The Pastor on Facebook:
Boldly Going Where Everyone Else Goes

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I punched in a username and password on Facebook's welcome page in September 2007, a few years after it was launched for university and high school students and one year after it was made available to everyone thirteen and older in the general public. The first weeks were pure thrill, and my contacts were all current and former friends. Immediately aware of the potential for obsession,[1] I made a decision never to open Facebook at work. Within weeks, youth of my congregation started sending me friend requests, and within months, their parents and other adult members of the congregation did the same. I accepted the requests without much thought, and soon I was getting work-related messages from parishioners through Facebook. Amending my rules, I decided to open Facebook at work only to deal with work-related messages. Within a few more weeks, Facebook offered a live chat option. Late one night, I sat with my computer in my bedroom when a new live chat box popped open on my screen that read, "sup paster amy?"[2] It was a thirteen-year-old of the congregation. I should not have been surprised. Facebook

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[1]For a creative response to the obsessive character of Facebook, see "Giving Up Online Social Networks for Lent?" *The Christian Century*, 7 April 2009, 13.

[2]Translation: "What is up, Pastor Amy?" The translation is both playful and intentional. I had to look twice at the live message to realize it was a transliteration of the way this young person speaks.

Social networking involves courageous steps into a world millions of humans already inhabit. God calls us into the realities of life, and such realities certainly include Facebook; but, like all calls, this one should be entered with care.

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does not merely blur the lines between work and home, public and private, and professional and personal. On Facebook, there are inherently no lines to blur. Work had easily snuck its way into whatever space I occupied with my laptop open to online social networking.

Today, my congregation has a page on Facebook, and I am on the site at work a few times a week. The potential for using online social networking for the purpose of Christian ministry is now more broadly recognized, and I have adapted my online habits, as quickly as the programs themselves have evolved, in order to be a Facebook user who is also a public leader in the church.

In the twentieth century, the mission of *Star Trek*'s Starship *Enterprise* was to boldly go where no one had gone before. In the early twenty-first century, in no faraway galaxy but in the privacy of one's own home, online social networking is a vast and unfamiliar world, explored by millions who are making their way—and making mistakes. When the pastor joins, she is entering a world where family, friends past and present, and parishioners past and present are already interacting and eavesdropping electronically. This article does not ask whether the pastor should engage in online social networking but raises some of the issues the pastor will almost inevitably face once she is engaged, boldly going where everyone else goes.

Pastor to Friends, Friend to Parishioners

The first question to be asked once the pastor is on Facebook is whether and to what extent one will *be* pastor on Facebook. Had I joined the network with the intention of doing ministry, my habits from the start would have been markedly different. Now that so many church members are connected to me through Facebook, my online identity has naturally and unwittingly become more professional than personal. The result is an odd feeling of being pastor to friends and friend to parishioners. On the positive side, there is no mistaking that the pastor who commingles personal and professional identities online is a real person with real emotions and a life outside the parish. This awareness is literally in the face of parishioners as they see the pastor's personal life and activity on screen. However, given that all these people have simultaneous access to the pastor's online activity, transparency becomes a sticky subject. Even on a personal profile, pastors cannot set aside their role as servants of their parishioners, so they must choose what they disclose about themselves with discretion.[3] Because every pastor and every context is different, online habits will never be identical, but obviously some information in every context, while perfectly appropriate, is not beneficial for all eyes. Even Jesus kept some perfectly appropriate information about himself secret (Mark 8:27–30).

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[3]For a helpful and thorough discussion of self-disclosure and the Internet within the field of psychotherapy, see Ofer Zur et al., "Psychotherapist Self-Disclosure and Transparency in the Internet Age," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 40/1 (2009) 22–30.

Public self-disclosure naturally raises the bar on accountability and consistent living. A campus pastor who uses Facebook extensively for her ministry notes that her life should be consistent with the gospel whether she is among students or friends. For this reason, she has chosen to have just one account. Interestingly, some journalists are encouraged to become friends with their bosses on social-networking sites in order to be kept honest online.[4] This is akin to the pastor friending a bishop or other synodical staff, opening the pastor's profile to yet another level of accountability.

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Because of the challenges associated with mixing identities and roles on one account, some pastors have created two profiles, one personal and the other professional. I took an informal survey of colleagues with two separate profiles and discovered that the desire for better boundaries and greater freedom of disclosure are the motivational factors behind the decision. Pastors who receive friend requests from parishioners to their personal profile redirect the request to the professional profile.

Though the cyber footprint has an indelible reputation with good reason, privacy settings and the delete key are there for a reason. Real-time online communication happens at dangerously high speeds. Especially in the weeks just before a pastor resigns a call, utmost care is required to prevent information from spilling online. The pastor has some control and choice over what will be public to whom and what will be private. It takes time and effort to learn the privacy settings, which change constantly, but they are crucial for the online pastor.

A particularly sensitive issue is social networking after transitioning to a new call. Regardless whether the pastor has one profile or two, does he remain friends with former parishioners online? Does he "unfriend"[5] former parishioners, preventing them from having access to the information on his site? I remained Facebook friends with former parishioners after taking a new call, but drastically reduced the amount of interaction I had with them and gently made it clear that I was no longer their pastor. Others may wish for a cleaner break. Bruce Reyes-Chow, Presbyterian pastor in California, poses this question on his blog, and a thoughtful and interesting string of responses is posted there.[6]

Because I choose not to put parishioners in the position of being pressured to accept a friend request from their pastor, I do not initiate friend requests through

[4]Pamela J. Podger, "The Limits of Control," *American Journalism Review* 31/4 (2009) 34.

[5]NPR, "Dictionary Picks 'Unfriend' as Word of the Year," http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120510385 (accessed 10 January 2010).

[6]Bruce Reyes-Chow, "Pastor, When You Leave Will We Still Be 'Friend?'" http://www.reyes-chow.com/2009/08/pastoral-transitions-social-networking.html (accessed 10 January 2010).

Facebook with any church members, but I will accept any friend request made to me. On the other hand, I actively seek parishioners to join me on the Ning social-networking site dedicated to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Book of Faith initiative, since its sole purpose is to share faith-related issues.[7] After receiving too many work-related messages through my one multipurpose Facebook account, I wrote a brief article in our church newsletter explaining my social-networking habits. Multiple parishioners have expressed their gratitude for the article and made helpful changes in their communication with me.

INFORMATION, RELATIONSHIP, OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN?

Social networking opens immense and seemingly boundless possibility for connections with a broad range of people, not only family and friends but friends of friends, strangers, and even celebrities. Facebook, like other special-interest social-networking sites, allows specific interest groups to connect online. Pastors can join other pastors for discussion and networking. There are text studies, preaching resources, study Bibles, churches, church-related organizations, and a plethora of peace and justice causes of which to become a fan.[8] Pastors can post sermons, biblical texts, and blog entries aimed at teaching the faith. When we put our congregation on Facebook in December 2009, the first of our members to notice, all age twenty and younger, became fans of the page within hours. Because of the viral nature of Facebook, confirmation meetings and other church events are now better attended. Theology has much to tackle regarding the immediate and incessant nature of online communication, but, without doubt, the ministry of the church can benefit.

For the pastor's use, it may be helpful to distinguish between using social networks for disseminating information and using them for developing relationship. There is no hard and fast line between information and relationship on social networks, but there is a noticeable difference between the pastor merely sending an electronic invitation to a church event and the pastor interacting electronically with parishioners about their lives, posting comments, and sending messages.

Even with the limitations of electronic communication, there is no way around the fact that Facebook is being used by young people today for relationship. Kenda Creasy Dean, associate professor of youth, church, and culture at Princeton Theological Seminary, says, "For people my age (in their 40s), technology is a tool. For kids, technology is the air they breathe. It's social glue."[9] A study done in Britain discovered three main uses of Facebook among entering university students: keeping in touch with friends back home, keeping up with university information

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[7]http://www.bookoffaith.ning.com (accessed 10 January 2009). Unlike Facebook, there is no advertising on Ning sites, and each Ning network exists for very specific conversation.

[8]This journal, *Word & World*, also now has a Facebook fan page.

[9]Cited in Chansin Bird, "My Ministry Space: Youth Pastors Track Popular Networking Webspace," *Christianity Today*, February 2007, 20.

and events, and meeting new friends, the last of which was the most significant for the students.[10] Aware of this relational use by people in our own congregations, pastors who are active on Facebook but limit themselves to disseminating information about church events may be missing an opportunity for ministry. It is indeed moving to see encouraging comments pile up under a post about an upcoming surgery, a cancer diagnosis, or some other life difficulty. The online pastor sees a flood of prayer concerns on parishioner profiles and has every opportunity to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15).

> *more relational than merely disseminating information and more realistic than developing incarnational place-sharing relationships online, maintaining connections is a fitting use of Facebook*

If relationship is possible online, however, what should the nature of online relationships with parishioners be? Andrew Root's compelling work in a theology of youth ministry makes a helpful distinction between relationship and connection. Using Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Root suggests that transformational, relational youth ministry is a ministry not of influence but of place-sharing.[11] As Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, shares our humanity fully even in suffering and death, so, too, we are called to be place-sharers with youth, uniquely in their suffering. Because of the complicated nature of such relationships, Root claims that the youth pastor should not be in place-sharing relationships with all the youth of a congregation. Instead, Root calls for the pastor to have *connections* with all youth in the congregation and deeper *relationships* with only a few, while helping facilitate place-sharing relationships between other youth and other adults in the congregation.[12]

The nature of place-sharing is deeply incarnational, calling into question the limits of the computer to nurture the kind of relationships Root articulates. By *connection,* Root means simply knowing the names and backgrounds of youth and showing care for them. Thus, Facebook can be an effective means for keeping up connections with youth and others. More relational than merely disseminating information and more realistic than developing incarnational place-sharing relationships online, maintaining connections is a fitting use of Facebook, though never at the expense of in-person conversation. Certainly with youth and others who are disconnected from the gathered community and with young adults away at college, Facebook can be a great blessing for keeping connected and keeping in regular touch.

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[10]Clare Madge et al., "*Facebook*, Social Integration and Informal Learning at University: 'It Is More for Socialising and Talking to Friends about Work Than for Actually Doing Work,'" *Learning, Media, and Technology* 34/2 (2009) 141–155.

[11]Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2007).

[12]Ibid., 200.

THE E-LIMITS OF E-SPACE

In a strong apologetic for virtual community, Lenora Rand writes, "At social media sites we can confess our sins and weep and laugh together daily."[13] Christian theology has not yet thoroughly explored all the issues such an assertion raises. Is virtual reality "space," and, if so, how? Is it an extension of physical space or is it devoid of physical space? Without gathering physically, is virtual church an oxymoron? Is the person sitting alone in front of a computer screen really in community with others or only more alienated from them? What is possible in pastoral ministry online, and at what point is the lack of physical presence a genuine hindrance to ministry? What are the limits of the pastor in electronic space?

In a sermon recently, I playfully and wryly suggested sharing the Lord's Supper through Facebook. After all, it is possible to give friends electronic birthday gifts, throw snowballs at friends (even snowballs originating in Texas), and play games with each other online. The ordained could surprise unchurched friends with this: "I just threw Christian baptism at you! Accept or reject the baptism here." Of course, with an assumed theology of radical incarnation and the earthy stuff of the sacraments, the absurdity of online sacraments should be obvious. In a very real sense, the computer mitigates the scandal of the Word made flesh. Without a computer to act as mediator, face-to-face fellowship, while a great joy and a blessing, is also messier, less predictable, and takes more time and energy than sitting behind a screen at home or in an office. A live person talks back immediately and interrupts. Shutting the power down and walking away is not an option. Body language must be discerned and is often misread. Voices laugh with joy and cry in pain. There is great discomfort in some churches about sharing the peace of Christ in worship, because it means facing each other with a handshake or a hug. A sick person can be shocking to see, and let's face it: bodies are awkward, and people smell. Yet it is in this finite, awkward, and frail stuff that the Word chooses to dwell. Behind the lit-up screens and behind all the disclosure are real and complicated people with real bodies, real joys and sorrows, real brokenness and sin, and real need for a word of forgiveness, grace, and hope. Remembering the body on the other side of the message or post paradoxically does the two following things for me: it keeps me online checking parishioners' statuses and posting notes and words of encouragement, and it reminds me to get offline, since God calls real people to be in real presence with each other.

Like other forms of communication, electronic communication has its limits. In the end, the pastor and the parishioners in e-space are just as vulnerable and finite online as they are offline. Social networking is unarguably a great deal of fun, but perhaps the sacramental and pastoral deficiencies in seemingly infinite and connected e-space serve to remind us, somewhat ironically, of our mortality and alienation.

[13]Lenora Rand, "The Church on Facebook: Why We Need Virtual Community," *The Christian Century*, 30 June 2009, 22.

THE E-PASTOR'S CALL

In both a personal and a professional role online, Paul's countercultural words to the Philippians are well worth heeding: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil 2:4). Social networking encourages a focus on the self that poignantly resembles marketing on some member profiles. I, too, fall prey to the deceptive lure of self-marketing on Facebook. With the presence of so many *others* online, the opportunities for looking to their interests are enormous. When I open Facebook at work, I make a point to zip through its news feeds and write on parishioner profiles, intentionally spreading posts around and taking care not to favor anyone.

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It is not hard to notice that the social hierarchies and power dynamics that exist online often mirror the ones that play out in real life in school classrooms and cafeterias. While much online interaction is harmless and fun, Facebook also creates new and expanding opportunities for excluding and bullying. Working with youth, I have come to see that, for some, loneliness and death lurk in the recesses of electronic space. Cyberbullying, stalking, unfriending, and other forms of online meanness can push an *actually* excluded and despairing person to the further godforsaken corner of *virtual* exclusion and despair. That teen suicides have been connected to online bullying is a call to pastors who are online with parishioners to keep a special eye on the excluded, the disregarded, and anyone in trouble.[14] If we are called with Christ to the godforsaken places to proclaim the surprising and counterintuitive presence of God in those places, then we are called to the perceivable places of suffering in this odd electronic world. However, because of the radical incarnational nature of the gospel, Facebook is never the end but only a means, and a means that deserves sustained study and critique. When pastoral care is requested of me through Facebook or when I notice a cry for help on someone's page, it is first and foremost a signal to me to make a phone call and go in the flesh to be the body of Christ together with the one suffering.

My use of Facebook is simultaneously my study of social networking, and pastors who are engaged in social networks have great opportunities and even a responsibility to help educate parishioners on both the risks and the blessings of online interaction. Since parents and other adults are only beginning to get connected with social networking themselves, especially parents with ever-younger digitally

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[14]Make a Difference for Kids, Inc., "Cyberbullying," http://www.makeadifferenceforkids.org/cyberbullying .html (accessed 10 January 2010).

aware children need help and support deciphering this e-world and thinking through the issues. I strongly encourage parents to become friends with their younger online children and to monitor their sites; even with parental permission, children younger than thirteen lie about their age to get a Facebook profile. Brain scientists are currently doing some of the most fascinating and exciting research on social networking, and the findings are not all cause for rejoicing. Neuroscientists stress the importance of face-to-face human interaction, claiming that it's good for the brain. Pastors should have a discerning eye on the issues of loneliness, self-esteem, narcissism, and addiction and how they affect Internet use.[15] Church leaders should be able to confront these issues and foster dialogue about them in their congregations.

It is reported that on the walls of Facebook's headquarters in Palo Alto, California, hang multiple images of *The Son of Man* painting by twentieth-century Belgian surrealist René Magritte.[16] The image is of a stiff man standing in grey suit and bowling hat, his face partly obscured by a large green apple. According to Facebook's vice president for product, Chris Cox, the company's goal is to help people remove the apple through greater identity disclosure and even a widely accepted identity standard online.[17] But even were the apple removed, it is neither biblical nor realistic to assume that full disclosure of a human being can be achieved online or off. If social networking is about disclosure, the greatest thing it may reveal is the bare human condition, both aching to be recognized yet hidden, both longing for community yet alienated. In this light, the pastor's call becomes only more acute. She is called to witness to the Word made flesh in a world where flesh and words are becoming segregated. She is called to witness to the eternal God who is known among us in the concrete and real person of Jesus Christ, and she is still called to proclaim the good news that even our finite communication, limited and distorted as it may be, is a capable medium for the infinite Word.[18] Though mortal and limited, anyone who is in Christ is a new creation and no longer regarded from a human point of view (2 Cor 5:16–17). The online pastor is perhaps most uniquely called to proclaim the freedom of the gospel, freedom from the bondage of self, and the gift of Christ: a new creation, a new self in right and good relationship with God and with others, both online and off.

[15]For an accessible and comprehensive look at each of these issues, see David DiSalvo, "Are Social Networks Messing with Your Head?" *Scientific American Mind*, January 2010, 48–55.

[16]Douglas MacMillan, "Why Facebook Wants Your ID," *BusinessWeek* 4161 (2009) 92.

[17]Ibid., 93. Privacy advocates are concerned about Facebook's intentions with such information, claiming that the company stands to make a fortune should it be released, raising another set of ethical questions for pastors.

[18]Vítor Westhelle, "Communication and the Transgression of Language in Martin Luther," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 62. Westhelle does not make this claim about electronic communication per se; it is my move, assuming that electronic communication represents the "defiled character of human language and communication."

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH A PERK

Given the great potential for both good and evil online, pastors have a unique opportunity to be engaged in the electronic world in which their parishioners are active. As with nearly everything, the best use of online social networking is a critical engagement. After poring through social-networking research for this project, I became far more discerning, considered my online habits more consciously, and made some changes. I expect to continue to adapt. Social networking involves courageous steps into a world millions of humans already inhabit. If God calls us into the realities of life wherever people experience it, then we can go boldly and enjoy the ride, for this critical engagement comes with a lot of fun.

In closing, I offer the following summarizing tips for pastors who boldly go where everyone else goes:

1. Be clear with yourself about your intentions and desire for social-networking usage and your online role and identity.

2. Be clear and up-to-date with your congregation about your online habits.

3. Make intentional boundaries between public and private information. When in doubt, send a private message instead of a public post.

4. When posting on parishioner profiles, spread the posts around. Keep an eye on the disregarded, the vulnerable, and the troubled.

5. To the degree that it is possible online, rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep, but set time limits for social networking at work.

6. Be aware of risks, especially to youth. Educate yourself on the latest social-networking research and help educate your congregation, especially parents. Encourage parents to friend their younger children online and to monitor their activity.

7. Seek dialogue with colleagues to discern good practices.

8. When you leave a congregation, make your future online habits clear to parishioners.

9. Remember the delete key.

10. Be exceedingly adaptable. ⊕

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