
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

July 3, 2008

(8-68)

IN THIS ISSUE:

Jesus in MySpace: Churches use social-networking sites

Felice Gaer to serve as chair of religious-freedom panel

Opinion: God, country and the 4th of July

Clarification Jesus in MySpace: Churches use social-networking sites

By Rachel Mehlhaff (ABP) -- Social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace are redefining the way many Americans build and maintain relationships -- and also how their churches communicate.

In the last few years, relating to social contacts through such sites has become practically ubiquitous among the under-30 crowd, and the practice is quickly spreading upward along the demographic spectrum. Simultaneously, Christian leaders are realizing that the sites can be useful tools for youth ministry, college groups and other church groups, enabling group members to reach each other consistently and instantaneously.

That's because social-networking sites are the new coffeehouses and community centers of the Internet. Facebook, Friendster and MySpace are places where people can stay connected -- in some cases, practically constantly -- with what is going on in the lives of their friends, family and colleagues. People use their online profile pages to post pictures, send messages, create events and invite people to them, and provide status 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, Va., has been in student ministry for 20 years. He said he is staying linked with his students 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 through 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. Their profiles reveal current activities, pictures they've added and other Facebook users with whom they've had recent contact. Tadlock said his colleagues nationwide are using such sites similarly in ministry, although some do so more extensively than others.

Tim Schmoyer, youth pastor at the Evangelical Covenant Church of Alexandria, Minn., 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 website by group members. If there is new info, 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 friend's church. If an activity sounds interesting to them, then they might visit. Like Tadlock, Schmoyer finds Facebook to be a valuable tool for keeping in touch with his students and what is going on in their lives. "Kids put so much of their lives on there," he said. "It is really telling [about] what the kid is [like] outside of church."

Tadlock uses Facebook to send out event reminders to his students. Through the site, he can find out who will be attending, who won't and who might. He also created a Facebook group for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. He didn't invite anyone to join, but it 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 Fellowship website.

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

members.

Are Christians relying 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.

But, Tadlock said, while other 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 that is catching on through word of mouth is MyChurch.org -- a social-networking site built around congregations. It currently has about 21,000 churches on it from across the United States and Canada, and about 150,000 individual members. The congregations range from Baptist to non-denominational to Salvation Army. "It is kind of a MySpace for churches," said Jon Suh, one of the founders. The site was created about a year and half ago to fill a need that Suh's congregation, The River Church in San Jose, Calif., felt.

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

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

The only doctrinal requirement that qualifies 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 that watches the content on the congregation's page as well as keeping tabs on members' pages as well. "We don't enforce too many hard policies," he said. "We provide lots of tools for users to report content."

People already were building networks for their churches on secular sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Suh said he doesn't have a problem with that, because it's good for Christians to be out in the secular world, pointing others toward God.

In fact, his site has a Facebook application. It allows church members to put content from MyChurch on their Facebook profiles, letting their Facebook friends know what is going on in their church. About 15,000 MyChurch congregations have added this application, Suh said. "I think it's just changed the way we are interacting and the way we are doing things," Tadlock said. "I think it literally has changed our culture."

Felice Gaer to serve as chair of religious-freedom panel

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Veteran human-rights activist Felice Gaer will once again serve as chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Gaer, a member of the independent federal panel since 2001, has twice been chair and twice vice chair of USCIRF. She is director of the American Jewish Committee's Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights. She is a veteran negotiator on human-rights protections for international agreements and institutions, and was the first American to serve as an independent expert on the United Nations Committee Against Torture.

She replaces Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center and director of its Evangelicals in Civic Life program. He also served twice as the commission's chairman.

A bipartisan, independent federal agency that monitors and reports on religious-freedom conditions worldwide, the commission was established in 1998. It alternates its chairmanship between Republican and Democratic appointees. Gaer was appointed to USCIRF by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.). Cromartie was appointed by President Bush.

The incoming and outgoing chairs traded compliments, according to a commission announcement. "I am very pleased to see Felice Gaer returning to lead the commission," Cromartie said. "Her expertise and stature as an internationally renowned advocate for respect for human rights and religious freedom will continue to enhance the commission's impact."

Gaer praised Cromartie's leadership during a taxing time for the panel. "I commend Michael Cromartie on guiding the commission through a difficult year of transition, following the death of Executive Director Joseph Crap," she said. "Visits to Vietnam, Turkmenistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as hearings on Iran, Burma, and Iraqi refugees helped the commission make a mark on U.S. human-rights policy concerning severe violations of religious freedom."

The panel also elected Cromartie and Elizabeth Prodromou as vice chairs. Prodromou is an international-relations professor at Boston University, where she is also a research associate at the Institute on Culture, Religion and World

Affairs.

Cromartie and Prodromou replace Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, and Preeta Bansal, a New York attorney now in private practice who once served as that state's solicitor general. USCIRF officers serve one-year terms.

Opinion: God, country and the 4th of July

By David Gushee

Visiting family last weekend, I experienced a classic "God and country" service at a large SBC church. There was a day when I would have been outraged by such a service on theological grounds. This particular day left me more analytical. These reflections are offered especially for everyone who will plan or experience a patriotic July 4th service this weekend.

Lesson 1: Americans lack civic spaces to celebrate our nation and roll out traditional patriotic music and rituals, and so they move inappropriately into church.

Who can forget the scene in "The Music Man" where Mayor Shinn prepares to offer his July 4th soliloquy, only to be interrupted by the rebellious members of the school board? Apparently in that (imaginary) Iowa town a hundred years ago there was a tradition of a communitywide July 4th celebration, held at the school gymnasium. Everyone came.

No one could complain about a July 4th extravaganza held at the public school or the city fairgrounds. But we don't really do that kind of thing anymore in this country, except a mute fireworks celebration after the sun goes down. And so in many (Southern?) towns, these ritualized national celebrations are moved into the local church, without a whole lot of reflection about the theological issues raised by turning a Christian worship service into a civic patriotic celebration.

Implication: If Christians want a recovery of civic celebrations on July 4th, we should approach our city councils, not our pastors.

Lesson 2: Low-church Baptist worship services leave congregants with a hunger for liturgy, which is one reason why God-and-country extravaganzas are appealing to many.

I credit my wife, Jeanie, one who loves liturgy, with this acute observation. Populist Baptist worship services are informal. No one works from a script, every prayer is extemporaneous, dress is increasingly casual, and pastors are rewarded for being "down to earth" and "relevant."

There was nothing informal, extemporaneous or low-church about the God-and-country service we witnessed Sunday. All rose as the American flag was walked in ceremoniously under the care of a Navy man. The Pledge of Allegiance was said with dignity. The patriotic music was presented with gravity and care. Most people were dressed in their Sunday best, especially those who led the service in any way. I think Jeanie is right—here was liturgy, and people responded. The problem is that the liturgy was national rather than Christian—or national as Christian.

Implication: Such an obvious hunger for liturgy calls for a rethinking of the trend toward studied informality in our weekly services.

Lesson 3: American patriotism is overidentified with war and the military.

In our service on Sunday we sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." The songs of the five military branches were sung as veterans and active-duty servicepeople rose and were recognized. A dramatic monologue about the war-tattered American flag was offered. Those killed in wars while serving the United States were remembered and mourned.

A child or newcomer to our country could easily be forgiven for concluding that the main thing to celebrate about America is our wars and those who fight them and die in them. This then leads to the implication that America is at its best when we are fighting, dying in, and presumably winning wars.

Taken simply at the civic or national level, this is a problem, for it deprives Americans of reasons to be proud of their nation not associated with the military and with war, feeding an expectation and maybe even a hunger for more use of the military and more war.

And of course, returning to the fact that God-and-country worship services happen in Christian churches that profess to serve Jesus Christ, the peacemaker and reconciler, the problem is even more profound.

Implication: All who speak of what is good about America, and all who construct civic patriotic rituals, must find ways to honor aspects of American life that go beyond military service and war-fighting. And all ministers who incorporate civic patriotism into a Sunday service must remember who exactly is the Lord of the church.

Lesson 4: Christian celebrations of America tend to idealize the past and demonize the present.

Presenting the standard conservative account of American origins, our pastor on Sunday told us that America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles that have been lost in our time and must be recovered. He received many hearty

“amens.”

As I looked around me at the sea of white faces, I thought about how very surprised I would be if such an unambiguous account of either the past or the present were offered in a black church. Black Americans know that somehow the Founders created a nation that combined ideals of justice and freedom with the injustice and bondage of slavery. And they also know that the America of today has both deteriorated in some aspects of its morality while advancing in others, including racial justice.

The past was both good and bad. The present is both good and bad. Human life, created good yet fallen, is always both good and bad.

Implication: Those who talk about America must acknowledge both the good and the bad in every stage, neither idealizing nor demonizing any particular era—and calling us to our best and highest values now and always.

-- David Gushee is distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University.