holistic faith identity in a secular community. Contacts can be maintained with those who move from a local church to a new environment such as college or entering the work force away from one's childhood roots. The asynchronous nature of communication within social networking and the practice of engaging with many individuals simultaneously eases the minister in her work. Therefore social networking not only increases the quality of the work, but also empowers the minister to be more efficient.*

## Introduction

Gone are the days of the church parish in which everyone lived within walking distance to the church. Today a church parish is structured on relational experiences, not geography.

Even at the Newbold Church on the campus of the SDA college in Great Britain, the majority of church attendees live off campus and commute more than 30 minutes to attend church. The question arises, "Where is your home church?"

When those who regularly attend the Newbold Church choose to move geographically, they remain part of the Newbold Church community and still see this as their church, despite being geographically closer to other Adventist churches. Their attendance gets limited to holidays and other occasional visits rather than weekly attendance at worship services. Only a few in this group of young adults will attend an Adventist church in the new community where they now reside. Gone is the seemingly global appeal of the Adventist church to this emerging generation as their commitment to their own "local home church" isn't dictated by geography.

As young adults have embraced internet Social Networks (SN) for community, how will a church respond? A ministry of presence through SN emerges as a core form of ministry—keeping them present in the life of the church, and keeping their spirituality alive.

The duty of pastoral care for young adults tends to continue to be expected from the "home church." Young adults often find integration in other Adventist churches challenging. Complications and challenges increase when young adults leave home for college because the vast majority of Adventist college students in Europe attend universities that are not faith-based.

Ministry is grounded in relationships—between individuals and God, and between individuals and the church fellowship and the surrounding community. SN sites provide a strong platform to be part the lives of other people. And this can be done without being bounded by geography.

## Presence Ministry

I became aware of the scope and possibilities of SN in ministry as I observed my husband at work.

He is a computer scientist researcher in the area of e-learning, competencies and SN. This led me to integrate SN such as Facebook<sup>1</sup> into my ministry.

Quickly I discovered that this was a tool that would enable ministry to a much wider range of individuals, especially among young adults and teens—the moveable generation. SN became an integral part of my ministry to youth and young adults. It gave me an inroad to being present and relational with them in their online lives. As living life online increases, it is essential for ministry to be present where people are. With church affiliation tied to one's early or established congregation, a ministry of presence through SN might be the only method to maintain ministry with those who move. This has major implications for young adults who leave their home town and church for college.

### **Digital Faith Identity**

Online living is as real as “normal living” to many people, and it is here that such people build and strengthen relationships. Research suggests a practice among youth and young adults in which they exhibit an openness to share and expose private issues online, sometimes naively.<sup>2</sup>

The digital identity of youth and young adults reflect their faith and religious beliefs. Previous generations were not seen as being free with personal and private information. Now Facebook profiles show and share an individual's political and faith orientations. As a result, SN normalizes spiritual and religious views and enables sharing these alongside political and activist opinions. Youth and young adults seem even freer to practice their holistic identity in a secular community than was previously seen. They share spiritual and religious views and journeys. As a result, they create sacred spaces in the midst of life. SN encourages authentic and transparent lives, which enables relational ministry to move in a more appropriate and relevant manner. Relationships built purely in church related programs often struggle with authenticity and relevancy to the lives that youth and young adults live outside of a church program.

### **Deeper Connections**

Dialogues and chats on SN strengthen the face-to-face encounters people have with each other. What often fails to be captured in a brief, impromptu

contact during a church program can go deeper more quickly based on previous SN interactions. Issues and questions that build a foundation for heavier topics have already been covered, and done so openly through the SN. The connection between a minister and a church member deepens as it becomes more real. You can know through SN statuses and updates what is happening in the other person's life.

Face-to-face contact with those already connected through SN allows greater transparency, authenticity, and depth. A minister can target needs that previously would have been kept at arms' length by youth and young adults. She is now able to mingle in the realities of where they are in their lives. Such depth strengthens relational ministry.

Consider the time that would be spent travelling in person from one SN contact to another. A knock on the door might not be as welcomed as a SN contact. A minister could easily engage in more prayers and Scripture studies with online contacts than are possible in person. Availability becomes less of an issue, which certainly works out better across time zones and schedules that don't match. A prayer group no longer needs to be limited to those who can catch a ride to the church regardless of the weather or their distance from the physical church. Now a prayer group can span continents. When done well, a minister through SN can foster a community of prayer practices that makes prayer applicable where individuals are at any given time.

### **Connected Ministry**

Besides providing a strong platform for multiple information flow, SN is attractive in a postmodern society. Invitations to a variety of onsite contacts, events, and causes seem commonplace and non-threatening. This also makes church events more transparent and available to people who do not attend church. It invites spiritual friendships and relationships.

Individuals who might not be regular in church attendance are more apt to consider an SN invitation to an event less intrusive than a phone call or face-to-face invitation to the same event. SN is able to bridge personal spaces for event invitations and yet remain safe. For those outside of the geographical community, the online community/parish becomes

an important place for the flow of information. It also allows connectivity and communication regarding who is (and is not) attending—something that is often quite important for young people when they consider whether or not to attend an event.

SN strengthen relationships in a non hierarchical manner and invite the minister into lives where there previously would have been barriers. SN provide a platform where it is perceived to be safer to exchange and explore ideas, experiences and feelings than sharing them face-to-face with the minister. Communicating through chats and messaging appears to offer a level of confidentiality that a church foyer does not provide on a Sabbath morning.

Because of communication interaction on SN, continuing the conversation in person can be a natural and non-intrusive development. This form of “SN visitation” is effective among the youth and young adults who might feel overwhelmed with a house visit, which often is not the appropriate form of visitation for them in the first place.

As lives are lived online, digital visitation becomes a natural outreach and point of contact. One can be present in their online lives and can reach individuals in various levels of depth. Some discussions remain superficial, while others move to more depth with dialogues about spiritual and religious matters. Such conversations youth and young adults might hesitate to engage in with a minister, unless that minister has been present in their online life. Ministry threads of communications on SN can take a relationship into a deeper level of life-sharing and God-sharing, in a language and format that is at the core of postmodern living.

## Effective Connections

The asynchronous nature of communication within social networking eases the minister in her work. The minister is able to engage with many individuals at the same time. In the past, a minister could visit one person at a time. Now she can visit five or six individuals online, either as a group or individually. Travel time between locations, being dressed appropriately for any given setting, and even odd hours make asynchronous communication more of a match with regular life. And the thread of communication continues across

time and despite time zones. Hence the church parish becomes a worldwide parish grounded in a local church community. This makes authentic life-sharing possible in communities that might have not existed when limited by geography. It strengthens bonds between church attendees in a ministry not driven by attending church programs. Traditional methods of ministry have taken on new formats, such as participating in study groups across university campuses or across continents.

## Conclusion

SN provides an emerging ministry form that is relevant to postmodern youth and young adults. It offers the minister a deeper level of connectivity to engage in life, sharing in a relevant format. It strengthens relational communications between a minister and individuals who might not seek pastoral care. It maintains contact with church members who have moved away and have not connected to church in their geographical proximity. It deepens face-to-face contacts by having shared with some depth online already, which paves the way for greater openness in person. Relational interactions available through SN make it possible to not only reach the campus, but reach the world.<sup>3</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup><http://www.facebook.com>

<sup>2</sup>*This Is Me* (Odinlab, University of Reading) and eLearning Communities and spaces (Parslow, Lundqvist and Evans).

<sup>3</sup>The author would like to acknowledge the work of Odinlab at the University of Reading. The work of the researchers shaped the philosophy behind the work described in this paper.

