Social Media: A Postmodern Necessity for Churches and Leaders

by Trina L. Daniels

Trina L. Daniels is a PhD student at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She also serves as the executive pastor at Smithfield Baptist Church in Gloucester, Virginia.

In the 21st century, church administrators, executives, and pastors are searching for ways to make the Gospel more relevant. Any Bible-toting church leader should adamantly oppose this taunting coercion. As Neil Cole puts it, "The gospel does not need to be made relevant; it is relevant and always will be."[1] But like it or not, every church must grapple with what level of influence it does or does not have in this postmodern era. In postmodernity people want to convey and want their religion to convey the concerns of their hearts and minds and to embrace creativity, technological advances, and diverse forms of worship.[2]

Social media represents a mere modicum of the postmodern mindset. It is complex and constantly changing. Churchgoers use a plethora of tools to participate in the phenomenon called social media. Social media relies on web and mobile technologies to communicate. Seemingly every day a new tool springs up to make worship, Biblical inquiry, devotion, and spiritual communication easily available via social media. The formal church must also employ the social media platform to remain *influential* in the lives of believers and in the world of unbelievers. Many churches do so through websites. But, there is so much more. Some churches and church leaders tentatively traverse the social media landscape using text messages, email, tweets, and posting status updates to Facebook. These examples merely scratch the social media surface. In fact, of those tools, Facebook is one of the quickly dissipating tools for teens.[3] These early adopters are abandoning Facebook for other tools such as SocialCam and Pinterest.

With new tools arriving on the scene constantly, how can churches remain influential by using social media? Here are a few recommendations. First, solidify your social media strategy. Next, engage a technologist to educate church leaders and execute the strategy. Last, monitor posts and your maintenance of the strategy.

First, develop a social media strategy.

Developing a social media strategy means defining goals and learning about your congregants. When church leaders define a social media goal they simply ask themselves, what are we trying to accomplish by using social media? Goals should relate to the 21st-century church make-up. For example, the church demands relationship, social justice, and public witness. Following are but a few of the possibilities helpful for defining your social media goals. Appreciate 21st-century demands:

- *The 21st-century church demands relationship.* More than at any other point in history, research demonstrates people yearn for relationship with leaders, each other, and Christ.[4,5] Churchgoers want to talk to each other daily to receive and give encouragement. They want their leaders to be approachable and available. They want to search for theological answers throughout the day, even while taking a break at work. People have

started openly and ardently looking for God beyond the walls of the church building. People get it; the church goes wherever a believer goes. Believers build relationships with each other, their leaders, and Christ through social media.

- *The 21st-century church demands social justice*. Look no further than The Jena 6 or Treyvon Martin story to see that people still come to church in droves to petition God, check the country's social system's conscience, and to mobilize around societal ills. Injustices receive national attention because of the use of social media by people in the church. People have come to realize their collective power and speak in a unified voice via social media.

- *The church demands public witness*. For the Gospel to reach the masses, the Church must join the global conversation. Not only must the Church make statements, but it needs to show the world that God is alive, answers prayer, and still manifests miracles. Social media provides a platform to share preaching, prayer, praise, battles, and victories.

- *Know your target audience*. Nielsen research says, "Churches . . . active in organizing or mobilizing people can utilize the media consumption trends for outreach and promotional efforts."[6] Researchers report that 54% of African Americans own a smartphone and are more likely to send mass texts. Forty-seven percent own a computer, and 40% of Twitter users are African American.[7] The average age of Facebook users is 40, and the largest growing groups are 55–65+.[8] These statistics identify national US African American habits. Local churches may probe their congregants further through surveys and observation. Sample questions to ask include: Are you interested in receiving reminder mass emails or texts? If you have a computer, how much time do you spend on it?

Next, engage a technologist to educate church leaders and execute your strategy.

Many churches make the mistake of trying to do it all in-house. They end up with a poor social media presence, irregular and erratic content, and outdated information left on their website too long. Hire a consultant who can help define the church's strategy, recommend tools, and build an initial presence.

Look for someone with a church social media portfolio. Ask questions about what they would recommend prior to hiring them. Be aware that the goal of a corporation's presence greatly differs from that of a church's presence. Technologists will try to sell the similarities, but the nuances make a difference. While corporations try to build brand loyalty and increase profits, the church additionally aims for relationship building, social activism, Christian education, and public witnessing of Jesus Christ by its members. After the initial posts, the consultant should transition responsibilities over to a trained staff person or ministry leader.

If you insist on doing it yourself, at a minimum assemble a team to review the initial site and posts prior to launching the full strategy, and make sure your team contains one Christian webmaster. Then pay the person who will maintain your site; that way you will have someone to hold responsible.

Finally, monitor posts and your maintenance of the strategy.

Social media requires constant attention. At least weekly someone should update and monitor sites. Delete unsavory content immediately. Develop a maintenance schedule to review introductory content and remove outdated or erroneous information at least bimonthly.

Resources

There are many resources available. Here are a few popular tools and their purposes.

Multimedia Content Sharing

- **Facebook** allows individuals or organizations called "Friends" to send and receive multimedia and text content via an Internet page. Find the free tool at Facebook.com.

- **Twitter** allows individuals to follow each other's posts consisting of text messages and/or hyperlinks to external web content. Find the free tool at Twitter.com.

- **Blogs** allow church leaders to dialogue with the congregation, public at large, or private groups about different topics. Know that blogging is time-intensive, requires someone who writes well, and must be updated at least once each week to maintain the interest of readers. Free blogging tools are at blogger.com, WebPress.com, and livejournal.com.

Photo Sharing

- **Instagram** allows individual and organizations to take mobile pictures and share them instantly with a network of family and friends. The company that owns Facebook now owns Instagram. Find the free tool at instagram.com.

- **Pinterest** allows individuals and organizations to share theme-based image collections. Find the free tool at Pinterest.com.

Professional Network

- **LinkedIn** allows organizations or individuals to network for professional purposes. Churches may post jobs and locate candidates via this resource. Find the free tool at linkedin.com.

Mass E-mail Distribution

- **Constant Contact** allows churches to send email updates to subscribers. Try out the tool for free; after a trial period fees ensue based on the number of subscribers. Find the tool at constantcontact.com.

- **Google+** allows individuals and organizations to message each other and share multimedia content via self-defined social circles. Find the free tool at google.com.

Video Sharing

- **SocialCam** allows individuals to record on-the-spot videos via their smartphones and post them online to share with others. Find the free tool at socialcam.com.

- **YouTube** allows individuals and organizations to post videos and share with the world. Find the free tool at youtube.com.

- **Vimeo** allows individuals and organizations to share online videos for non-commercial purposes. *Find the free tool at Vimeo.com.*

New tools arrive often; review the following web resource sites to learn about them.

- **ChurchTechToday.org** offers a *Social Media Handbook* and a **T***witter for Ministry: Expanding Your Kingdom Influence Using Twitter Guide.* Both downloads arrive via email after you give your email address. The 47-page handbook outlines best practices and gives samples, a getting started guide, and a starter kit. The 39-page guide details how to set up a Twitter account, how to use it, and a few best practices.

- **Techsoup.com** is a nonprofit organization that shares resources for nonprofits including learning tools, webinars, etc.

Because social media tools are constantly released, books help with strategy development and new tool assessment and use. Following are social media strategy books for churches: [Sridhar, put in the book covers]

- Drescher, Elizabeth, and Keith Anderson. <u>Click 2 Save: The Digital Ministry Bible</u>. Morehouse Publishing, 2012.
  Drescher and Anderson theoretically discuss the transformational process of social media and its opportunities for the Church. By way of examples, the book explores digital ministry for various aspects of the Church.

- Crawford, Terrance. <u>Going Social: A Practical Guide on Social Media for Church Leaders</u>. Beacon Hill Press, 2012.
  Crawford highlights hordes of web resources and services to aid churches. A glossary of popular social media terms helps new users comprehend their meaning. The glossary also creates a baseline from which the book develops. The author discusses common fears that newcomers, including churches, have about social media.

- Reyes-Chow, Bruce. <u>The definitive-ish Guide for Using Social Media in the Church</u>. Shook Foil Books, 2012.
  Reyes-Chow commences with a much-needed glossary of terms for the technologically illiterate. The guide examines practical uses of social media, including augmentation of

worship, pastoral care, evangelism, education, mission, giving, and church administration. A list of popular tools and platforms help readers navigate their purposes beyond mere descriptions.

A few online classes for churches are located at:

- **Socialmediachurch.net** offers "conversations with church leaders about social media," including podcasts and webinars.

These are but a few of the resources available for churches interested in going *social*. Remember, new tools, technology, and capabilities launch every day in the postmodern times we live. The key to minimizing frustration lies in building a comprehensive church strategy. Once churches know what they're trying to achieve and construct a road map, they arrive at the destination with a peace of mind.

So, be honest and thorough about what you want to achieve—increasing your membership numbers, increasing money, increasing the number of young adults in your church, increasing your church's stature as a community-involved church, etc. Do not allow a technologist to give you a cookie-cutter site. Give the technologist your plan and have him or her do a mock website and a preliminary social media strategy. For example, if the technologist suggests that particular things will increase your membership numbers, ask him or her to prove it and then check the proof with others, particularly other churches with whom the technologist has worked. If you encounter constant concerns at this early point, pay them the amount agreed upon up-front for this initial work and then find someone who will provide what your church needs and wants.

<u>Notes</u>

1. Cole, Neil. <u>Church 3.0: Upgrades for the Future of the Church</u>. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010, 27.

2. Bergqyust, Linda, and Allan Karr. <u>Church Turned Inside Out: A Guide for Designers, Refiners, and Re-aligners</u>. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

3. Martin, David. "One Simple Rule: Why Teens Are Fleeing Facebook," June 16, 2011, Forbes Online, retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidmartin/2011/06/16/one-simple-rule-why-teens-are-fleeing-facebook/ (accessed 29 November 2012).

4. Barna, George. <u>Futurecast: What Today's Trends Mean for Tomorrow's World</u>. Austin, TX: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2011.

5. Cole, 23–48.

6. Nielsen Company. "African-American Consumers: Still Vital, Still Growing 2012 Report," Black Press of America, National Newspaper Publishers Association. Retrieved from http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/microsites/publicaffairs/StateOfTheAfricanAmericanConsumer2012.pdf (accessed 29 November 2012).

7. Woodward, Jason. "Twitter Use Highest among African Americans and Hispanic Americans, Survey Finds," June 2, 2011. Public Relations Society of America. Retrieved from http://www.prsa.org/SearchResults/view/9222/105/Twitter_use_highest_among_African_Americans_and_Hi#.ULe3FYILEDk.mailto (accessed 29 November 2012).

8. Martin, 2.