

Facebook rules for pastors

By [Adam J. Copeland](#)

October 5, 2010



"Should

I post or should I not?" I ask myself this when I'm thinking of posting a particularly snarky religion-related Facebook status update that would entertain my old seminary friends, go over my high school friends' heads and unsettle some members of my congregation.

I

use Facebook daily in my work, but it wasn't designed as a ministry tool. As the new movie [The Social Network](#) shows, Mark Zuckerberg developed Facebook on a college campus with the social networks of college students in mind. Now, as a pastor with 866 Facebook "friends," I struggle with my mixed-up social networks.

If

I post a vacation picture or two, church members will post comments on them. This is lovely and thoughtful of them, but it's also a reminder that even when

I'm on vacation I have a congregation waiting for me back home. (There are [larger concerns](#) about vacation posts as well.)

When

they began looking for a call to a church, many of my seminary classmates combed their Facebook accounts and deleted photos, changed favorite quotes and blanked out political affiliations so that pastor-seeking congregations would not prejudge for or against them by their online identities. I even have several pastor friends who maintain two Facebook profiles, one personal and one professional.

Pastoral

ministry is a public calling, and in our social-media age this calling extends to online identities and relationships. I laud the possibilities social media presents and urge the church to use the tools for the kingdom. But just as church-owned houses offer particular challenges to a pastor and family when members drop in unannounced to fill the fridge with makings for the women's tea, Facebook offers the challenge of unclear and ever-changing boundaries. (For the record, Presbyterian Women of Hallock, Minnesota, this is not something I fret over but just an example.)

Since

becoming a pastor, I've adopted some different Facebook practices:

- Though I am Facebook friends with several church youth, I only post to their public walls rather than sending private messages. (I do use the message function for messages to multiple youth and their parents.)
- I rarely put up status messages; it's too difficult to write something with so many different audiences in mind.
- My interactions on Facebook tend to be affirming and broad-minded rather than combative or controversial.
- Whatever my privacy settings, I always assume that anything on Facebook could be read by anyone at any time.

I'm a huge fan of social media, and Facebook sets the standard, at least for now. But it can be abused, and it brings with it unintended consequences, especially for those in public roles.

How do you approach Facebook for public ministry and personal use? What challenges do you encounter with social media? What are your Facebook best practices?