MEREDITH GOULD

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THE SOCIAL MEDIA GOSPEL

Sharing the Good News in New Ways

Chapter 14 Social Media Durability

Just when you think cyberspace could not possibly expand enough to hold another social media platform, a new one gets coded into being and launched into orbit. The universe of digital tools can seem mighty crowded, overwhelming at times. Which ones should you use to build church and faith? Why choose any of them? Which ones have staying power?

Start exploring the world of social media and you'll soon discover that most discussions focus on how to use these key platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube.

Savvy social media users will quickly point out the list should include Foursquare, Swarm, and maybe Vimeo and Vine. Some will insist Google Plus must be included.

My personal list of essential platforms features (in order of personal preference): Twitter, Instagram, Medium, Pinterest, Facebook, Blogger, LinkedIn, and Swarm. This is my list. For today. Next month, my list could be the same or completely different.

What hasn't changed and won't change are core features that will endure even when "must use" social media platforms change. What do they have in common?

By definition and therefore without exception, social media platforms make it possible to generate, build, and sustain conversations leading to relationships and, if nurtured and managed well, community. Each and every one of them does this by allowing visitors to post original comments or reply to ones posted by someone else.

New Platform? Now What?

A new social media platform appears, one that might be useful for digital ministry. Jump right in? Wait a while? For you as an individual, the answer is an unequivocal, "it depends." Whether you try something in

beta (i.e., testing in final stages of development) will depend on whether you:

- are comfortable with Internet-based tools that may not yet have all glitches worked out;
- are adventuresome and able to envision how something might work strategically and tactically; and
- have time to explore without getting too distracted and diverted.

If you can honestly answer "yes" to two out of three, then go ahead and try every new bright shiny thing. If, however, you get frustrated and distracted, wait until there's wider adoption and the platform works out major kinks in usability.

In any case, do hold off on setting up church or organizational accounts until you know the platform can help you meet goals and deliver messages without frustrating your audiences.

Even short, asynchronous comments have impact. I've seen conversations gather momentum from something as simple as clicking the "like" button on a Facebook post, keying in "agree" after retweeting something on Twitter, or cross-posting a well-captioned Instagram to Twitter and Facebook.

On Twitter you can see thought-provoking discussions develop after someone tweets "preach it!" You might be delighted (or appalled) to know I once generated a lively exchange among clergy from at least four denominations after adding "Jesus barfs" to something I'd retweeted about current events. I like to start and participate in frisky conversations; grim piety gives me heartburn and heartache, as it apparently does for/to Pope Francis.[1]

Social media platforms are most durable when they can be used either separately or together as well as embedded into websites and e-newsletters. They're durable because there's remarkably little variation in how accounts get set up and the basic information users must provide.

Choosing Digital Media Tools					
	Facebook	Instagram	Pinterest	Twitter	YouTube/ Vimeo
Announcements	✓	✓		✓	
Commemorating Events	✓		✓		✓
Conversations	✓			✓	
Evergreen Information			✓		✓
Planning Events	✓	✓		✓	
Reminders	✓	✓		✓	
Stories			✓		✓
Time-Sensitive News	✓			✓	

As time goes by there seem to be fewer differences in navigation (e.g., how to find content and conversation), functionality (e.g., how groups/lists are created, privacy settings), and ability to track visitor behavior. Design templates for user profiles and other features (e.g., tabs, drop-down menus) are becoming uniform across key platforms. By 2013 the top social media platforms had created business accounts and offered paid advertising options.

As a practical matter, the proliferation of shared characteristics makes it relatively easy to shift from one platform to another. Learning one social media platform really well and keeping up with its modifications will significantly flatten the learning curve for almost any other tool you explore.

But please remember similarities in principle, function, and design do not render key platforms either strategically or tactically interchangeable. One will work better than another depending on your ministry, goals, and audience. Choosing social media requires knowing first and foremost whom you want to reach and what you hope to accomplish by doing so. Lord have mercy if you ignore this key step.

THOUGHT BYTES

Social media options can seem overwhelming at first and enticing after you get comfy with using them. Before getting too enthralled with the next big social media thing, ask:

- How are we currently choosing which social media to use?
- What process will we use to decide whether to explore new social media platforms?
- Who will be responsible for deciding which and how many social media tools we'll use?

Chapter 15 — Why Choose Blogging

So many online platforms have emerged so quickly in recent years that some social media fans can't remember when and why blogs (web logs) emerged. I'm here to remind you that they first appeared during the mid-1990s as quirky online diaries written by individuals. By the end of the 1990s, they'd replaced bulletin boards and chat rooms as platforms for community building.

Blogs provided a more spacious online environment to muse and amuse, which was then seen as a welcomed alternative to threaded conversations. Being able to post and respond to comments allowed communities to emerge between bloggers and readers, and often among readers as well.

Political, corporate, organizational, and group blogs didn't overpopulate the blogosphere until the early 2000s. Another half dozen years passed before blogs became recognized as a tool for mainstream reportage.[1]

I'm semi-embarrassed to admit that I didn't start blogging until 2007. It took me that long to get out of denial about the crashing print magazine market. Within four years, I was managing two group blogs, had created two personal ones, and was writing guest posts for many more. At the time, blogging was a great outlet for essayists, book reviewers, humorists, and culture critics. No pay for the vast majority of individual bloggers but lots of editorial control.

By 2012, some tech observers were composing requiems for the blogosphere, but in the world of church communication, blogging was still in its infancy. While you could easily find blogs by individual clergy and theologians as well as group blogs hosted by religion book and magazine publishers, blogging was not the norm at local and diocesan/synodical levels.

Probably a good thing.

Fast-forward to 2015 and blogging really does seem to be declining in popularity, especially among individuals who have been generating content for years and are suffering from writer burnout and have found better options for long-form publishing that might generate revenue (e.g., Kindle Singles).

That's right, just as church communicators are getting around to viewing blogs as something to avoid, I'm suggesting thinking very long and carefully before starting or continuing a blog at the institutional level of church. Here's why:

- Those younger people you want to attract have no patience for text-heavy blogs.
- Visual social media provide a faster and more visceral way to communicate.
- Social media platforms like Facebook groups and Twitter-based chats work much better for conversation and community building.
- Blogs have never worked well for delivering time-sensitive news or announcements.
- Editorial oversight can get almighty touchy when blog contributors include clergy whose oral skills outshine their written ones.
- Explaining how text must be written for web-readability can generate angst, especially for writers who have mostly published in print (see Chapter 27: A Bit of How-To about Writing Online Content).
- Comments need to be monitored. Sad but true: almost every blogger I know has ended up enabling comment moderation when Christian love became not so abiding online.

In sum, blogging involves massive amounts of work. Group blogs involve exponentially more massive amounts of work—and hassles galore because more than one person is involved.[2]

But I'm guessing someone at your church really wants to blog, right? Go ahead and encourage that someone to start a personal blog that's not hosted on the church's website. An even better option is suggesting that someone start by contributing content, three-to-five times a week, to a blog that's already established.

Blogger? Tumblr? WordPress?

If you want to get into blogging, you'll need to think through the pros and cons of available platforms. Top options include:

- *Blogger:* Owned by Google and therefore immediately integrated into Google's product and service line.
- *Tumblr:* Owned by Yahoo and often characterized as "a mashup of the best features of the most popular social networking and blogging sites."[3] Popular among Millennials and GenZers.
- *WordPress:* Owned by WordPress and therefore easily integrated into WP-based websites.

All offer self-hosted and customized domain name options, customizable themes, plug-ins to enhance functionality, and easy updates.[4]

THOUGHT BYTES

Should every church establish a blog? Heavens, no. Before adding blogging to your social media mix, ask:

- Which ministries, if any, would benefit from having a blog? Are you sure?
- Do we have the energy, time, and talent to maintain a consistent blogging presence for at least two years with fresh, new content? Are you sure?
- Will establishing and maintaining quality content become a source of strife? Count on it.

Chapter 16 — Why Choose Facebook

Who doesn't already know about Facebook? Back in 2010, its early history was chronicled in a big-budget, award-winning Hollywood movie called . . . wait for it . . . *The Social Network*. Simply put in a grandiose but accurate way, with 1.35 billion monthly active users as of October 2014, Facebook, which also owns Instagram, WhatsApp, and video platform QuickFire Networks, is the largest social networking platform in the known universe.[1]

Since the first edition of this book, the average amount of time people spend on Facebook each month jumped from approximately eight hours to nearly sixteen. That's a whole lot of time on Facebook visiting, friending, reading, listening to music, looking at pictures, watching videos, leaving comments, and playing games. Since launching in 2004, Facebook has managed to transform online communications as well as contemporary culture. Really, how else would "friending" and "liking" have become verbs?

I got started on Facebook when my high school graduating class (Go Tigers!) was planning a reunion. Someone set up a closed group that many visited on a regular basis for nearly a year in advance. By the time we got together, we'd already caught up on details and were therefore able to appreciate one another as the adults we'd become instead of the kids we'd once been.

Over the years I've added people, organizations, and enhanced functionality to my account. And although Facebook is not my favorite go-to place for conversation and community, it reigns supreme on my list of must-have social media tools for ministry, even though some social media observers note that young people are leaving Facebook in droves.

Facebook is great for church communication and ministry because in addition to providing an efficient, cost-effective way to broadcast news and publicize events, it provides many other options for generating and sustaining community (e.g., the time-line, groups, customizable tabs on the home page, notes, lists).

Posting announcements and prayer requests to the news feed, clicking "like," and adding comments are the most obvious ways to use Facebook.[2] But community is revealed, emerges, and can be enhanced when churches:

- provide an illustrated history of the community and its activities by populating the page's timeline with milestones and pictures, both current and from archives;
- help congregants exchange ideas and chat in between meetings by setting up open (public) groups for committees;
- encourage congregants to include posts about church activities to their own status updates;
- use page tabs to provide more welcoming, detailed information and links to other social media;
- create a safe haven for ministries requiring privacy and confidentiality by setting up closed (private/secret) groups;
- swiftly respond to comments posted by upset visitors whose anger is probably masking a deeper hurt or disappointment;
- reduce administrative hassles by using the Events function to publicize celebrations and events, invite people, collect RSVPs, and send reminders;
- participate in the larger community of faith by "liking" pages of sister churches, denominational organizations, and religion publishers and then leaving meaningful comments; and
- demonstrate good citizenship by "liking" pages of local community organizations (e.g., Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity) and posting comments to support their efforts (e.g., blood drives, housing efforts).

Community, which takes time to build online and off, will always emerge more readily if church leadership actively participates, especially from a place of relatable authenticity rather than one of distanced authority.

Clergy need to think through, in advance, whether it makes sense to set up two accounts. Some clerics who attend the weekly church social media (#chsocm) chat on Twitter make a strong case for putting forth an integrated identity with one Facebook account with carefully configured privacy settings. Others make an equally strong case for setting up a separate account

for all church-related content and conversation. Different strategies, both with the goal of protecting self while honoring Self.

Paging the Right Page . . . or Is It a Profile or Group?

On screen they might look alike, but you'll need to distinguish a personal profile from a business page before deciding which to set up. Are you on Facebook as an individual? As an individual representing your church? Are you perhaps a public figure? What sorts of analytics will you want to access? Will you want to launch Facebook ads?[3] Do you want content to be public? Do you need content and conversation to be private?

Are these questions making you feel woozy? Sorry, but you'll need to think this through before setting up a page – or do you really want a group – for your church. Start by identifying your audience(s) and goal(s). For technical details about which type of page to choose, visit Facebook's "Help" section.

Most, if not all, of the concerns frequently raised by social media defeatists—privacy violations, data-mining, and being flooded with minutia —can be swiftly and easily handled by learning how to optimize Facebook privacy settings. Experienced, knowledgeable users can help you with that as can subscribing to news from the supremely useful site Inside Facebook.[4]

Other concerns about how "Facebook is for kids" and "our older members won't use it" can be gently dismissed by explaining how that has radically changed. By 2014, more than half of all adults online, age sixty-five years and older, were using Facebook.[6] The exodus from Facebook by Millennials has given rise to the quip, "Facebook is the party your parents crashed."

What about Google+?

There was lots of excitement when Google+ (aka, Google Plus) first rolled out in 2011. It allowed users to sort connections into discrete groups called circles, thereby controlling how to share information. The hangout feature allowed up to ten people to chat simultaneously via video.

All features were touted as major improvements over Facebook. But within months, Facebook rolled out its timeline interface and made it easier to sort friends into lists. Checkmate?

Meanwhile, the Google+ stream was soon deluged with comments longer than the posts they accompanied and duplicative content from other social media platforms. On the upside, hangouts became popular. Their size limit and unreliable technology was offset somewhat by integration with YouTube.

By 2015, Google+ was being reconceptualized and sort of rebranded as "Photos and Streams," although observers suggest that Google Streams may be "sunsetting."[5]

Should you bother setting up a Google+ account for your church? Uh yes, if only to establish integrated identity on the Internet, making it easier for search engines and Google Maps to find it, and allow you to drop your church's Google calendar into your website.

Of all the expressed concerns, those about time management are probably the most legitimate. Facebook is constantly changing in response to users' requests and market demands, so it's not unusual to wake up one morning to find favorite features refined, replaced, or simply gone.[7] Most innovations really are announced in advance, which is why whoever is in charge of your church account needs to pay attention and follow at least one blog or tech news aggregator (e.g., MashableTech).

I realize this sounds like a lot of time-intensive work, but it's actually very manageable and need not take up more than a couple of hours each week. Of course it helps if the account administrator(s) love social media and consider church communication a ministry. Strange but true: I've encountered situations where the person responsible for church social media didn't like it and artfully avoided learning how to use it.

The effort it takes to set up, monitor, and maintain a Facebook account is a worthwhile investment; count on receiving rewards for what you have done. Turn away from all other social media if you must, but don't deny the value of Facebook if your audience is there.

THOUGHT BYTES

Moving forward with Facebook is, in almost every church situation, probably the best choice, but you'll still need to ask:

- How will we use Facebook to go beyond broadcasting news and events to build community among our various audiences?
- Which ministries would benefit from having groups and should those groups be open/public or closed/private?
- Who will have primary responsibility and authority for setting up and monitoring our Facebook page(s) and group(s)?

Chapter 17 — Why Choose LinkedIn

Ah, LinkedIn, a social media platform for which I have special affection. While I'd participated within online communities as early as 1993, LinkedIn was where I fully succumbed to the nimble charms of twenty-first-century social media.

LinkedIn was established to serve social networking needs of professionals. Within a month of launching in 2003, LinkedIn had 4,500 members. By July 2014, it had become the world's largest online network for professionals with more than 300 million members.

I skipped other social networking sites and went directly to LinkedIn because of its focus on professional development. It made my résumé and references readily available. May Almighty God forgive me for laugh-snorting whenever someone requests this information in a Word document. It provided ways for me to develop visibility, which I did by offering counsel about marketing communications, writing and editing, and ethics.

I built networks based on existing connections in various industries and started accumulating recommendations (references). Posting SlideShare presentations and video interviews has enhanced my visibility and credibility.

LinkedIn groups have helped me stay current with colleagues. Over the years, I've left some groups and joined others, added and deleted skill areas, and changed my position description. What hasn't changed is using it to stay focused on career and vocation-related information.

What about about.me?

Although it's not a social networking platform like LinkedIn, about.me provides an online and visually attractive résumé-ish option. You may design a simple, narrative one-pager and leave it at that, or add Backstory, which is formatted like a traditional résumé. Go even more paperless by

using Intro, a mobile app that turns your about.me page into a digital business card.

This strategy became even more important when cross-posting from Twitter or Facebook to LinkedIn became possible. No one on LinkedIn needs to know when I nap or that my cat is a full partner in my literary endeavors, and I actively discourage people from sharing their personal adventures. That's why Twitter and Facebook were created.

Church folk tend to either ignore LinkedIn, assuming it's only for business professionals and organizations, or create accounts with information so skimpy it's useless. So should you or your church/diocese/synod/faith-based organization bother with LinkedIn? Maybe.

Use LinkedIn's terrific search function to review how other churches and mission-based nonprofit organizations use it. Scroll through the hundreds of groups to find ones that might make sense to join. There are LinkedIn groups for church administrators, clergy by denomination and region, chaplains, clergy and lay leadership involved with technology, seminary alumnae, and more. There are secular groups that I urge anyone involved with church social media to join (e.g., Social Media Today).

In February 2014, LinkedIn opened up its publishing platform, allowing members to write and post their own content.

If you join LinkedIn:

- craft a profile with more than basic information;
- be a professional among professionals;
- maintain stronger boundaries between work and personal life than you do on Twitter or Facebook; and
- join groups to which you can contribute and from which you can learn.

Also check out LinkedIn's "Company" page feature, an option that has been used by dioceses, synods, national churches, and faith-based organizations. Using it for a local church will necessitate thinking through additional issues like how to ensure whatever information you post about your church/organization is consistent across platforms (i.e., website, Facebook page).

THOUGHT BYTES

If you have very limited time and energy for social media, then LinkedIn should probably not be on your list of platforms to use. Still, before rejecting it entirely and forever, ask:

- What might I and/or my church community gain by having a presence on LinkedIn?
- If I and/or my church community join LinkedIn, how will we contribute and participate?
- Who will have the responsibility and authority for setting up and maintaining our institutional account?

Chapter 18   Why Choose Pinterest

At first Pinterest was viewed as yet another upstart social media tool with little appeal beyond its initial user base of artists, designers, photographers, crafters, and do-it-yourselfers.

Pinterest, after all, was just a virtual bulletin board onto which users could pin (i.e., post) images. How was *that* going to build community? Plus the majority of early adopters were women, which resulted in Pinterest being dismissed as too gender-specific. At first.

Much has changed, and changed dramatically, since Pinterest arrived on the social networking scene in 2010. By July 2013, Pinterest had 70 million registered users, more than 47 million of whom are active daily users, and approximately 500,000 business accounts. Pinterest's popularity has also been boosted by the ability to pin videos, audio files (think Spotify song lists), podcasts, and SlideShares to boards.

Although a relatively small percentage of men use Pinterest, they are not completely absent from it and, unlike other social media platforms, this one appeals to users across generational lines.

On Pinterest the focus is on images. In return, the images help visitors focus. What they focus on depends on the imagination, resourcefulness, and creativity of whoever manages a Pinterest account and sets up thematically organized boards.

Community emerges as participants respond to one another's contributions, although the response takes the form of repinning or clicking the [heart] rather than comments. User-generated captions and comments rarely exceed a few words.

Who could have predicted Pinterest would so swiftly share first place with Facebook for the amount of time people spend on those sites each month?[1] How about anyone who understands the enduring appeal of images and how they remove language barriers. This is certainly true for those attracted to churches anchored in a rich history of sacred art. Art has always been a gateway to the sacred.

But online picture boards? Really? Absolutely.

Think about the bulletin boards in your church or religious education space. They may look cheesy, but don't people always seem to gravitate toward them? They attract visual learners (see Chapter 4: Learning Styles). These visual learners are the congregants whose faith is deepened by encounters with Christian art and architecture.

You know these people! Their vacation photo albums are filled with images of churches, statues of saints, details of tapestries and vestments, crosses on steeples against cerulean skies. Favorite spiritual practices involve profound engagement with images, such as praying Stations of the Cross and gazing at icons. They join the Altar Guild to spend more time with sanctuary decor. And they're likely to participate in an online community via Pinterest, even if they reject all other social media tools as too complicated.

Pinterest also appeals to crafters and educators who understand how to use crafts to engage visual and kinesthetic learners.

In my case, it was love at first pin. No surprise there since I'd spent much of childhood collecting stuff for my collage box and decorating school classrooms. Pinterest soon became my happy place to relax after a day of high-speed and high-volume interaction on other social media.

To test how Pinterest might be used to build community, I invited participants at the weekly Twitter-based church social media (#chsocm) chat to post images on group boards for "Stations of the Cross," "Church Windows," and "Jesus the Christ." Then I sat back, watching people who, because of denominational disputes, would probably never worship together or enthusiastically share their love of church and Christ through sacred art.

Pinterest is the obvious choice for those involved with worship and sacred arts, but don't limit its use to those ministries. Do include those involved with religious education and faith formation. In addition to being extremely simple to set up and use, Pinterest:

- supports preaching, teaching, and storytelling by using images and videos to illustrate gospel messages of feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and lifting up the brokenhearted;
- provides another way to introduce resources and ideas (e.g., pinning pictures of book covers, church supper-worthy food, crafts that could be used for faith formation activities, SlideShare presentations[2]) and staff (e.g., pinning staff pictures from the church website);

- allows congregants and clergy alike to learn about one another's interests, hopes, and dreams without words getting in the way or being misinterpreted;
- makes sacred art and expressions of faith accessible to an unchurched audience without using the freighted-with-meaning label "religion."

Like any other social media, Pinterest comes with its own set of cautions, most notably ones about intellectual property and copyright. Users soon raised concerns about how to deal with visual spam.

In response, Pinterest quickly revised its terms of service, acceptable use policy, and privacy policy, all of which are on the Pinterest site. I think these policies are well worth reading because they emphasize authenticity, respect for others, and user accountability in service to community, issues at the core of any conversation about using social media to build church and faith.

Still stumped about how to use Pinterest for ministry? Use the platform's superb "guided search" function to discover and review what other churches are doing within and beyond your denomination.

THOUGHT BYTES

Please do not hesitate to set up a Pinterest account for liturgical and sacred arts ministries. You should probably also get one going for faith formation ASAP. And while you're doing that, ask:

- How might we think about our goals and messages in visual terms?
- Which other ministries would most benefit from sharing its mission via images?
- Who could we invite to group boards to promote ecumenism and interfaith communication?

Chapter 19 | Why Choose Instagram

Like Pinterest, Instagram was initially viewed as a somewhat esoteric social media platform for artsy types. Not anymore. By early 2015 Instagram reported having 300 million monthly active users busily posting, liking, and sharing an average of 70 million photos each and every day. Instagram use seems to span generational cohorts, although Millennials tend to use it the most, which is why churches hoping to attract young adults need to get smart about using Instagram.

People who typically avoid social media tend to like Instagram because it makes photography easy, convenient, and fun. Instagram allows users to choose from more than a dozen fancy funky filters to enhance photos taken with smartphones.[1] In addition to Instagram, photos can be posted to other social networks, although posting IG images to Twitter is a bit weird, probably because Facebook bought Instagram in 2012. (I get around that by using an IFTTT recipe that automagically posts my IG pics to Twitter as pictures rather than links.)[2]

So what makes it social? Once posted, images prompt "likes" (that look like a ♥) and comments that may (very) occasionally morph into threaded conversations. Don't get hung up on making that your goal because conversation threads are not strong indicators of community development on Instagram. Getting lots of ♥s are equally valuable and should, in fact, be considered the functional equivalent of a comment.

Instagram . . . Video?

Instagram added a video option in 2013. At first glance, it looks more attractive than Vine because IG videos can run 15 seconds, be shared with a group, and be posted to lots of social networking platforms. Other big advantage? Image stabilization.

So, should you use Vine or IG for video for your church? Easy answer: use the one you feel most comfortable using. Better answer: who and where is your intended audience? Also keep in mind that the vast majority of IG posts (96 percent) are photos, not videos.

While you're at it, check out Periscope and Meerkat, two live-streaming options that arrived on the scene in 2015.

As is the case on other social media platforms, Instagrammers use hashtags (#) to categorize content and make searching easier (e.g., #church, #Advent, #Lent). Lots of hashtags. Many many more hashtags than are tolerated on any other social media platform.

Practically speaking, this means you may tag a picture to highlight a liturgical season (#Lent), plus an event or two (#ShroveTuesday, #AshWednesday), plus your church's name (#StBingo), plus another descriptor (#foodie) and add #Jesus while you're at it without alienating viewers and probably building community beyond your church building. #ForReal.

Crafting great captions is another way to generate community on Instagram. At first, captions were brief and simply descriptions possibly with a hashtag and geotag (e.g., #lunch #NYC). By 2014, organizations (and super-creative individuals) were using captions to tell stories about the images. Visit Instagram and take a look at humansofny, which describes the account (2.6 million followers strong) as sharing "one story at a time." You'll find captions with more than 150 words telling a story and including a call to action. Go and do likewise?

Let's Get Visual

In the domain of What Everyone Knows: adding images and other visuals to social media content dramatically boosts engagement in the form of click-throughs, retweets/shares, repins, etc. In the domain of What Everyone Needs to Know: creating images and graphics is surprisingly easy.

Not only does this cheer up those who cannot afford or tolerate Adobe Photoshop, but it also makes it possible to avoid intellectual property issues. You create it and you own it—unless, of course, you're stealing

elements that belong to someone else. Don't do that! There are plenty of free stock images out there.[3]

While it helps to know a bit of color, design, and font theory, you can generate (and fix) visuals with these online tools:

- *Image editors:* crop, fix, add filters, manipulate colors/textures, add quotes. Check out: Canva, PicMonkey, Ribbet. Add a watermark with: PicMark.
- *Infographics:* turn data/fun facts into graphics. Check out: easel.ly, Piktochart.
- *Font fun:* turn quotes (e.g., Scripture verses, sermon quotes, wisdom from saints) into images. Check out: Canva, Picfont, Pinwords, Quozio, Recite.
- *Memes generators:* create memes with your own uploaded image or one that already has online traction. Check out: imgflip, imgur, makeameme.
- *Social media headers:* create properly sized headers for social networking platforms—after you figure out and establish your branding! Check out: AP Social Media Image Maker, Canva, Snappa, TwitrCovers.

Maybe, depending on your strategic goals (see Chapter 7: Developing Strategy).

You can ensure success by going beyond *allowing* to *encouraging* Instagram use by church leadership and congregants. Making this shift will be easier for a church community that already understands or can be guided to appreciate:

- the deeply relational nature of Christianity;
- an expansive definition of what sharing the Gospel (literally) looks like;
- the spiritual power of sacred art and church architecture; and
- delight in sharing God's manifest grace with others.

Churches without these sensibilities and sensitivities will need to develop them. Using Instagram could help that happen more quickly by revealing

God's presence in all things as well as all people. #nofilter

THOUGHT BYTES

True anecdotal fact: By 2015, most of the top church social media experts were ranking Instagram as the #1 must-have social networking platform. In practical terms, this means you really do need to use Instagram. Before getting started—or even if you already have —ask:

- Which makes more tactical sense, having a church Instagram account or creating church-specific hashtags and encouraging leadership and congregants to tag images on their Instagram accounts?
- How might we translate our key messages into images?
- Which existing Instagram hashtag themes/projects could we adopt or adapt to tell our stories?

Chapter 20   Why Choose Twitter

Twitter's nimble far-flung power to provide real-time communications during political upheavals, weather emergencies, health crises, national tragedies, and other worldwide events should now be established enough to stop smart people from railing against it. That's always my hope, one being fulfilled in the secular world. These days even mainstream broadcast networks feature on-screen hashtags so viewers may participate in Twitter-based conversations. Twitter has become mainstream. For church? Not so much, but getting there at the judicatory level and among savvy individuals who want to share faith.

Twitter is a real-time social media tool for finding and sharing interesting content as well as participating in conversations (see Chapter 9: Participants and Participation). It was originally characterized as "micro-blogging" because tweets (i.e., messages) are limited to 140 characters. And trust me when I tell you that a lot can be packed into 140 characters!

In the beginning, users were prompted with, "What are you doing?" Now a box simply appears with the phrase "Compose new Tweet," yet another indicator of how routine Twitter use has become. If you're completely new to Twitter, it's a learning-by-doing medium that's likely to drive you batty until you've tried it for a while.

It can take a few weeks of steady use before the power and glory of Twitter is fully revealed. At first glance, Twitter seems to be an endless stream of blather, random comments, and links to content without context. With regular use, disconnected conversations suddenly become coherent. Twitter works well for visual-kinesthetic learners for whom typing short-form content is an easy-breezy way of communicating. Twitter is a Godsend for self-avowed introverts (see Chapter 5: Personality Types).

I'd been using Twitter for a month before having my own "aha" moment. The angels came down and the choir sang for me during the 2008 presidential debates—relative to Twitter, not US politics.

As I watched a fast-moving stream of tweets, laughing at some and groaning at others, I realized I had stumbled into the largest living room on the planet, one filled with often brilliant, sometimes absurd but always engaging, commentary and conversation. Not for nothing has Twitter been characterized as an online dinner party with an amazing assortment of guests.

Me? I absolutely love Twitter. I'm sorta not kidding when I announced that I hope to predecease Twitter, but if and when it disappears, I'll embrace whatever social media platform provides real-time, short-form communication.

At the same time, I'm swift to point out that Twitter is often not the optimal choice for *local* churches. It works best when used for a combination of content, commentary, and conversation.

Rarely will churches have enough congregants on Twitter to warrant using it for broadcast or engagement with them. Again, here's where it makes sense to cultivate "brand ambassadors" (see Chapter 8: Crafting Tactics). Dioceses, synods, conferences, presbyteries, and national church organizations can productively use it as a link-to-content news feed, but only if at least one person on staff is willing to set up, find material for, and monitor the account. You need to know that even if there's abundant willingness, a well-managed Twitter account will take up someone's time, energy, creativity, and focus at any level of church.

Thou Shalt Not . . .

For the love of all that is holy, do *not* post anything that:

- you want to keep private;
- cannot be verified by facts;
- puts you at risk for hostile ridicule;
- you're unwilling to address;
- forces you to take action you cannot take;
- jeopardizes your ministry; or
- will make Jesus weep.

Still, there are excellent reasons to choose Twitter. It's an effective and productive choice when individuals, especially those in leadership, use their personal accounts to act as ambassadors (evangelists) for church and faith by:

- tweeting invitations to church events, sermon snippets and insights, programs, and activities;
- participating in regular and formal Twitter-based conversations (i.e., tweetchats) devoted to Bible study, ministerial efforts, theological inquiries, and denominational concerns (see Chapter 25: A Bit of How-To about Tweetchats);
- attending and contributing to church-related conferences, conventions, assemblies, and other convocations by using relevant hashtags;[1]
- using it to enhance the you-are-there experience of live-streamed events and worship services;
- tweeting or retweeting prayers as well as words of wisdom from sermons; and
- creating content and contributing links to web-based content and images that enhance spiritual and faith formation.

Even more powerful than using these time-tested ways is how Twitter allows people of faith to connect with one another across denominations. This comment by a participant in the weekly Twitter-based chat about church social media (#chsocm) is typical: "Twitter has broadened my ecumenical world and deepened my faith with the richness of others' experiences." Personally, I've witnessed and been privileged to participate in conversations whose authenticity, poignancy, intelligence, faithfulness, and laugh-out-loud humor are as equal to any I've encountered in so-called "real life."

On Twitter, conversations generate relationships; groups form and communities emerge (see Chapter 6: Virtual Community Is Real Community). Church is no longer confined to or contingent upon a building. For followers of Jesus the Christ, Twitter breathes new life into the words "follow me."

THOUGHT BYTES

Still think you need to set up an institutional account for your church on Twitter? If so, ask:

- How could we, as an organization, best contribute to Twitter relative to content and conversation?
- Which of our ministries or events would be enhanced by being tagged, then promoted and discussed on Twitter?
- Who will be responsible for finding, creating, and posting content; engaging in conversations with other individuals or groups; and monitoring our Twitter account?

Chapter 21 Why Choose YouTube

Our ancestors were transfixed by the sight of shadows moving across cave walls; later generations have been held in slack-jaw captivation by movies and then television. We love moving pictures, especially when audio is added. YouTube's popularity should come as no big surprise.

According to claims that YouTube made on its statistics page, every week many millions of people take some kind of social action as a result of watching a video. That's a lot of likes, shares, and comments on the YouTube site itself. Now add to that the interaction generated by videos subsequently posted to blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.

Clearly YouTube is an important platform, one you'll want to add to your church social media mix for three major reasons. First, videos are an effective way to reach audio-visual learners, those who best retain information by hearing and seeing, listening and watching. It's perfect for finding instructional videos about setting up and using social media. Second, videos are watched, bookmarked, and shared by viewers across generations. Third, it's owned by—wait for it—Google, which means search rankings are practically guaranteed, if that's important to you.

As is the case with all social media, whether and how you use video depends on what you want to accomplish. Figure that out and one of two options emerges. You can either produce your own videos or may use videos produced by others.

Video production is not an expensive enterprise. These days perfectly fine video can be shot from a smartphone, free or inexpensive editing software is available online, and distribution is free. Your more significant investment will be time.

The challenge for church at all levels is producing useful, engaging videos. In practical terms this means creating content short enough to watch in no more than five minutes, preferably less than three when shooting interviews or commentary. This is what takes time. Lots of time.

Case in point: I easily spent twelve to fifteen hours creating "Social Media: Don't Be That Church," which was 1:28 (i.e., one minute and twenty-eight seconds long).[1] Granted, some of that time was spent getting up to speed with the XtraNormal, a free text-to-movie platform that no longer exists. My second XtraNormal video, running 1:20, "Don't Be That Church II: We Need a New Website," took about six delightful hours to create.[2]

What about Vine?

If creating full-length videos that are only one-to-two minutes still seems like a burdensome production, consider learning how to use Vine. Launched in 2013 and owned by Twitter, Vine is a smartphone app for creating and editing looping videos up to six seconds long.

By 2014, 40 million users were creating Vine videos and posting 12 million of them every day. Twenty-five percent of those users were teens, which means the majority of users were creating super-short videos for customer service, how-to instruction, and product promotion.

What does this have to do with church? Plenty . . . once you shift from thinking "documentary" to "peek at" or "glimpse into."

Which stories could you (visually) tell about your church in six seconds, then share to other social networking platforms? Scenes from the sacristy and sanctuary? Ministry moments—choir, altar guild, hospitality? Day in the life of your priest, deacon, or beloved church cat?

What about Vimeo?

At some point in the process of setting up and populating a YouTube account, someone who knows about such things might ask, "What about Vimeo?"

Often characterized as "hipster YouTube," Vimeo is known for posting high quality, high definition (HD) digital videos on its site. It has always focused on quality content from users. Independent videographers welcomed its ban on advertising.

Generally speaking, Vimeo is favored by those keen on aesthetics and more committed to embedding videos on their sites than reaching a far-flung audience of potential viewers.

Vimeo has been on the scene since 2004 and by December 2013 claimed to have 22+ million registered users and 100 million unique visitors a month. YouTube, owned by Google, gets more than 1 billion unique visitors a month.

Which is the right choice for your church? My standard answer applies: it depends on your goal(s) and audience(s)—your strategy!

Fortunately, YouTube videos don't have to be super slick. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests viewers respond more favorably to videos produced by competent amateurs than they do to ones produced by professionals. But by 2015, it became important to attend to details like crafting descriptions to include traffic-generating keywords and making sure your website is verified by your YouTube account to facilitate linking.

Your church's videos need to be easy to see and hear. And have I mentioned they must be short? They must be short. Brief. Edited way down. This can be painful for those who think every precious moment of the Christmas pageant is, uh, precious. Videos also need to be titled, described, and tagged so anyone can find them.

Choosing Social Media for Personal Use? Know Thyself!

The social media tools you choose to build church community may not be the best ones for personal use. The more you know about yourself, the better equipped you'll be for choosing among available options.

If you're new to social media or feeling stuck with choices you've already made, I recommend creating a mini-retreat for yourself. Light candles, play some Benedictine chant in the background, pray for wisdom as you explore these core issues:

- How do you best receive and retain information? Are you a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learner?
- What's your favorite mode of communication? Would you rather talk on the phone, write a lengthy email, or send a text message?

- Are you energized by interacting with lots of people or do you prefer observing and listening? Do you prefer community or solitude?
- How do you typically find God in your life? Are you engaged primarily at a sensory level or a cognitive one? If both, then in what proportion?

These are questions I ask whenever people tell me they've tried social media and it "didn't work" or they "hated" it. Without fail, I discover they've chosen a social media tool that's fundamentally incompatible with how they typically engage with the world and seek God.

Know thyself . . . and then choose social media platforms for personal use from that vantage point.

But you don't have to produce original videos to benefit from YouTube. Use the site to find content to then post on your website, blog(s), Facebook page(s), and Pinterest. By the time this edition goes to press, Twitter may also allow videos to be posted. Think about searching for videos about:

- Christianity, church history, and Scripture study to support religious education;
- baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation to support sacramental preparation; and
- mission activities and ways to serve within and beyond the local church to build community.

And look for videos of:

- worship experiences, sacramental celebrations, and people talking about God's presence in their lives to enhance faith formation; and
- traditional and contemporary hymns, anthems, and chant to generate joy and gratitude.

God knows there's no shortage of things to hear and watch in the world of church. Sermons and celebrations come immediately to mind although these may not, in fact, be the best way to spend your YouTube capital. "Remember that YouTube isn't a second pulpit for the pastor," cautioned one participant during a church social media (#chsocm) chat on the topic of using

videos to communicate church and faith.[3] "Thou shall not be boring," proclaimed another. And to that, the people tweeted, "Amen."

THOUGHT BYTES

Without a doubt, video content is a powerful, cost-effective way to educate and inspire. YouTube is a well-established social media platform, but to help you decide how best to use it, ask:

- How will we use video to build church community?
- Are we willing and able to create original video content?
- Which ministries would benefit from using video content that already exists?

Chapter 22 — Why Choose Snapchat

Snapchat rates its own chapter? Kind of weird, I know, especially considering how its primary feature is content that disappears. Automagically erased! I'll keep this short and . . . wait for it . . . snappy.

By May 2015, Snapchat claimed that approximately 100 million active users were sharing 700 million "snaps" a day. Even so, until last week,[1] I wasn't going to give it much more than a passing mention. But then I just could not ignore buzz among tech industry observers about how venture capital funding could make Snapchat the "third-most valuable VC backed company in the world."[2]

That's right, big bucks backing for a smartphone app that allows users to send images or videos that self-destruct after one-time viewing or 24 hours (if configured as a Snapchat Story). Plus, the company is in partnership with major media that provide daily sponsored content (e.g., Food Network, National Geographic, People, Yahoo News). In January 2015, Snapchat set up Snap Channel to roll out its own original web series of less-than-5-minute videos that disappear 24 hours after being posted.

This photo- and video-sharing smartphone app was developed and launched in 2011 by a group of Stanford University students. Within two years, social media analysts were wondering if it was destined to become "the next Instagram."[3]

By August 2014, Snapchat was showing up in rankings as the third most popular social app among Millennials. It's even more popular among teens. And it scares the snot out of many adults who swiftly imagine nefarious and salacious uses despite credible research to the contrary. Turns out Snapchat is used for fairly benign content.[4]

A far more credible concern has to do with whether snaps are fully, completely, and forever deleted after being viewed. Turns out enterprising geeks have figured out ways to create screenshots. This, plus the dubious reality of security, landed Snapchat the lowest rating possible for protecting

user data by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, in EFF's fourth annual "Who Has Your Back?" report in 2014.

What about Whisper and Yik Yak?

Although new ones will emerge, Whisper and Yik Yak are currently the top two smartphone apps for posting and responding without disclosing identity. Anonymous sharing.

Each appeals to a slightly different audience, has developed a slightly different culture of conversation, and has slightly different ways of ensuring anonymity. Some observers have lumped these apps into a category known as "dark social," a characterization that tends to undermine the validity and value of these platforms.

In a world besieged with strident demands for "transparency" and brimming with self-disclosure—not all of which is either welcomed or appropriate—being released from the constraints of identity is a blessed relief. Anonymous messaging platforms provide a safe place for self-expression. That we so swiftly default to assuming that anonymous self-expression will be bad, wrong, or mean-spirited speaks volumes about fears of the beholders. How about focusing on Gospel imperatives to lift up the brokenhearted, comfort the afflicted, and all that while also recognizing how, for some, anonymity is the only condition under which they can speak out from within? Note: Neither you individually nor your church corporately need to use these apps.

For Snapchat users, these concerns seem to be as ephemeral as the selfies and goofy stuff they share. They love Snapchat because content is fleeting and disposable. They love it because of options that allow them to add filters, geotags, captions, emojis, and hand-drawn doodles. They love the ability to create real-time and real-life stories that will disappear, thus mirroring the flow of life.

For a generation that excels at swift, short communications while multitasking, Snapchat is considered social. I, too, consider it a social networking platform, even though my chronological age places me decades away from Millennials. I can see the value as well as the fun factor of sharing via Snapchat. Currently, my list of Snapchat friends has only two

people on it, but I seek consolation in knowing that "where two or more are gathered" we-know-who is there also.

OK, so maybe you don't want to choose Snapchat, but if you have anything to do with young people—within and beyond the youth group—you'll need to know how it works, as well as when, how, and why they're using it.

THOUGHT BYTES

Encounter or perhaps feeling lots of resistance to Snapchat? If so, ask:

- Is pushback against or upset about this app a symptom of something else that needs to be examined and discussed?
- How might we engage youth in helping us understand whether and how to use Snapchat for ministry?
- When does trying out new social networking platforms become more hassle than helpful for building community?