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- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
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- Browse by Feature Type

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- Staff Directory
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- Q&A »
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What's church got to do with it?

Confession as art. Thousands of people send postcards with their deepest secrets to the website PostSecret.com. But some wonder: Does a postcard truly fulfill the need to confess?

by [Ned Barnett](#)



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They show up every Sunday like penitent churchgoers bearing guilt, regret or worry, seeking the release of confessing before a presence they cannot see.

They are not churchgoers. They are postcards sent anonymously to a man named Frank Warren. He gets them by the thousands. Every Sunday, he presents those he finds most compelling on his website, [PostSecret.com](#).

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The cards are usually artfully designed with a photo or a drawing. The wording, often cut and pasted like a ransom note, is sometimes just as blunt and urgent. A few of the revelations are hopeful and grateful. Some are wry and funny. Most are dark. Since the site went up in 2005, it has drawn more than 250 million visits.

Warren, who doesn't attend church, nonetheless posts only on Sundays, a day he says is appropriate for "reflection and gravity." For ministers, that choice of day can seem a direct challenge. As worshippers gather in churches each Sunday, others log on to Warren's cyber venue to read iconic cards shining against a black background like stained-glass windows. Some visitors want to see if their secret is one of the 20 or so featured. Others seek a comforting echo of their own troubles.

PostSecret's popularity isn't limited to the weekly postings. The site sells books of secrets, too. The latest, "PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and God," just went on sale. When Warren visits college campuses, students turn out to hear him speak about the healing power of sharing what one has long withheld.

For ministers it can seem that Warren and other social media not only dominate the Sabbath, but threaten to usurp one of the church's traditional functions. Thousands of people, most of them young, are disclosing their fears, worries and sins to a website instead of their pastors.

In an interview, Warren insists that no competition is intended. He said PostSecret is more of an artistic expression than a religious one.

"I don't try to connect PostSecret with religious belief, but many of the secrets I receive do have a spiritual nature," he said. "I like to think of the project as art."

Whether it is art or something else, the PostSecret phenomenon raises questions for ministers, particularly those who work with youth: Are churches failing to provide an outlet for the need to confess? And, if so, are they also neglecting another spiritual hunger -- the longing for forgiveness?

A need for forgiveness

For McKennon Shea, admissions director at Duke Divinity School and long involved in youth ministry, the answers are "yes" and "yes."

"PostSecret put the church on notice that we have lost a sense of confession and what goes with it, that absolution, that forgiveness," Shea said. "It's something we lost in the Reformation. It may have been done away with in the life of the church, but nothing changed in human beings. We still have that need for forgiveness."

Elyse Gustafson, a regular reader of PostSecret, agrees that the site taps a desire the church tends to ignore.

"The popularity of PostSecret might be in part due to Protestant America's disinterest in confession," Gustafson said. "All that guilt and shame has to go somewhere, even if the church won't take it."

Acknowledging the desire to confess is one thing, but deciding how churches should respond becomes complex, particularly for Protestants.

Shea believes churches can provide time and space for confession -- responding in a way that helps heal a broken relationship with God -- without exclusively claiming the power to absolve sins.

"We have the tools to respond, to reclaim what we lost," he said. "It doesn't mean ministers have to go and build a confessional booth. But we have to find a place where people can hear the story of a God who forgives and loves and listens to secrets that we can atone for."

Kelsey Merison, a medical student at The Ohio State University, thinks young people prefer confiding to a pastor they know well, but only up to a point. "It can create barriers when the young person is worried about what the minister will think of them."

Merison, who grew up Catholic, said she never felt close to her priests. "To me, confessing the sins just felt like I was talking to a stranger." While she thinks Protestant churches should consider carefully how they listen to youth, she senses that none of her friends are interested in something akin to the

Catholic confessional.

Today's young people may not have a greater need for confession than previous generations, but they are making the need more apparent as they explore -- and are sometimes isolated by -- a world of instant messaging, tweeting and social networking sites. Some pour out sad or embarrassing information on Facebook. Others confess anonymously on PostSecret or blogs. Some open up suddenly in group discussions.

Fred Edie, faculty director of the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation and assistant professor of the practice of Christian education at Duke Divinity, notices that more young people are revealing secret concerns.

"One thing I note is either a generational or cultural tendency toward self revelation," Edie said. "At our Youth Academy, for example, it has become relatively routine for students to share stories or incidents of significant wounding (of themselves or from themselves to others) as they grow to trust one another in Christian community."

As Edie and his staff weigh how to respond to these disclosures, they've developed approaches -- both communal and one-on-one -- that go beyond simply accepting the cathartic value of confession. They try to make it a process for emotional and spiritual mending.

"Unlike PostSecret, the point of confession for Christians is not just therapeutic relief of one's own existential pain," he said. "It is to enable reconciliation between themselves and the party or the parties to that pain."

A chance to heal – or to vent?

Warren, who posts less than 3 percent of the 1,000 postcards he receives weekly, thinks an effective confession doesn't require an audience or even another person. It requires only honesty and the courage, he said, to reveal what he calls the two kinds of secrets -- those one hides from others and those one hides from oneself.

Warren said he believes people find relief in "the act of writing a secret on a postcard and letting it go."

Paul Griffiths, William K. Warren professor of Catholic theology at Duke, said that PostSecret and the Catholic sacrament of penance are very different.

"The urge behind [sending the postcard] is the same as what developed the Catholic tradition, but with one fundamental difference," Griffiths said. "For Catholics, it's not about making public announcements, but firmly intending an amendment to one's life. That second aspect is lacking in PostSecret."

For his part, Warren thinks his site does provide healing as well as release. In his book "PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives," Warren writes, "I like to believe that when a private secret ends its trip to my mailbox, a much longer personal journey of healing is beginning for all of us."

Griffiths said Warren is "just a little optimistic about the opportunities for healing that come out of that." He said his reading of the site finds it as much about venting as confessing.

"Some of what is going on is a forum for expression of anger or rage," he said. "They're not penitent. They're pissed off."

Indeed, Griffiths sees PostSecret not as a flowing outlet for confession, but as a measure of how many people feel there is no one in whom they can confide.

"I've been impressed by how many of the postcards have to do with feelings of inadequacy and shame. People feel they are weird, they're different. These are feelings that are hard to express publicly, and if there is a place, it ought to be in the churches."

For the Rev. Justin Snider, Facebook has been a valuable tool as he ministers to two churches in a rural area of Illinois. It helps him communicate with his far-flung congregations, and it led at least one young man to seek his counsel.

“He began testing the waters with how much he could share,” Snider said of the teen with whom he communicated on Facebook for a month.

“The discussions spanned everything from the Trinity to girls and pressures of school. All these things weighed on him.”

When Snider finally met his correspondent, the young man seemed reticent, and admitted later in a Facebook message that he found that medium more comfortable for deep discussions with his minister.

“I didn’t know what to think of that,” Snider said. “One-on-one conversation is ultimately superior, but for this teen Facebook worked.”

Snider’s ministry colleagues have had similar experiences. “They said people approach them on Facebook and just start dumping these confessions that go way beyond small talk. It adds a level of protection for a lot of young people.”

Still, Snider remains ambivalent about how much technology can help what he sees as a growing need for genuine and deep communication. Ministers who think they’re more in touch with their flock because they are hooked to a BlackBerry are only “sucked into an illusion of availability,” he said.

He would prefer to see a renewed emphasis on face-to-face counseling and discussion aimed at helping people express their concerns and deepen their relationships with God.

“Handled with delicacy and care, that can be a very fruitful process,” Snider said.

Protestants and penance

When the Rev. Mark Reamer arrived at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Raleigh, N.C., he brought extensive experience in hearing the confessions of young people: he had served as a chaplain in the U.S. Navy.

At special sessions offered at St. Francis for middle school and high school students, the confessions strike him as “sincere and authentic,” said Reamer, and the young people seem comforted by the ritual of the sacrament. Protestants, he said, might want to adopt some of the Catholic elements of penance, just as many have adopted the ritual of Ash Wednesday.

In an age of technological isolation, as information explodes and intimacy withers, Reamer said the human touch becomes all the more important in expressing the divine. He notes the human contact in anointing with oil in the rites of the sick, receiving the Eucharist and the voice of the confessor.

“One of the things I love about being Catholic,” he said, “is that the sacraments are so appealing to the senses.”

But McKennon Shea said sites such as PostSecret might be pointing churches toward a new kind of confession that is at once personal and communal in its benefits.

“There’s a cathartic effect that does model confession,” he said. “A whole host of people just go and read [the postcards]. They want to know they are not alone. What one person thinks is his or her deep secret is mine too. Just knowing someone out there has this going on can be helpful.”

Shea said churches should try to achieve that effect within a Christian context.

“It does force the church to ask: Are we creating a space like this somewhere? Can we let people confess and at the same time feel like they’re not the only ones out there?”

