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John P. Jackman: Facebook and faith

When a middle-aged pastor joined Facebook, he didn't know what to expect. But he quickly discovered that this new medium offers a powerful way for the church to be present in the world.

by [John P. Jackman](#)



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Four years ago, at the urging of younger members in my congregation, I joined Facebook. As a 55-year-old pastor, I wasn't sure what to expect. But I soon discovered that this strange new medium, for the church at least, is about much more than new technology.

For us, Facebook is about theology -- and ecclesiology. For pastors and other church leaders, Facebook offers a powerful way to enhance and expand our ministry and our presence in the world.

Pastoral ministry, indeed church itself, at least in part has always been about building relationships and cultivating community. For pastors and other church leaders, that task includes contact and communication, getting to know our people and their lives and helping them to know and care for one another.

But even for pastors with the very best visitation skills, the weeks do not have enough days and hours in which to build and nurture deep, authentic relationships with more than a few church members.

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And even if it happens every Sunday, the typical post-worship doorway exchange, complete with handshake and “Fine sermon, Pastor,” doesn’t build much of a relationship.

Yet relationships are vital to any faith community. Their absence or presence is what often decides whether members will drift away, leave through the back door, or stay committed and involved.

For me, Facebook opened a doorway that allows me to be in touch with people, to know and share in the day-to-day joys and sorrows of their lives, in a way that previously happened only occasionally in a home visit. Even more, it makes possible a whole new layer of instant community -- a sharing in real time -- that had not existed before.

With Facebook, I and church members can almost immediately share photos of important events, rejoice together at moments of triumph, and express concern when tragedy strikes or a loved one falls ill. All these things and more can be shared in the moment and acknowledged while still fresh, instead of weeks later, as usually happens in church life.

One of the most compelling reasons to sign up for Facebook is that it is heavily used by college students and 20-somethings, the very group that has always drifted from church and been difficult to stay in touch with. After joining Facebook, I intentionally searched for all our college and 20-something members and “friended” them in short order.

Soon, I was in touch with their lives in a way that I had never been before. Yes, sometimes I saw a frat picture or two that they probably would not have wanted their pastor to see if they had thought about it for a moment. But I knew when they were sick. I knew when they were taking an exam they were worried about. I knew when they had a job interview.

Now, as never before, I could send them a brief “attaboy” or note of encouragement and celebrate with them when things went well. I joked with older members that I now usually knew what was going on in our college students’ lives before their parents did. But it wasn’t a joke -- it was true.

You don’t believe that kind of virtual presence can make a difference in a young person’s life? Then consider how delighted I was when one of our younger adult members wrote on her Facebook page, “I can’t post that on Facebook -- I’m Friends with my pastor!”

But is this really community? Is this really substantial communication? Isn’t Facebook just a giant water cooler conversation? Well, yes. That’s exactly what it is, nothing more or less.

Water cooler conversation is vitally important in building relationships, researchers have found. It helps create informal bonds that lead to more substantial communication and trust. Telecommuters, for example, report that, lacking these seemingly inconsequential conversations, they feel disconnected from the people in the office. And for many people in our congregations, the only options are the Facebook “water cooler” or the post-worship handshake exchange. Which do you think is more likely to nurture real relationships and greater involvement in church life?

As our congregation’s membership in Facebook has grown, so too have the layers of communication. Many new parents in our congregation now post baby pictures and give regular updates, enabling me to learn about the sniffles and the first vaccinations and the milestone events even as they’re happening. I have made more than one hospital visit as a result of posts on Facebook, responding to events I learned about long before we got an “official” family telephone call at the church office.

This new level of connection and relationship is not just for the pastor but for the entire congregation. Pictures of church events, tagged with relatives’ names, have shown up on the Facebook walls of young members who now live far away, keeping them connected to our church. We’ve had members and former members post comments from across the country and around the world.

Facebook, of course, is not without problems and challenges. The technology can create a digital divide, and pastors need to be aware of which members are not Facebookers and intentionally use other methods to stay in touch with them.

Foolish use of the medium -- things far less than Anthony Weiner-level stupid -- can end a ministry career. And even with the best intentions, an unthinking post can easily violate the privacy of your family or a church member. But healthy pastors, whether in the virtual world or the real one, have good psychological boundaries and should know how to limit the information and private opinions

they share in the very, very public world of Facebook.

At the same time, authenticity is vitally important, especially with younger members. Young people today have a nose for the artificial. They can sense when you are posting “with your robes on.” Be genuine and be honest, always keeping in mind the limits of a fundamentally public forum.

Remember, Facebook is *two-way communication*. Listen as well as talk. At some level, your members will be measuring the authenticity of your responses just as they would in a personal conversation.

As new as Facebook is, its strengths lie in skills that have been at the heart of the church from the very beginning. As recorded in Acts and the Epistles, the apostolic church was profoundly relational, with members clearly concerned about staying in touch with one another, bearing one another’s burdens and sharing in one another’s joys.

This is what real church is about, and any tool that enhances our ability to build connections and relationships is not one to be ignored.