

Social Media and the Episcopal Church:

A New Way to Tell a 2,000-Year-Old Story

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If your congregation is a typical one, you don't spend a great deal of time or effort on your online presence. You probably have a website, but it may be little more than a static page that lists basic information such as your church's address, phone number, and scheduled services. Yet at a time when participation in organized religious communities is declining across the board, you simply can't afford not to create a strong online presence. It's time to embrace the immediacy, intimacy, and warmth that the Web and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube can bring to the way you reach out and communicate with the world—in particular, with people looking for a spiritual home.

In this white paper, you will learn how social media can help you welcome new members to your community in a warm and deeply personal way, encourage participation in parish activities, and tighten the social bonds of your congregation to build a stronger and more vibrant spiritual community. We provide you with six best practices to give you an actionable guide for leveraging social media in today's Episcopal Church. We also introduce you to an easy-to-use, affordable tool specifically designed with the Episcopal Church in mind that will help you do all these things without requiring huge amounts of money or time.

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BEST PRACTICE NO. 1: Know thyself

Too many churches jump headfirst into designing their websites and Facebook pages without first identifying who they are. What is your unique personality? In what particular way do you hope to serve God? What are your specific social or spiritual goals? The beauty of social media is that you can precisely target certain groups of people and strategize to fulfill very specific objectives.

“First, try to see your church through the eyes of a stranger: what is its personality?” asks Nancy Davidge, president of Episcopal Communicators and editor of the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF) website, ECF Vital Practices (www.ecfvp.org).

“There could be 12 churches within a 10-mile radius and yet each has its own unique characteristics: one has great music, another has a Latino Mass, another has strong mission and outreach programs. Once you identify your brand, you should then speak in the most authentic voice possible—on your website, on Twitter, on Facebook, on any YouTube videos you post.”

Increasingly, this spiritual invite begins online. People search for a church online because they want to be assured they will like it before they set foot inside.

“The very first step is to figure out who you are as a church, and then allow that to guide the technologies you embrace,” says Justin Wise, a social media expert with Monk Development, a company that specializes in church website design. He recently finished a consulting engagement for a church near Fort Worth, Texas, that wanted to leverage social media to have a greater impact on issues of interest to the secular community, and to draw non-churchgoers into the congregation. From that goal, he was able to create a Twitter and Facebook campaign that served advertisements to people who searched on certain keywords within a 20-mile radius of Fort Worth, and generated a tremendous amount of traffic to the church’s website that translated directly into increased attendance at Sunday services.

How To: *Make a list of the top five programs that make your congregation unique (e.g., your church’s MOPs group, pre-school, or mission trip team). Create Facebook pages and Twitter accounts for each program, and delegate responsibility for each account to a member of your community who is active in that particular area.*

YOUR WEBSITE: THE FRONT DOOR TO EPISCOPAL CONGREGATIONS

Key to attracting a new member to your congregation is that a “spiritual inviter” needs to make a personal recommendation or referral.¹ Newcomers to the Episcopal Church say that a key reason for choosing an Episcopal congregation over other religious denominations is the warmth and opening with which they are greeted.² “Our unconditional welcome seems to be a true differentiator,” says Anne Rudig, director of communications at the Episcopal Church Center in New York City. “People seem to seek us out at key moments of change in their lives, and these moments of change—the birth of children, young adulthood and the assumption of all its responsibilities, the empty nest—can be accompanied by a spiritual awakening and seeking.”

Yet increasingly, this spiritual invite begins online. People search for a church online because they want to be assured they will like it before they set foot inside. A full 77 percent of Christian churchgoers recently surveyed said the website was “somewhat to very important” in their decision to attend their church.³ Even more—83 percent—said the website was “somewhat to very important” in motivating them to participate in church activities.⁴ “It’s the same message St. Paul preached 2,000 years ago in the marketplace at Corinth. Just via a different medium,” says Bill McGarvey, head of McG Social Media, a social media consulting firm in New York City, and the former editor-in-chief of BustedHalo.com. Jan Butter, the director of communications for the Anglican Communion Office in London, agrees. “The vast majority of the Anglican community—60 to 70 percent—is online,” he says. “And if we don’t take advantage of that, we miss real opportunities to do what we are supposed to be doing with our faith, which is to be in communion with each other around the world.”

1. Brandtrust on behalf of the Episcopal Church (2010), “Emotional Enquiry.” Research deliverable.

2. Ibid.

3. Goodmanson, Drew. “Website Wisdom: New Research, Cooperative Reveal Best Practices for Churches.” *Your Church*, Nov/Dec, 2009: 24-27. Retrieved from <http://essentialchurchplanting.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/websitewisdom.pdf>.

4. Ibid.

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BEST PRACTICE NO. 2: Make your website the crown jewel of your communications strategy — and keep it fresh with constant updates

Everything leads back to your website—not just your Tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos, but all of your traditional outreach efforts, like your parish newsletter, direct mailings, and advertisements. Post everything on your website; make it self-contained. If you do your job right, most information about your parish should be easily discoverable online by first-time visitors to the site as well as to regular ones. In fact, you should assume that a significant proportion of the visitors to your website are looking to join a church, and plan the organization of the site and its content accordingly.

Monk Development's Michael Elias looked at 50 church websites. He found that the most popular sections of those sites fell into a category he calls "I'm New." These are pages related to people attending for the first time, those who are looking for service times or locations, and those looking for other information about the church and its beliefs and doctrines.

Yet having a website alone isn't enough. That website needs to be kept alive with constant updates, new postings, and continuous enhancements. "Still, most churches either have a completely static website, or one that is updated less than once a month," says Wise. "They're losing tremendous opportunities to attract and engage new parishioners."

How To: *Your website should definitely include such things as service schedules, directions to the church, bios of church leaders, and other basic "about us" information. But you should also include transcripts of sermons, articles written by staffers as well as members of the congregation, blogs, news feeds, videos of events, status updates of church fundraising projects, and any other information that might be of interest to future or current parishioners.*

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BEST PRACTICE NO. 3: Make it a two-way conversation

One of the most attractive things about social media is that it allows you to have lively, interactive conversations with a large number of people. Make the most of that. When you post a sermon, encourage people to tell you what they think of it. When you put up a new video on YouTube, keep going back to see what people say about it—and respond to their comments.

“With the new social media tools, you can get a much better feel for what people think about a particular topic, or get much more precise reactions to your opinions,” says Neva Rae Fox, head of public relations at the Episcopal Church Center. “I don’t believe in sitting in New York and pontificating. I want to hear what people’s concerns are—and those concerns will be different in Boston than in Phoenix.”

Dr. Elizabeth Drescher, professor of Religious Studies and Pastoral Ministry at Santa Clara University and author of the new book on social media and religion, *Tweet If You ♥ Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* points to Andy Doyle, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, and his ability to jumpstart conversations via Twitter and Facebook. “He is really good at asking short, provocative questions that engage people, then he steps aside and lets people talk to each other,” she says. “By using his status as a bishop to get attention, and by providing background resources on issues he thinks are interesting, he generates a lot of good conversations.”

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How To: *Provide e-mail addresses of church administrators, leaders, and authors of articles posted on the church website or Facebook page. Enable feedback forms so people can type in their reactions to what they’ve just seen or read.*

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BEST PRACTICE NO. 4: Put someone in charge of your online strategy

Precisely because most churches are strapped for both finances and personnel, responsibility for the website and other social media outlets usually falls to volunteers.

Although a typical scenario is that a committee is formed to get a website up, ongoing management of the website frequently defaults to staff members who have been there the longest: the office administrator or the parish secretary. Sometimes they have Web

skills, but most often they do not, and as a result, after the initial push, the website is neglected. It's therefore essential to tap into the knowledge and experience of the congregation on an ongoing basis. Specifically, you should appoint a clear "owner" of the website and other social media assets and put a formal structure in place for ensuring the success of the initiative. "It really takes one or two skilled people to lead the effort. They can enlist a pool of volunteers. But there has to be someone in

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charge," says Elias. "Otherwise the effort will fizzle out."

How To: *Treat your online communications as an essential part of your church's operations.*

Write a job description—even if the "job" is a volunteer position—that specifies precisely how often the website will be updated, how many Facebook updates will be posted every week and how many Tweets will be sent out a day.

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BEST PRACTICE NO. 5: Don't be too controlling

The most common pitfall for religious organizations is that they try to control too much. "I've heard pastors worry that if they post something on YouTube there's a good chance that after our video is over someone will suggest a video that we don't want our people to see," says Simon Cowert, the IT and new media director of Day1.org, in Atlanta. Since 1945 (when it was known as *The Protestant Hour*), Day1 has been the voice of the mainline churches, providing a platform for preachers from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and other denominations.

"That's true: on the Web you are in a universe where you can't control the message any longer. But living in fear is not a productive way to manage it."

What is your church doing that is warm, welcoming, and relevant? Share that!

"Churches should post pictures, stories, and video of the work they do in the community," says Anne Rudig, director of communications at the Episcopal Church Center in New York City. "Worship and music are our most popular posts, with 'Blessing of the Animals' being a favorite on our Facebook page. Again, put yourselves in the shoes of newcomers. What is your church doing that is warm, welcoming, and relevant? Share that!"

How To: *Establish guidelines, but don't be overly strict. Provide people with the opportunity to express their opinions. Insist on good manners and polite discourse by all means, but don't censor messages that simply express disagreement with prevailing congregational attitudes.*

HANDLING BLOWBACK: WHEN SOCIAL MEDIA GETS MEAN

So you've posted a link to your sermon on Facebook and now the comments section reads like the bathroom graffiti in a college bar. What do you do? First, relax. This kind of blowback has been going on since Luther posted his 95 Theses on the doors of a Wittenberg church and started the first social media firestorm. Still, you need to be prepared to deal with it. You need to know when to respond, how to respond, and sometimes, when to hit delete.

Step 1: Identify the type of feedback

The first step, according to Josh Catone, writing in Mashable.com, is to identify the type of feedback you're dealing with.⁵ Then you can determine the best response. Catone lists four types:

- **Straight Problems**—Someone has a problem with your sermon, something you've said or done, or a decision the vestry made. This type of feedback is negative in the sense that it paints something about you or your congregation in a negative light, but it can be helpful in exposing real problems that need to be dealt with.
- **Constructive Criticism**—This type of feedback is still negative because it points out your flaws, however, it can be very helpful because it tells you how you can improve.
- **Merited Attack**—You did something wrong and are being called on it. This can be painful and descend into ad hominem attacks, but you need to remember that the underlying issue does have merit.
- **Trolling/Spam**—Trolls have no reason to be angry with you, hence the attack is unmerited. They may be angry at the church or the clergy in general. Spammers who may be promoting rival points of view also belong in this category.

5. Catone, Josh. (February 21, 2010). "How To Deal With Negative Feedback in Social Media." Retrieved July 5, 2011, from Mashable: <http://mashable.com/2010/02/21/deal-with-negative-feedback..>

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BEST PRACTICE NO. 6: Don't reinvent the wheel

When Day1.org's Cowert worked with executive producer Peter Wallace to build their new website, they debated long and hard about whether to build their own social network. "But we decided there was no sense recreating something that already existed in Facebook and elsewhere," says Cowert. "People were in the online social communities they were in." Instead, Day1.org decided to use a hub-and-spoke design, where Day1.org would be the hub of the community, gathering content such as sermons, blogs, videos, and anything else of interest to its constituents. Then it would use the existing social media tools such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to get the content out to interested parties and encourage them to share with their social networks. "Our strategy was to build a core community at Day1 of brand evangelicals—those people who listen every week over radio or online, and who then reach out to their social networks and share what they've heard," he says. Day1 has been able to achieve this at relatively low cost, too, by using inexpensive consumer technologies such as flip cameras and leveraging an existing Macintosh computer with iMovie software to produce videos.

How To: *Always research what products and services already exist in the market before attempting to build anything yourself. It is very likely that someone has already created what you need.*

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Step 2: Decide how to react

The number-one rule, according to Catone, is to stay positive. Becoming negative yourself only reflects poorly on you and your congregation. You must respond to Straight Problems and Constructive Criticism. Stay positive and use this as an opportunity to educate. For instance, you might respond: "You make a really great point and thanks for bringing it to my attention. However, this is why the vestry decided to handle things the way it did . . ." In most cases you won't end up following or implementing the constructive criticism you receive, but this is a chance to build loyalty and trust by responding positively, and to thank those parishioners who took the time to provide you with a suggestion or point out a flaw or mistake.

Merited Attacks are harder to deal with and often become personal. "You should always try to keep in mind that this type of feedback, as harsh as it may be, has a basis in a real problem," Catone writes. "It is best to respond promptly and with a positive vibe (e.g., thank the commenter for the feedback and assure them that steps are being taken to correct the issue or mitigate their problem)."

Finally, how do you handle trolls and spammers? First, you need to realize that this is not feedback at all; rather it is bait meant to lure you into an unnecessary and image-damaging fight. This type of feedback should always be ignored, and if it is offensive or libelous it should be deleted as soon as you spot it.

Some suggested commenting guidelines for Facebook

The following guidelines are used to govern posts to the official Facebook page of the Episcopal Church. They are reprinted here as an aid in developing similar guidelines for Episcopal congregations and organizations.

Welcome to the Episcopal Church page! We hope that you will make connections, find and share information, and engage in conversations here.

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EKKLESIA360: An affordable, made-to-order solution for Episcopal congregations

You have three basic choices when choosing a tool to help you build the kind of vibrant, interactive online community described by these best practices. First, you can have a Web design firm create a website and associated social media channels from scratch. The advantage of this is you can get a well-designed site that does exactly what you want it to do. The downside: the expense. An alternative is to use one of the free website-building tools that are available on the Web to do it yourself. The advantages of this are the low cost and the fact that (again), you can create something that is exactly what you need. The downside: It takes a significant amount of expertise and time—and you might not have someone in your organization capable of providing both.

By far the most typical way to proceed is to use one of the many Web services that offer you a variety of standard design templates. You choose the template that comes closest to meeting your particular needs, customize it yourself—no technical expertise is required—and fill it in with your church's content. By going this route, you get an affordable solution that is easy to set up and maintain with little or no technical know-how required.

If this sounds attractive, you might be particularly interested in finding out more about the Ekklesia360/Episcopal Church partnership. This website solution, specifically designed for Episcopal congregations, provides templates that were built with your needs in mind. In addition to a deep understanding of the unique requirements of a church community website—as opposed to those of a pet store or dental office—Ekklesia360 also links your church's site to a growing network of other connected parishes, missions, dioceses, and schools. The site also gets automatically updated with up-to-the-minute news and videos of interest to Episcopal congregations, giving it the vibrant, active dynamism of being part of a larger, growing community.

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No personal info

Besides your name, please do not include personal information. This is a public website, and any information may be linked to your name and published on the Internet.

No selling

Please do not market your wares here, no matter how useful or wonderful.

Be nice

This page should be a safe place to engage in conversation. Please remember that this page belongs to a church, and think of it as a place for fellowship. Show tolerance for divergent opinions. No personal attacks or insults.

We understand that there can be many varied opinions on an issue, and we welcome all views and ideas.

By posting to this page, you agree to the guidelines outlined here. Although this page is monitored, we acknowledge that occasionally something inappropriate may find its way onto it. In most instances, we will send you a notice if we feel that there has been a violation of the guidelines. We reserve the right to remove inappropriate posts immediately. Subsequent violations can result in being blocked from this page without warning.

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CONCLUSION: Taking risks and reaping the rewards of a new paradigm

The Episcopal Church is participating in a digital media revolution as profound as Gutenberg's printing press—and there's no going back. Although there are risks to engaging in online social media, there are also opportunities for religious leaders who have the courage of their convictions.

Churches that will flourish in the world of social media are those that understand that these are not just new tools for dumping information or pushing agendas. Social media demands transparency, openness, and a willingness to be part of a conversation. "This provides the church with a unique opportunity, given that our mission is to live beyond reproach, in the light," says Jan Butter, the director of communications for the Anglican Communion Office in London. Richelle Thompson, the director of communications for the Diocese of Southern Ohio agrees. "The most successful people in social media are those that are open and engaging," she says. "Jesus told us to go out to all members of the earth. Reaching out in this other, more open and transparent way is much more challenging and thought provoking. But more and more churches are rising to the challenge."

ABOUT THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Episcopal Church welcomes all who worship Jesus Christ in 109 dioceses and three regional areas in 16 nations. The Episcopal Church is a member province of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

ABOUT MONK DEVELOPMENT

Monk Development, Inc., builds web-based solutions to achieve its clients' goals. These solutions are built on MonkDev's software suite that includes its web-based Church and Ministry Content Management System built from the ground up around best-of-class technologies.

For more information about the Ekklesia360 / Episcopal Church affordable website program, please contact www.ekkleisia360.com.

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