

Churches using Internet for social networking: The new coffeehouses

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Social-networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace are redefining the way many Americans build and maintain relationships—and also how their churches communicate.

In recent years, making social contacts through such sites has become ubiquitous among the under-30 crowd, and the practice is spreading throughout the demographic spectrum. Simultaneously, church leaders are realizing that the sites can be useful tools for youth ministry, college groups and other church groups, enabling members to reach each other reliably and swiftly.

Indeed, social-networking sites are the new coffeehouses and community centers of cyberspace. Facebook, Friendster and MySpace are places where people can stay connected—in some cases, almost constantly—with friends, family and colleagues.

People use their online profile pages to post pictures, send messages, create events and invite people to them, and provide updates to show what is going on in their lives. Facebook—currently the largest such site—has approximately 80 million active members and is adding hundreds more every day.

Dale Tadlock, the 41-year-old associate pastor at First Baptist Church of Waynesboro, Virginia, has been involved in student ministry for 20 years. He said he stays linked with students by using Facebook.

“It has given me a great opportunity to work with students,” Tadlock said. “It’s become a way to stay informed.” He even does visitation by means of the site. When newcomers fill out visitors’ cards at his youth group meetings, many mark Facebook as the best way to contact them.

While on the go, Tadlock uses the Internet feature of his smart-phone mobile device to check Facebook to find out his students’ latest status.

Tadlock said his colleagues nationwide are using such sites similarly in ministry.

Tim Schmoyer, youth pastor at the Evangelical Covenant Church of Alexandria, Minnesota, created a Facebook application—basically, a customized add-on program that can be used on the site and added to users' pages—specifically for youth groups. The application sends news updates from a youth group's Web site to Facebook so the students know what is going on.

Every 30 minutes, the program checks to see if new information has been added to the site by group members. If there are new postings, the program updates a news feed that goes out to all members, who will see the news on their Facebook home pages the next time they log in. And young people log into social-networking sites with great frequency.

Schmoyer said Facebook works as an outreach tool as well, because online friends of the students see updates on what is going on at their friends' church. If an activity sounds interesting to them, then they might visit.

He also created a Facebook group for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Georgia-based association of moderate Baptists. He didn't invite anyone to join, but the group has grown anyway.

CBF officials didn't know he formed the group, but once the organization found out, it gave him access to the CBF logo. Tadlock said they have been supportive ever since, even adding a link to the Facebook group on the main CBF Web site.

Tadlock said, "we are connected, but not in the traditional way." At latest count, the CBF network had 806 members.

Can Christians rely too much on a commercial site not specifically geared toward their needs? After all, just like other major Internet domains, Facebook, MySpace and other social-networking sites have their unsavory precincts.

In response, Tadlock said that while similar sites specifically geared toward Christians are popping up, he has not found them to be that useful. He believes it's more effective for Christians to reach out to the culture around them by taking the best of that culture and adapting it to holy uses.

But one Christian site catching on through word of mouth is MyChurch.org—a social-networking site built around congregations. It currently includes about 21,000

churches from across the United States and Canada and about 150,000 individual members. The congregations range from Baptist to nondenominational to Salvation Army.

“It is kind of a MySpace for churches,” said Jon Suh, one of its founders. The site was created more than a year ago by Suh’s congregation, the River Church in San Jose, California.

The River Church was using a variety of online sites—such as Evite, Yahoo! Groups and the photo-sharing Flickr—to provide online content or to notify members of church activities. Church leaders decided to form an online community that would incorporate those functions into one site.

MyChurch users can send individual or group messages, announce prayer requests, share photos and audio files, comment on sermons and organize events and advertise them to others in their congregation. Suh said it’s used especially by small groups within the church.

The only doctrinal qualification for churches to use the site is their adherence to the Nicene Creed, one of the earliest affirmations of Christian faith. But MyChurch doesn’t preclude anyone from making member profiles and joining a particular congregation’s page.

Churches police themselves, Suh said. Every church has a moderator who watches the content on the congregation’s page as well as keeping tabs on members’ pages. “We don’t enforce too many hard policies,” he said. “We provide lots of tools for users to report content.” *—Rachel Mehlhaff, Associated Baptist Press*