Facebook faith - social networking in a faith based community

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FACEBOOK FAITH

SOCIAL NETWORKING IN A FAITH BASED COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This paper views the increasing social networking as an efficient emerging ministry to the moveable generation. Through social network such as Facebook, ministry from a pastoral perspective can become more authentic and meaningful. Ministry is relational. Social Networking sites provide a strong platform to being part in other people's life. Social networking and living online builds community beyond geographical boarders. Young adults and youths digital identity often reflects their faith, this is supported by research which suggests a practice of more openness to share and expose private issues online. Spiritual and religious views are freely shared, creating sacred spaces in the midst of life practising a holistic faith identity in a secular community. Providing a strong platform for information flow, Social Network is attractive in a postmodern society where inviting people to join in events are perceived as non threatening, making church community events transparent and available to people who do not attend church, inviting spiritual friendships and relationships. Social Networking strengthens relationship in a non hierarchical manner and invites the minister into lives where there previously would have been barriers, engaging in prayer and bible study as well as pastoral care through social networking, thus relationships deepens via social networking making people real. It has been observed that, although community building happens on the net, church affiliation loyalty remains to the local community. Therefore presence ministry though social networks emerges as a core form of ministry, where relations to youth who move from local church to university campuses are kept alive. The asynchronous nature of communication within social networking eases the minister in her work. The minister is able to engage with many individuals at the same time. Before the minister could visit one person at a time, now she visits 5-6 individuals at any given time. Therefore social networking not only increases the quality of the work, but also empowers the minister to be more efficient.

Introduction

Gone are the days of the church parish were everyone lived in walking distance to the church, today a church parish is not structured on geography but on relational experiences.

This is experienced at Newbold Church which although geographically well-placed, and a part of a college, the majority of church attendees are community based, and commute more than 30 minutes to attend church. In Europe this(due to car and petrol prices) reflects a shift in perception of where your home church is.

This becomes even more reflected amongst the young adults and university students in the church, wherein Europe the vast majority of youth attend non-faith based Universities.

When they choose to move geographically, they remain part of the Newbold Church community and still see this as their church, despite being closer to other Adventist churches. This is not reflected in weekly attendance to worship services but regular attendance in holidays and the occasional visits. Some in this group of young adults might attend a geographically closer church but the majority will not attend other Adventist churches. Gone is seemingly the global appeal of the Adventist church to this emerging generation as their commitment seems to be to their own "local home" church – although "local" is not bound by geography. As community building happens on the net, church affiliation

loyalty remains to the local community, so "presence ministry" though Social Networks (SN) emerges as a core form of ministry keeping them present in the church life, and keeping their spiritual life alive. The duty of pastoral care for young adults tends to continue to be expected from the "home church". As Young adults often finds integration in other Adventist churches challenging.

With ministry being grounded in relationships; between individuals and God, and between individuals in church fellowship, SN sites provide a strong platform to being part in other people's life, being relational unlimited by geography.

Presence Ministry

Through the experiences of one of the co-authors, who is a computer scientist researcher the area of e-learning, competences and SN, the scope and possibilities of SN in ministry came to the attention of the pastor co-author.

Integration of SN such as Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) into the ministry was initiated and it was found that this was a tool that would enable ministry to a much wider range of individuals especially among young adults and teens, the moveable generation. SN became an integral part of the ministry to young adults and teens, in particular a way of being relational and present with them in the lives they live online. As living more and more is done online, it is essential for ministry to be present where people are.

Although community building happens on the net, church affiliation loyalty remains to what they see as their "local" community. Therefore presence ministry though SN emerges as a core form of ministry.

Digital Faith Identity

Online living is as real as "normal living" to many people, and it is here that relationships are built and strengthened. Research suggests a practice among youth and young adults where they exhibit an openness to share and expose private issues online sometimes naively.[1]

One of the findings that are emerging is that the digital identity of youth and young adults reflect their faith and religious beliefs. Previous generations were not seen as being free with personal and private information, now Facebook profiles show and share individual's political and faith orientations. Therefore SN normalises spiritual and religious views and enable freely sharing of these alongside political and activist opinions. Not merely among those in the congregation where this is to be expected, but youth and young adults seems even freer to practice their holistic identity in a secular community than was previously seen. Spiritual and religious views and journeys are shared and sacred spaces are created in the midst of life. SN encourages authentic and transparent lives which enables relational ministry to move in a more appropriate and relevant manner. Relationship built purely in church related

programs often struggle with authenticity and relevancy to the lives that youth and young adults live.

Deeper Connected

It is experienced that dialogues and chats on SN strengthens the face to face meeting by enabling ministry relations to go deeper and touch on issues and questions that cannot be captured in a brief encounter during church programs- the time and place where dialogue tend to happen impromptu. The Connection between the minister and the individual deepens as it becomes more real, you know through SN statuses and updated what is happening in the other person's life enabling integration to be transparent, genuine and targeted at needs, where as previously a minister might have been kept at arm's length by young adults and youth, she is now able to mingle in the realities of where they are in their lives. SN enables a deeper connection with where the members are in their lives, strengthening the relational ministry that can then be more efficient. This becomes evident in the amount of prayer and study the minister engages in as a result of SN and taking place on SN, praying with people who are not in the same location and / or time zone at times. Additionally where an individual would have felt overwhelmed by pastoral visitation and prayers SN fosters a community of prayer practices making prayer applicable into the reality of life where individuals are at any given time.

Connected Ministry

Besides providing a strong platform for multiple information flow, Social Networking is attractive in a postmodern society where inviting people to join in events are perceived as non-threatening, making church community events transparent and available to people who do not attend church, inviting spiritual friendships and relationships. This has been confirmed on numerous occasions, that individuals who might not be regular attending church, appreciate and considers a SN invite to an event, as less intrusive than a phone call/personal invite to the same event. SN is able to bridge personal and yet safe spaces for event invites, and with individuals not being in the geographical area this create a community and an online church parish where information flow, but also a transparency of what who else is attending- something that is particular important for youth when they consider attending an event.

SN strengthens relationship in a non hierarchical manner and invites the minister into lives where there previously would have been barriers.   SN provides a platform where it is perceived to be safer to exchange and explore ideas and experiences feelings than sharing them face to face with the minister communicating through chats and messaging appears to a level of confidentiality that a church foyer perceivable does not provide on a Sabbath morning. From communication interaction on SN, continuing conversation in person, is experienced as a natural and non intrusive development in relational

ministry. This form of "SN visitation" is effective among the youth and young adults who might feel overwhelmed with a house visit, which often is not the appropriate form for visitation for them in the first place.

As lives are lived online digital visitation becomes a natural outreach and contact, as one is present in their online lives and can reach individuals in various levels of depth. Some discussions remain surface level where as others move to in depth dialogues about spiritual and religious matters. Dialogues which youth and young adult would hesitate to engage in with a minister, where she not present in their online life. Ministry threads of communications on SN can take a relationship into a deeper level of life sharing and God sharing, in a language and format that is at the core of post modern living.

Effective Connections

The asynchronous nature of communication within social networking eases the minister in her work. The minister is able to engage with many individuals at the same time. Before the minister could visit one person at a time, now she visits 5-6 individuals at any given time. The effectiveness and the possibility to have visits with people without travelling times and being available at inconvenient hours is made possible and acceptable conduct with asynchronous communications. The thread of communications continue across time and despite time zones yet remains focussed on content, making it possible to minister to individuals who have moved to different time zones (Geographically

or at University), hence the church parish then becomes a worldwide parish grounded in a local church community. Making authentic life-sharing possible in communities that might have not existed, strengthening bonds between church attendees in non program driven ministry. Traditional methods of ministry has taken on new formats, such as participating in study groups across university campuses, across continents where time and location is not the defining factor for participation.

Conclusion

SN provides an emerging ministry form that is relevant to the postmodern youth and young adults, inviting the minister to a deeper level of connectivity to engage in life sharing in a relevant format. It particular strengthens relational communications between a minister and individuals who would not seek pastoral care, or would not experience a sense of belonging to the church were it not for the information flow and relational interactions making it possible to not only reach the campus, but reach the world.

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[1] This Is Me (Odinlab, University of Reading) and eLearning Communities and spaces (Parslow, Lundqvist and Evans)