

Congregations

ISSUES 3 & 4 2013

THE *JAZZ* CHURCH

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Volume 40, Numbers 3 & 4. CONGREGATIONS (ISSN 1816-2800) is sent quarterly to all members of the Alban Institute. CONGREGATIONS is the successor to ACTION INFORMATION, published since 1975. Copyright © 2013 by The Alban Institute, Inc.

This periodical is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database®, published by the American Theological Library Association, 300 South Wacker Drive, Suite 2100, Chicago, Illinois 60606; e-mail: alla@atla.com; Web site: www.atla.com.



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Pastoral Transitions in the Age of Social Media

BY ADAM WALKER CLEVELAND

Social media has changed many aspects of our lives and how we engage with others. We shop differently, research differently, communicate differently, and we experience community differently. Many of us broadcast our lives through status updates, photos of coffee and cute kids, and by checking in to restaurants, pubs and our churches. Say what you will about the pros and cons of social media, but it's not going away anytime soon. Social media is not a fad. And so, it only makes sense that pastoral transitions in this new age would become more complex, and look much different than pastoral transitions even ten years ago.

“I’m not interested in having two identities on Facebook . . . I think there are enough good reasons, both theological and practical, to only having one . . .”

After serving a United Methodist church for just over three years, I took my first call as an ordained Presbyterian minister. About a year and a half later, I accepted my second call and moved across the country to Chicagoland, where I currently serve as an Associate Pastor. I’ve dealt with this new type of pastoral transition a couple times in the past few years. I will say that it is definitely more complex than it used to be, but there are ways in which you can help both yourself and the congregations you’re connected to during these transitions.

I’d like to think about how to engage with parishioners on social media first, and then share some practical tips and tools to aid you in future transitions you may go through in your ministry, both as you leave churches, and as you start jobs at new churches.

Becoming “Friends” With Church Members

A friend of mine was recently going through the call process, and was a little shocked to find that there were members of the church she was going to be called to already requesting to be friends with her on Facebook before it was even official. I’m a few months into my current call as Associate Pastor at Winnetka Presbyterian Church (Winnetka, Illinois), and I had some folks reach out to me early on in my time here because they wanted to connect online.

I still remember sitting in classroom discussions in seminary, talking about how pastors really shouldn’t become friends with parishioners. We talked about the power and boundary issues, and about how it just made things too difficult when you

were called to another church; what happened to those friendships? Could you still stay in touch? What could you talk about?

I always had issues with those conversations in seminary; part of that has to do with my own desire to be radically transparent in my ministry. I didn’t want to hide who I was with parishioners, or not be open to friendships for my wife and I, even if they happened to be with members of the congregation. Sure those friendships would always be a little bit different because I was their pastor, but I didn’t think it made sense to think that some folks were “off-limits.”

Part of that is probably why I have chosen to always accept any and all Facebook friend requests from people at the churches I’ve served, and why I have chosen to only have one Facebook profile. Many pastors have tried to deal with the question of “friending” parishioners by creating a separate, work Facebook profile. You may have friends and colleagues who have done this; often they choose a distinctly church name for the account (e.g. “Pastor Adam Walker Cleaveland” or “WinnetkaPres Adam Walker Cleaveland”). It’s always a little bit awkward, and it goes against Facebook’s Terms of Service by having more than one profile for an individual. However, those who use two profiles say that it allows them to use Facebook personally, and not have to worry censoring what they post, for fear of upsetting parishioners.

I’m not interested in having two identities on Facebook, partly because I don’t want to have to spend time curating two completely separate Facebook profiles. That just sounds like too much work for me; I think there are enough good reasons, both theological and practical, to only having one Facebook profile, and for

using that profile to engage with folks in your congregation.

Disconnecting from Friends & Followers

So, what happens when you leave a church? In addition to all of the normal boundaries that you’ll have to figure out between you, the church and your denomination’s governing body, now you have to figure out what you’re going to do with all of the people that you’re Facebook friends with from your congregation.

Do you just unfriend everyone on Facebook? Unfollow everyone on Twitter? I’ve actually had some people tell me that when they left their congregation, they went through their Facebook Friend Lists and unfriended everyone from their former congregation. Their reasoning was that they were serving those folks as part of their job, and now that they were moving on, they were not obligated to remain connected to them.

That seems pretty harsh to me, and I couldn’t see myself doing that. But, I do think it’s important to give people from former churches some breathing room and space to continue on without their previous pastor as involved in their online and social media life, particularly with youth. At one former church I worked at, I had quite a few students who were very active on Facebook and Twitter, and we’d often get into conversations online, “like” many of each other’s statuses and found the online world a great medium to communicate in.

So, when I left, it was important for me to not be tempted to continue to “like” their updates, comment on Facebook or reply to Tweets. Below are some of the steps I have taken when leaving churches to help make the transition a bit smoother in the world of social media:

Facebook Friend Lists: Facebook actually makes curating lists of people you are connected to on Facebook very easy, with the use of Friend Lists. I think this is probably one of the most powerful, but most under-utilized, features that Facebook has. Whenever I accept any friend request on Facebook, I always assign each new friend to a specific Friend List. I have Friend Lists for many different seasons of my life: college, seminary and each of the churches

I've worked at. This is a powerful tool, because it allows me to organize and categorize my Facebook friends, but it also allows me to unsubscribe from updates from specific lists, and it allows me to both post status updates to specific lists, or hide my updates from specific lists.

When I leave a church, I put everyone associated with that church into one Friend List. Then when I go in to edit the settings for that list, I can simply uncheck all of the Update Types for that friend list, and then I will no longer see the status updates posted from that group of people. That helps me from being tempted to engage with people from my previous church for a predetermined amount of time.

Unfriending People: I will say that you may indeed need to unfriend a few people from your congregation, but that is always a case-by-case situation. Maybe you have someone who likes everything you post, always leave comments and is extremely active on Facebook; that might be someone to unfriend for the reason of giving them space to connect with whomever is following you at the church. Or there might be a few people who you were connected to on Facebook because of your role as their pastor, but there was some conflict or other reasons that it would be better for both of you to not be connected in that way anymore. I think there are situations when it is helpful to unfriend people; I just don't think it's necessary to unfriend everyone from the church you're leaving.

Remove all social media accounts from your computer, iPhone or other media devices: In order to prevent accidentally posting from a church account after you've left, and to remove any temptation to post, or check on things that are happening at the church, I suggest going through your computer, iPhone, iPad and any other media devices that might be connected to the Twitter or Facebook profiles, and delete those accounts. This will help give you a more clean break from the church's social media life.

Talk about your plan: Talk to the church leadership about boundaries and your plan. It shows that you're being pro-active and thinking through these issues. Be specific. Let them know what you're planning to do about Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and any other social media platforms that you've used to connect with folks at the church. Make a

plan, and then communicate that with the appropriate parties involved.

Give people space: In most cases, you'll be leaving one church and moving on to a place you're really excited about. But everyone else is staying where they were - they don't get to share in your excitement about new opportunities and possibilities. Give them the space and time (online) to grieve that you are not their pastor anymore. If you're constantly checking in with them, commenting on their Facebook status updates, it doesn't give them the space they need.

Let's Get Practical

There are also some very practical things you can do when leaving a church. First, make sure that you've passed off all social media logins and administrative rights to Facebook pages or other social media sites that your church uses. There is nothing more frustrating for those who come after you to realize that no one remembers a username or password to log into a site.

This isn't necessarily related to social media, but it would be very helpful for you to leave digital copies of all the documents related to the ministry that you have on your computer. Put them all onto a Dropbox account, and leave a flash drive with the documents with someone at the church. This is much more helpful to those who may come after you than filing cabinets filled with papers, or 3" binders that may just seem too overwhelming to someone else.

Finally, it's important to realize that things will be done differently. This can be a tough one if you've really been the point person for all things digital at the church you're leaving. And this is why I think it's helpful to both give up Admin Rights to your Facebook Pages, but to also Unlike the Page and stop following the Twitter accounts. If things aren't

being updated like they were when you were there, that can be frustrating to see, and might just be annoying. Each pastor brings their own gifts to a church, and hopefully there will be folks who are able to take on some of the digital things you were doing online. But...they might not. And that's okay. You are being called somewhere else, and that's where your focus and energy should be.

Transitioning into a New Church

There are a lot of issues and questions that people always have about what to do when they're leaving a church, in terms of boundaries and social media. But there is a lot to think about when you're starting at a new church as well. I hope the suggestions below are helpful in terms of thinking through how to get started successfully at your new church.

Talk to your colleagues and staff about social media. No matter what size of church you're at, I think it's important to find out if there is a social media policy in place, and see what your colleague's thoughts are about social media. This is especially helpful and important if you're someone like me - who is very transparent online - and that might be a new thing for your colleagues. This was something that I definitely had a lot of conversations about during my last interview process, and I would suggest you do the same thing if you're looking for a new job.

Determine a social media strategy. This one will take a bit more time, but plan to get together with the staff at your church and talk about having a social media strategy. Who's going to be responsible for what? What voice do you want to use for official church posts? What is your goal with using social media for ministry? This will take some time to work through, but is really important in the long run.

“First, make sure you've passed off all social media logins and administrative rights . . . that your church uses.”

“Connect with local individuals and businesses online. . . . Had lunch at a great pizza joint? Follow them on Twitter.”

Make sure you're not the only one doing social media. If you're at a small church, or a church where no one else seems interested in doing social media, you might actually be the only one engaging online. But try and change that. At one church I served, we had 6 people who had the Manager Admin Role of our Facebook page. So we had multiple people who were posting updates, content, links, videos, questions and it created a robust and interactive page.

If you're the only one, you'll get busy, you'll forget, or it will only have your voice, and not a greater representation of the breadth of your congregation. Convince your Office Administrator that it's important, or find another volunteer. This is also extremely helpful when you leave a congregation.

Get a Gmail email address for your church. Unless your church already has a generic email address (office@yourchurch.org or something similar) that you have easy access to, I think it's easiest to simply get a Gmail account for the church, which can be used to setup all of your social media accounts. You can use this email for something you can use for Yelp, Foursquare, creating that Twitter account (see #1), setting up a podcasting service, WordPress blog, etc. It is also something you can give all of the staff access to (if they need it). This will also save you time from when you leave that church, and having to try and remember all of the different accounts and services your work email address is connected to.

Get your church on Twitter. Even if none of the people in your congregation use Twitter, I still think your church should have a presence on one of the biggest social networks that currently exists. This presents a unique opportunity for your congregation's voice to get out into the community in ways that you wouldn't be able to otherwise.

Decide what Facebook Friend Lists you'll use for ministry. When I accepted the call to Winnetka, and I got my first friend request from a member of the church, I thought through how I wanted to organize folks into the various lists. As of right now, I just have two lists. WPC and WPC Youth. This allows me to sort my News Feed and view only WPC people's updates. It is also important to start this from the very beginning. Friend Lists are also really helpful as you're starting at a new church, because you can post all of your "I love my new church and these people are the best church folk in the world" updates, and hide them from the church you've left, which I think is a kind and generous thing to do.

Harness the power of location-based social networks. You may not even know it, but people are probably "checking into" your church on Foursquare, Facebook or Yelp. And if you haven't claimed your business venue, or added a Foursquare Special to your location, I would say you're missing out on another way of connecting with folks who are coming to your community.

At my current church, we have a "Newbie Special" so when you check in to Winnetka Presbyterian Church for the first time, you'll get a notification upon checking in that says, "Welcome! We're glad you joined us at WPC! Our pastors, David & Adam, would love to get to know you better. Show this to one of us to setup a free coffee outing at a place of your choosing!" Not that we wouldn't grab coffee with people who didn't check in on Foursquare, but this is just one to let people know that you are engaging those who might be connecting with your church through this type of social media.

Connect with local individuals and businesses online. Found a favorite coffee shop that you like to work at? Like them on Facebook. Had lunch at a great pizza joint? Follow them on Twitter. And do this from both your personal accounts,

but from your church's accounts as well. Connecting with local businesses is a great way to get involved in the community and make connections for you and your congregation. When I worked out in Oregon, I became Facebook friends with the owner of a local pizza joint, and through those connections and just getting to know them better, they've hosted some events I led, helped run great fundraisers for our youth ministry, and much more.

I would also encourage you to connect with local individuals as well. Search Instagram for hashtags related to your city (e.g. #winnetka, #wilmette #northshore #chicagoland), and use that as a way to connect with local folks. I've made some great connections and friendships with people not connected to the church simply through Instagram and Twitter.

Stay organized. Once you really start getting into social media, it can feel like you are getting lost in a sea of usernames, passwords, email addresses and more. Whenever I've started at a new church, I start a document on my first day where I keep a record of every site that I sign up on for the church. I'll list the link for the site, my login information, and anything else that is helpful. Starting that right when you begin saves you (and everyone else) a lot of work down the road. It is also helpful to have a document like that so you can easily share it with your colleagues and volunteers, so they can join you in the work of ministry through social media.

Pastoral transitions are always tricky. Because we are all connected in so many different ways today, and perhaps more connected with our parishioners than pastors used to be, it can add a few more layers of complexity. However, by thinking through your use of social media and following some clear steps, I think it's still possible to maintain connected, transparent leadership as a pastor, and make it through that transition. ♦



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CONGREGATIONS is a quarterly publication of the Alban Institute, a nonprofit, interfaith membership organization founded in 1974 as a major resource for American congregations facing the challenges of a changing society. Our mission is to provide clergy and lay leaders with practical, research-based information and ideas for effective ministry as they grapple with an ever-changing environment.

The Alban Institute serves leaders—both ordained and lay—across the denominational spectrum through consulting services, education events, online and print publications, and research.

Our work is supported by contributions and sales of programs, services, and publications.

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