

The church on Facebook: Why we need virtual community

by [Lenora Rand](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

"Oreon told me she's praying for you," my husband, Gary, said in between bites. He and I were having dinner after work one night when I was in the throes of a particularly stressful time at work. Gary is a pastor at a downtown Chicago church, and Oreon is one of the staff members there.

"Why is Oreon praying for me?" I asked. I hadn't had more than a passing hello with Oreon in weeks.

"She saw your Facebook status message," Gary said.

"Oh," I said, feeling my face go red and my blood pressure rise. I'd forgotten that I'd recently allowed Oreon to become a Facebook friend of mine. What had I written on Facebook? Was it something I felt comfortable having one of the ministers at church reading? I hadn't said anything too horrible, like I wanted to kill my boss or throw something (or someone) out the window, had I?

Gary must have sensed my panic. "Oreon said it sounded like you were having a rough week. She told me she's started using her Facebook news feed as her daily prayer list because she sees what's going on with all these people in her life, and it reminds her to pray for them. And it helps her know what to pray for."

"Wow! Cool," I said, starting to relax—at least a little. For those of you who haven't yet experienced Facebook (and your numbers are dwindling by the second: Facebook reportedly receives around 1.9 billion monthly visits and had about 68 million unique visitors in January), nearly every action you take on this social media site—from uploading new photos of your cat to changing the description of your love life from "Single" to "In a Relationship"—goes into a news feed that streams out to all your Facebook friends. The basic Facebook feature is the status update, a short little snippet you write in answer to the question posed at the top of your Facebook page: "What's on your mind?"

In return, you receive a river of information about all your Facebook friends and what they are up to moment by moment—everything from “Zoe is doing her massive amounts of homework” to “Hannah is listening to a new song you should check out” to “Allen is strangely euphoric.” The addition of a news feed to this social networking site was revolutionary when Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg introduced it in September 2006. Zuckerberg told the *New York Times* that the news feed function has been central to Facebook’s success.

Being on Oreon’s prayer list because of some passing thought I’d shared on a Web site got me thinking about how social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are changing how we do church. Already Facebook has provided a new way to promote a church and keep members of the congregation informed about events. Hundreds of churches, and small groups within churches, have formed Facebook groups or fan pages for that reason. Google “Facebook and church” and you’ll even discover plenty of church-marketing experts who will help your church get on Facebook and show you how to use it to advertise your church’s programs.

The jury is still out on how useful and important Twitter will become as a social media site (it’s currently the third-largest and growing), but many church-related groups have already discovered ways to tap into the power of tweets (the name for the 140-character messages that Twitterers post). One of those ways is to sign up at prayerontwitter.net to receive tweet prayers on the hour—taken from the Book of Common Prayer and other sources—to remind you to “pray without ceasing.”

But social media sites are more than tools for publicizing churches and their events, which can be done with Web sites and e-mail. They may actually present a new way of being the church.

“Church isn’t where you meet. Church isn’t a building. Church is what you do. Church is who you are. Church is the human outworking of the person of Jesus Christ.” So writes worship leader and author Bridget Willard. Whether a church meets in a steepled brick edifice, a small house in the suburbs or the basement of the downtown YMCA makes little difference, most people would say. The church isn’t about the building, it’s about what seekers and followers of Christ do when they come together. They offer praise to God. They reflect on their lives, and they express gratitude. They speak the truth about their lives in confession. They offer support to one another, pray for one another, care for one another. They are reminded of God’s mercy and grace, and are prompted to reorient their lives once

again according to the way of Jesus.

But long gone is the time when most people resided in small towns with a church you could walk to for two services on Sunday, prayer meeting on Wednesday night and a Bible study or other fellowship gathering on Friday or Saturday. These days, between the demands of work and family we often count ourselves lucky to show up at a worship service for an hour or so on Sunday morning. And for many in our society, church has fallen off the to-do list entirely. Not only is that hour on Sunday morning seen as one more long commute in a week of long commutes, but the traditional church, according to Lutheran pastor and blogger Nadia Bolz-Weber, is often experienced as a “cultural commute” as well. For many, perhaps especially in the under-30 crowd, walking into a church on a Sunday morning is the equivalent of entering a foreign country in which you don’t speak the language or know any of the customs. It may be a nice place to visit, but you really wouldn’t want to live there.

The popularity of social media sites seems to testify to the fact that many people miss what the church used to provide: a place to know others and be known, a place to weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh, a place to bear one another’s burdens and share one another’s joys—not just once a week or once a month or at Easter and Christmas, but daily. And that is exactly what Facebook is all about: reflection and confession, support and community. I suspect that this isn’t what Zuckerberg had in mind when he created Facebook. But the site is about what people make of it, what people need it to be.

Tidbits of honesty, introspection and vulnerability, confessions of hurt, need and sin—you’ll find them all in your news feed on any given day.

For example, a friend from church recently posted just two words on her Facebook status: “Cambodia . . . again?” and I knew immediately that she needed my prayers . . . again. This friend has been going through a long interview process for a job that would take her halfway around the world for several years—a great job, but one that would also cause a total upheaval in her life. I heard about this situation from her briefly at coffee hour months ago. But coffee hour at our church lasts only about 15 minutes, and people are jammed together, some snagging bagels and others wrangling small children. Intimate conversations are hard to come by. Yet through my friend’s ongoing posts on Facebook I was able to follow her ups and downs as she went through this process. I was able to be there with her—not physically, but virtually and emotionally.

Something about that simple question that Facebook poses to its users every day—"What's on your mind?"—invites reflection and response. For some it calls forth truth at a profound level. I have read admissions of envy and rage, of inadequacy and fear, of disappointment with self and frustration with life. Sometimes the admissions are sent to you stripped down and raw; one Facebook friend recently admitted that she "woke up kind of heartbroken." But quite often the admissions are mixed in and softened with humor; another friend wrote, "Wrestling the demons of too much to do and too little time. The demons fight dirty." With whatever tone they are served up, the truths about our lives that we often mask with polite smiles and the superficial "I'm fine, how are you?" are leaking out in this online world.

Those daily status updates aren't the only place that reflection and confession are taking place on Facebook. The site also offers a "Notes" section, which has turned into another way of making yourself known to yourself and others at a deeper level. Not long ago someone wrote a note called "25 Things You May Not Know About Me." The person who came up with this idea and wrote the note then tagged 25 Facebook friends—that is, invited 25 friends to read the note then write their own "25 Things" list and share it with their friends. This chain idea spread like wildfire. For two or three weeks I was receiving intimate details about many of my Facebook friends' lives, such as: "I couldn't sleep through the night my first two months of teaching," or "I am so emotionally devastated when I listen to good music that I am too intimidated to learn a new instrument besides the drums I never play"—things I didn't know about them, things that moved me closer to them.

Would my friends have ever shared these thoughts in person? Perhaps, if we ever had enough time and found ourselves in the right situation—which we never seem to do. Yet Facebook allows us to remain intimate and honest, to know each other and be known by each other, even if that isn't happening in the bricks-and-mortar world.

Blogger Leisa Reichelt has named this experience *ambient intimacy*. "Ambient intimacy," Reichelt writes, is about "being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn't usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible." Not only does this ambient intimacy allow us to hear confessions and make our own, it also helps us become a community of caring and support.

A few months ago on my Facebook status update, I wrote, "Lenora Rand is in a car rescuing her oldest daughter from a bad night." Within minutes, words of

encouragement and sympathy were posted in response from a number of fellow Facebook users. Another friend of mine, Rich, wrote that he had “survived his ‘coffin’ MRI experience.” I used to work closely with Rich but now see him infrequently, so when I read this news I immediately sent him a supportive comment and made a note to myself to give him a call when I got to the office to find out what’s going on in his life that necessitated an MRI. If it weren’t for Facebook, I doubt that I would have known anything about Rich’s MRI. Rich wouldn’t have picked up the phone and called all of us. He probably wouldn’t have sent us an e-mail either; that would have seemed too formal and serious. But he did mention the MRI on his status update, and as a consequence he received an outpouring of support.

I recently ran across a video of Jeff Pulver, a self-described futurist and entrepreneur, speaking at a Tel Aviv social media gathering. In the video, he describes his experience with Twitter with the kind of passion you could imagine being voiced by people in the early church:

Over the past couple years I’ve been on Twitter at different points in my life with different things personally happening to me, . . . and what I discovered is love. I discovered that when experiences, both bad and good, are shared on Twitter, people you don’t even know who are just “following” you will reach out to say something and provide comfort. I’m actually a very shy person, or at least I used to be, and I grew up in a world where I was invisible and very lonely. But by reaching out and connecting with people via social media, there’s an empowerment which is very hard to explain.

Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are not without their critics, of course. Like many good things, from food to work to watching sports on TV, these sites can become addictive. Of greater concern is that they can become a substitute for face-to-face, in-the-flesh contact. As the argument goes, if people are getting their needs met in the virtual world, what do they need the real world for? Or to bring it closer to home, if we are finding a way to reflect and confess, care for one another and experience community without ever walking through the doors of a church building, what do we need the “real” church for?

We need the real church in order to gather with our community for worship and praise, to sing together, to offer corporate prayers, to pass the peace with a

handshake or hug, to have hands of blessing laid on us, to have the sign of the cross made with oil on our foreheads, to share bread and wine shoulder to shoulder with our fellow sinners and saints. I need to see the sun shooting through the stained glass Good Shepherd window that graces the back of my church's sanctuary, and to be reminded of the faith and sacrifice of the immigrants who, a hundred years ago, built this sanctuary for themselves and for those of us who would come after them. We all need the physical manifestations of the body of Christ.

These days, however, given the busyness of our lives and the distances we're separated from each other and from our church buildings, we also need the virtual church. We live in a world in which it takes a lot of commitment to carve out an hour or so on Sunday morning to meet with others for worship, and in this kind of world we need the Facebook and Twitter church, where on a daily basis we can confess our sins, weep together and laugh together, know the intimate details of one another's lives and pray for one another in very specific ways. Rather than fearing social media sites or using them simply to market church events, perhaps we need to become more like Oreon, who is learning to embrace the church wherever she finds it.