

## ***Covenant Clergy and Social Media***

*Approved by the Board of the Ordered Ministry, January 2012*

### **Introduction**

Within the past decade or so, there has been an explosion of new communication tools called social media. Although there's no single standard definition of what social media is, most people agree that social media are web-based and mobile technologies allowing people to share, express themselves, and interact with one another.<sup>1</sup> Social media is *social*: by its nature, it is something we create for public consumption; it is intended to foster interaction. Types of social media include publication tools like blogs and "micropublication" tools like Twitter, interactive publication tools like wikis, sites to share videos (YouTube) and photos (Flickr), discussion forums, social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn, and virtual worlds such as Second Life.<sup>2</sup>

This resource has a simple aim. It does not intend to write a definitive paper on the theology of social media, or a comprehensive guide for using these tools. Instead, it seeks to foster a thoughtful conversation about how these tools intersect with our vocations as ministers of the good news of Jesus Christ. In order to limit its focus, it focuses primarily on publication tools (like blogs and Twitter), social networking sites (like Facebook and MySpace), and sites where videos and photos can be shared (like YouTube and Flickr).

Why do we need this resource? Social media, like any communication tool, are full of potential – and potential pitfalls. Pastoral search committees now search Facebook for the pages of their potential candidates. Congregation and community members alike have unprecedented access to their pastor's reflections via blogs and Twitter feeds. The younger generation has increasingly turned away from email and to other communication tools like texting and "Facebook-ing."

Yet the challenges of social media are not new challenges; they are new tools for old challenges. How do we communicate the truth of the gospel? How do we embody the peace, justice, and mercy of Christ to a hungry world? How do we keep vulnerable people and children safe in our ministries?

#### *Positive role for social media in ministry*

This resource paper takes for granted that social media are tools that can be used in positive and enriching ways by pastors and in churches. It is also used as a tool to connect pastors to one another within the denomination. Various forms of social media can be found as helpful.

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<sup>1</sup> If it is not too ironic to cite Wikipedia, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_media](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media).

<sup>2</sup> It's a landscape that grows more complicated by the day; see, e.g., <http://socialmedialandscape.com/cms/social-media-landscape-by-fred-cacazza/>

### *What this paper aims to do*

The main goal of this paper is to facilitate thoughtful conversation and reflection among Covenant clergy on issues of ministry and social media, and to encourage Covenant clergy to begin (or continue) conversations with their church leaders regarding the use of social media by pastors and in the church. This resource has four main sections:

- 1) A brief personal reflection on pastoral identity, vocation, friendship, and healthy boundaries, to lay the groundwork for thinking about how these issues affect use of social media in ministry
- 2) A set of simple guidelines and conversation starters for thoughtful personal and vocational use of social media by pastors
- 3) Guidelines for leaving a church “with courteous finality” in an era of social media
- 4) Suggested further resources for pastors and churches

Three Covenant pastors served as the writing team for the paper, drawing on their own experience and the wisdom and input from other colleagues in our ministerial community and the denominational Board of the Ordered Ministry. Specifically, Sean Curtis is an ordained Covenant pastor in San Francisco and serves on the Ministerial Association Executive Committee for the Pacific Southwest Conference. Rebekah Eklund is an ordained Covenant pastor, a member of Bethlehem Covenant Church in Minneapolis, and a Th.D. candidate at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. Efreem Smith recently transitioned from being senior pastor of Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis to serving as Superintendent of the Pacific Southwest Conference of the Covenant Church.

## **Pastoral identity, Friendship, and Boundaries in Social Networking**

Before we start to think together about social media, we take a step back and think through the larger themes that shape how we approach social media as Covenant pastors. What does friendship mean in the pastoral role? How do we navigate having friends within a congregation or ministry setting – if at all? What is different about those friendships? How do we nourish our own need for friendships?

*Sean Curtis:* Eleven years ago I started planting a church with the Evangelical Covenant Church. Many of the core of this new community were close friends of mine, some for over 15 years. In my opinion, this was a gift, a strength of the church plant. I had heard from older pastors that you shouldn't be friends with people in your ministry. I honestly couldn't understand why anyone would say that. Jesus called his disciples his friends, right? Wasn't friendship a way to affirm and even strengthen the community that you are called to pastor and serve?

In retrospect, it is easy to see how I was a bit naive in my view. I didn't have a strong understanding of what it meant to be a pastor. I often co-mingled my role as a pastor and as a friend without distinction in these precious peoples' lives. This can be really confusing to people in our congregations, and can blur healthy and necessary boundaries. I think I did this for a few reasons. First, as a young pastor just out of seminary, it hid my insecurities. When I was unsure, I could blend into the community. Second, it met core needs for friendship and community. Not that this is necessarily wrong, but I saw the community as my primary source for friendship and fellowship. Third, it was largely a reaction to what I witnessed in some pastors who were detached and lonely. I didn't want to be like that.

**Between detachment and enmeshment.** Through the years, I personally felt the pull between these two extremes: detachment and enmeshment. So I sought wisdom from Scripture and those that have navigated these waters before me to try to understand and live into a different reality with different anchor points. One anchor point is the value of *interdependence* seen in Paul's metaphor of the body (Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12-14). All followers of Christ are called into this interdependent dynamic within his Body. Another anchor point is the value of *mutual submission* described in Ephesians 5:21. Beyond just being interdependent, we are called to submit one to another out of reverence for Christ.

**Called to equip.** From this place of interdependence and mutual submission, God then calls apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers to "equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). I was called into this unique function within his Body.

**Called to lead and to serve.** As pastors we are both human followers of Jesus, and uniquely called as equippers. We have human needs for community, fellowship, accountability, companionship, encouragement, etc. And God has called us to a unique functional role, to equip his Body in the rhythms of the Gospel, in prayer and Word; in truth and grace; in mission and presence; in kerygma, diakonia and koinonia. The more this calling was defined and solidified in my heart and mind, the more I understood whether I was speaking and relating as Pastor Sean, or Sean. This distinction is crucial in our formation as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers. If we don't understand where this office begins and ends in us, and how that interacts with our larger call to be daughters and sons of our Heavenly Father, it becomes very confusing to the people God has called us to lead and serve. I now am realizing more and more the wisdom of being extremely careful about co-mingling these parts of ourselves. The Body of Christ needs us to courageously step into our calling as equippers, by God's grace and by the power of his Spirit. Some people might be able to form friendships within their ministry context and not diminish their calling as equippers. Others might have to have stronger boundaries in order to protect their calling.

**Healthy boundaries.** Social media only adds to an already nuanced understanding of ourselves and our calling. Now we can put our lives on display in unprecedented ways. If we don't have a clear understanding of our personal and vocational identities, and healthy boundaries as we flesh out our identity, then it becomes more complex when you add social media to the mix. Different parts of our worlds and our identities often co-exist or collide through social networking sites when we use them to communicate with family, parishioners, college friends, and clergy colleagues alike. Already having a healthy sense of how we handle friendships and how we understand our vocations as pastors will help us navigate those worlds.

*Discussion questions for pastors:*

- Do you think a pastor can have friendships with parishioners?
- Why or why not?
- In what ways might these friendships be different from other friendships?

*Suggested resources:*

- *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry* by Roy Oswald
- *Rest in the Storm: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers* by Kirk Byron Jones
- *The Spiritual Leader's Guide to Self-Care* by Rochelle Melander
- *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No, To Take Control of Your Life* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend

## Social Media and Covenant Clergy

Social networking has revolutionized the way we communicate with one another. Some people complain about the narcissism of Twitter while others praise its potential to connect and mobilize us in new ways. Like any other technology, social media require thoughtful, discerning use. The following are a few general questions or guidelines for us to think about as Covenant pastors as we navigate the world of social media.

*Rebekah Eklund:* I admit that I'm one of the few people in the country who still reads a print newspaper. I love the smell and the feel of paperback books. I am a late-adopter of new technology. I dipped my toe into the world of social networking when I was a youth pastor – Facebook and MySpace were just getting started, and I learned all about those new worlds alongside my students and their families. I have come to appreciate the flexibility of social media and the way those tools keep me connected to people all over the world. I collected the following simple guidelines from the wisdom of friends and colleagues who shared with me how they approach social media.

***So that your words may give grace.*** I think the best rule of thumb for using social networking is the same measure we use for any kind of communication: does it build one another up in faith, hope, and love? Will it hurt, or will it heal? Will it divide, or will it bring together? Paul writes in Ephesians 4:29, “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” As pastors, we strive for all our words to be useful for building up. We always work to create an environment of trust, safety, respect, and dialogue with the people we interact with, whether it be at a church meeting or on the Internet. One of my pastor friends has a simple rule for using social media: she imagines speaking what she wants to post to someone who is sitting in the room with her (you can have this person be your mother, your church chair, or your superintendent). Would she say the same thing out loud to a roomful of people? To any one of her parishioners?

**The care of vulnerable people.** As pastors, we have been entrusted with the care of vulnerable people. We are vulnerable ourselves; we struggle and grow and learn alongside our congregations. But we also have influence and power by virtue of the office of the pastor. I try to remember that when I use social media, I'm Pastor Rebekah – not just Rebekah. In some traditions, the visible symbol of the pastoral vocation is the collar. If it helps, mentally pretend that you are putting on a priestly collar every time you use social media. However you do it, remember that what we put out there on the Internet is a part of our lives as pastors. Even a casual comment or a joke can be taken seriously by people who trust us and value our opinions.

**Stewardship of time.** I discovered recently that it was a good idea for me to track how much time I was spending on social media. Once I added up all the hours in one

week, I made a conscious decision to limit my access, in order to be a better steward of my time. Social media tools can be really fun...and keeping up with them can eat up a lot of precious time. Think about setting guidelines for when and how often you use social media.

**Set clear expectations together.** Social media can help us to communicate creatively with our congregations and our communities. How might social media build a new sense of community or conversation among church members or with the neighbors in our community? We can discuss with our church leaders how best to use social media both as a pastor and as a congregation. Create guidelines about posting photos of church members online, especially of minors. There are good examples in the resources below about how to do this. Church leaders and pastors can navigate together some of the murkier waters of social media, like the pastor's blog or the youth group's online photo albums or whether to join the Facebook group "Colin Firth for President 2014." A trusted friend or colleague can give honest feedback about how we portray ourselves online or how others might perceive our online presence.

**Handle conflict in "real time."** Let's say one of us has a disagreement with our church over something. Perhaps it's doctrinal or theological or maybe it's over whether or not to hire another staff person or paint the sanctuary beige instead of teal. Social media might not be the best place to mediate the issue. In case of conflict, go for the original social medium: face-to-face time.

**Charitable disagreement and communal discernment.** I sometimes tell my students that one of the skills I most want them to learn, especially as future pastors, is how to respectfully, charitably, and lovingly disagree with one another while continuing to listen to and learn from one another. *The Covenant Companion* recently published an award-winning series of articles about civility, including an article on civil discourse and blogging by Scot McKnight. Social media can be a part of in-depth discussions of important issues together, if we recognize the possibilities and limits of the different tools.

**Healthy self-disclosure.** Social media certainly didn't create this quandary, but it did heighten it. How much of our inner lives and personal struggles should pastors share with their churches, and through what avenues? There is no easy answer to this question and no one way to answer it. However, my personal guideline is not to work out personal struggles through social media. I might vent frustration about the writing of my dissertation but never about my students. I tend to think of social media as a public bulletin board, and that's not where I want to hang my dirtiest laundry. Another pastor friend suggests avoiding ambiguous posts – anything that might make people worry about him or have to guess what's going on in his life.

**Find safe places to complain.** Ministry can be painful and exasperating. We must find safe places to express weariness, anger, and frustration about our churches and our lives as pastors that are not online, rather than taking the risk that we will

wound or create anxiety by communicating these emotions through social media. Even casual complaints about how irritating council meetings are or how much we're working can be misconstrued.

**“My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism” (James 2:1).** Social media can be a dynamic way to communicate with people in your congregation, but we want to be sure we're not creating two-tiered access to ourselves or bringing some people into an inner loop of communication while leaving others out. One pastor friend makes sure the same information is duplicated in different formats, whether it be the print newsletter, the email newsletter, or the church's Twitter feed. He never shares important or sensitive news in a medium that not everyone can access.

**“Finally, my brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Phil 4:8).** Social media is simply one part of this glorious, messy world we live in. Paul urges us, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2). If we're already comfortable in the world of social media, we can introduce others to the versatile tools of that world. If we'd rather call people on a land-line when we want to chat, we might consider allowing someone to introduce us to the potential of social media. Then we can reason together – about the real dangers and the real value of social media and how those tools intersect with our lives as pastors.

***A note about youth ministry:***

It is probably fair to say that the younger generation use social media far more often in more diverse ways than anyone else. This means that it is especially important for churches to develop clear guidelines and policies for ways that youth ministries can use social media in constructive, healthy, and safe ways.

Consider meeting with the important “stakeholders” in your youth ministry (youth pastor or director, volunteers, perhaps representative parents and students) to discuss creating guidelines that make good use of social media in healthy ways to foster ministry with youth and families, but also create clear expectations about adult-minor interactions and the posting of the photos of minors.

Resources: Walt Mueller and the Center for Parent Youth Understanding are doing good work on social media and youth workers. See <http://learningmylines.blogspot.com/2011/10/youthworkers-and-social-media-some.html>; and the Digital Kids Initiative at <http://www.cpyu.org/Page.aspx?id=667657>, whose aim is to educate children and teens on healthy ways to engage in social media.

***Next steps:***

Does your church have a social media policy? If not, consider meeting with your church leaders to draft one. This can include guidelines for posting photos of church members, children, and youth group students online.

Examples of social media policies created by churches

**Social Media Guidelines (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)**

<http://www.usccb.org/comm/social-media-guidelines.shtml>

**Safety in the Online Church (The Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ)**

The website [ctucc.org/resources/safechurchonline.php](http://ctucc.org/resources/safechurchonline.php) includes multiple resources, including articles on “Social Networking and Youth” and “The Electronically Safe Church Office.”

**Social Media Policy of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Washington, D.C.**

<http://www.holytrinitydc.org/communications/socialmediapolicy>

**Social Media Policy of Victoria (Australia) Department of Justice:** video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ws3Bd3QINsk>). Although this is about a government department, not the church, it raises the important issue of how social media use can reflect on and impact one’s organization. The policy is posted at <http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/socialmedia>.

## Social Media and Transition

*"We leave a ministry setting with courteous finality for the sake of both our successor and our former place of ministry." ~from the Ethical Principles for Covenant Ministers*

Leaving a church is probably one of the hardest things we have to do as pastors. Leaving *well* is even harder. We want to affirm and honor the relationships that we have made while gracefully opening up room for the next pastor who will come in our place. This was never easy, even before they invented the telephone and long-distance travel; but the way that social networking enables each other to "follow" one another from a distance makes this an even more complicated area to navigate.

*Efrem Smith:* I have been very involved in using social media over the last few years. Eight years ago I planted a church in North Minneapolis with the vision of being Christ-centered, multi-ethnic, evangelical, and urban. Three years into the church plant we had indeed grown into this kind of missional community. Another interesting development was that 60% of our congregation was between the ages of 19 and 35. Sanctuary Covenant Church (SCC) was both a diverse and a young church. We had attracted a generation for which social media was very relevant indeed. This reality is what led me down the road of using social media for ministry purposes.

It was through the influence of one of our staff members, our Media Coordinator, that I saw the fruit of social media in ministry and how it could reach those in our congregation. Through his leadership, SCC now has a user friendly and innovative website and a Facebook page, and he developed a separate website for me that included a blog. These social media vehicles allowed me to expand upon my sermons with devotional blog posts, provide some shepherding connection with many young adults, and even outreach to some outside of our congregation. Many of my initial friends on Facebook were those I was providing pastoral leadership to within the church.

In the summer of 2010, I made the transition from serving as Senior Pastor of SCC to that of Superintendent of the Pacific Southwest Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church. This transition provided the opportunity to have healthy closure with the members of SCC. There are many elements of healthy transition and closure including now the reality of social media. Drawing from my own experience and the experience of others, I want to provide a few bullet points to encourage healthy transition for us within this area.

**It is important not to use social media to pastor members of the church/ministry where you are no longer serving.** People from your former church might still contact you through social media, but the type of communication you have must change. Because I'm no longer the Pastor of SCC, this must be the reality in how I use social media. I can no longer pastor members of SCC through social media. I must entrust them to the current pastors of that church. I

communicate that I'm praying for SCC in a broad sense. I stay in touch with people from SCC. But, when they approach me through social media for shepherding purposes, I point them to the pastoral leadership of their church. My calling is now that of the Superintendent of the PSWC. Out of calling as well as collegiality I should make sure that healthy closure takes place in the area of social media as a ministry tool.

**It is important, on the other side of a transition, to use good boundaries with members of the church where you formally served.** It is our job as pastoral leaders to make sure that good boundaries are in place. This is the case whether we are in transition or not. We must understand the power, privilege, and influence of spiritual authority. Technology can blur the lines of the boundaries that ensure health in relationships.

**It is important to take the lead in setting clear expectations.** We must take the lead in communicating how relationship must change on the other side of transition, including in the areas of social networking. We can help people understand how things will change after a transition by being clear about expectations. One pastor sat down with his congregation and created a "covenant for our future" to ensure that the boundaries and expectations on both sides were clear and mutual – see Pastor Bruce-Reyes Chow's blog post "Pastoral Transitions in a Social Media World" at <http://www.patheos.com/community/breyeschow/2011/05/31/pastoral-transitions-social-media/>.

**It is important to consistently review our motives and mission for using social media as a ministry tool.** If there is a struggle in a healthy use of social media during seasons of transition this could be a sign that we must revisit our motives and mission in using social media as a ministry tool. Some pastors without healthy accountability could be using ministry language to cover up for using social media more for personal reasons than professional ones. Personal use of social media is not a bad thing, unless we're using it under the guise of ministry to meet personal needs. As both Sean and Rebekah noted, it's important to have good friends outside the church and safe places where we can attend to our own needs.

**It is important to have someone else in ministry checking our use of social media.** This kind of accountability can be very useful in looking at healthy boundaries and content. We can ask a trusted colleague to keep us accountable by keeping an eye on how we use social media or who can be a "friendly filter" when we're not sure how to approach something.

The transition that occurs when leaving a church or ministry is an issue of both our calling – how we think of our vocations as pastors – and collegiality. As pastors, we want to leave churches in a way that is healthy for the people we're called to shepherd. As colleagues, we want to leave in a way that is respectful to the next pastor and enables them to step full into *their* calling as a pastor. We can do this by establishing and maintaining good, clear boundaries with our use of social media.

*Resources/next steps:*

Pastor Bruce-Reyes Chow's blog post "Pastoral Transitions in a Social Media World" at <http://www.patheos.com/community/breyeschow/2011/05/31/pastoral-transitions-social-media/>. His post includes the "covenant" that he made with his church about how both he and congregation members would agree to relate after he left as pastor.

## **Conclusion**

*Summary:*

- Think before you click.
- Create guidelines with your church for the use of social media.
- Create and maintain clear expectations for pastoral use of social media with your church or fellow pastors.

Every new tool presents its own unique opportunities and challenges, from the telephone to the mobile phone to the smartphone. Social media are no different: they are tools to be used for God's glory, and neighbor's good.

## **Resources**

### **The New Media Project**

Union Theological Seminary has just launched The New Media Project, dedicated to "Helping religious leaders become theologically savvy about technology": <http://www.newmediaprojectatunion.org/pages/The-Project/default.aspx>.

### **"Virtual Lives" articles and study guide**

Baylor University's Christian Ethics journal devoted one full issue to "Virtual Lives," complete with downloadable files and study guides. See especially the article "Putting Ourselves out There: Making our Virtual Lives Virtuous." Available at <http://www.baylor.edu/christianethics/index.php?id=79642>.

### **"Facebook doesn't kill churches"**

Elizabeth Drescher offers a balanced article on the pitfalls and possibilities of social media and the church at [http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/4390/facebook\\_doesn%27t\\_kill\\_churches%2C\\_churches\\_kill\\_churches/?utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/4390/facebook_doesn%27t_kill_churches%2C_churches_kill_churches/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter).

### **"Staying Afloat Amid Information Overload"**

[http://www.faithandleadership.com/features/articles/staying-afloat-amid-information-overload?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=headline&utm\\_campaign=FL\\_topstory](http://www.faithandleadership.com/features/articles/staying-afloat-amid-information-overload?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=headline&utm_campaign=FL_topstory). The author asks, "Is it possible to serve the church's mission and still give your mind, body and soul a much-needed break in a world saturated with emails, texts and tweets?"

### **Facebook rules for pastors**

Blog at <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2010-10/facebook-rules-pastors>

### ***Print***

Debra Avery, "Cabbages, Theology, and Me – A Pastor Ventures through the Looking Glass of Social Networking," *Congregations* (Issues 3&4 2011)

Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*