

Proclaiming the Good News

—*bringing it all together* by Ken Maher

Everyone wants to feel they belong to something bigger than themselves. In days gone by people made do with the company and activities around them to fill their social needs. But with the advent of the Internet anyone can find people with similar interests, hobbies and activities much more easily. No longer do you need to feel alone because you are the only unicycling stargazer in your small town! Chances are there's a group (or two) for other stargazers like yourself, all over the world, just as eager to talk about unicycles!

No longer are people restricted by geography in forming social connections. Now interests, opinions and shared history can serve as the foundation for a network of friends and acquaintances. Known as social networking, it's the backbone of all social media. Sites such as Facebook and MySpace are two of the Internet's biggest examples.

Consider these recent figures from Facebook, the best-known social networking site. With more than 300 million active users worldwide, 150 million of them log onto Facebook at least once each day. The average Facebook user has 130 friends on the site. They share more than two billion pieces of content each week, create three million events each month, join 45 million active user groups.

Looking at the bigger picture, some researchers indicate that up to 57 percent of all active Internet users have joined some kind of social networking site. Facebook's fastest-growing demographic is people 35 years and older. (Probably because, according to other statistics, 96 percent of those in the 18-to-34-year-old age group have already joined some kind of social networking site.)

Mostly a U.S. phenomenon? Think again—about 70 percent of Facebook

users are outside the States. Finally, in comparison to Google's one-in-12, Facebook now accounts for one-in-four-Internet page views.

It's not so difficult to see how social networking can be a powerful tool in proclaiming the Gospel. Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or the Wittenberg Trail (think Facebook for Lutherans!) are designed to bring together all the other forms of social media (blogs, microblogging, pictures, video, audio) in one place. Whatever you can do in any of the these media, you can do again—all together—on a social networking site. The sites bring thousands of people together to interact with all that content as well as with one another!

Social networking provides forums for groups of all kinds—congregations, youth groups, Bible study groups, new-member groups. Publicize your events, promote your causes, or issue invitations in a matter of seconds. And if any of your contacts respond, all their friends become aware of the same information.

If you post a picture of a recent youth-group event to your Facebook page, the entire group instantly receives notification. When someone comments on that photo, every one of his/her friends (even those outside the youth group) is made aware, not only of the comment, but also of the photo and of your activity! Consider the staggering promotional potential: hundreds of individuals making your content available to hundreds of their friends each—and all with little or no effort on your part.

People also use Facebook to form grief or condolence groups when someone dies. Rev. Jason Schultz (St. Peter/St. John, Oxbow/Frobisher, Sask.) posted his funeral sermon onto the "remembrance" page of a young man in his community who

died. Hundreds of people joined the group to remember him, and Rev. Schultz provided each of them with the Gospel, extending comfort and hope in Jesus well beyond the funeral service and those who attended it. How many similar online groups out there need the same consolation? How many online connections await our Lord?

Will social networking ever replace traditional face-to-face gatherings and witnessing? Probably not. Nor should it. A printed word is never quite as good as the word spoken in person. A picture or video is never quite the same as being there. And an online community, while fulfilling a need for belonging, is never as rewarding as being together with other flesh-and-blood people in the same place. That's why many groups that begin online try so hard to make real-world connections, through meet-ups, conferences and conventions. Our Lord knew what He was doing when He gave gifts of Word and Sacrament that can be seen and touched and tasted, all in the gathered company of our fellow Christians.

I hope you can begin to see some of the many possibilities for using social media to proclaim the Gospel to this world. Modern tools can and should be used in bringing Christ to the world whether in real space or in cyberspace. Why not use social media to supplement what you're already doing in your congregation and community? Use it to reach out to others who would be unreachable otherwise. Use it to seek out every opportunity to proclaim the hope that is in you, and see how God might just bring it all together to stir up something glorious in His name!

Rev. Ken Maher is pastor at Christ our Hope, Collingwood, Ont. His blog *Hope For The Hapless* is at <http://hope4thehapless.wordpress.com> and he is on Facebook.

The Joy of facebook®

Why do I love Facebook? Let me count the ways.

by Judy Obelnycki

In 2006 I received two invites to join Facebook. The first one I ignored as I had no idea what Facebook was and really didn't have the time to look into it more thoroughly. When the second invite came a few months later from family members I decided to try it. At first I felt intimidated as it seemed so busy and mind boggling.

Due to time restrictions I didn't pay much attention to until months later after I landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia in May 2007 to care for my parents. By October that year I started getting more into it.

I started cautiously keeping to only adding relatives and a few close friends to my Facebook. But once I gained a little confidence I added my maiden name hoping that

maybe someone in Halifax would recognize it and I could contact old school friends. That didn't happen. Although I had two sisters living in the area they were not around much and were caught up in their own lives. Through Facebook I met a new friend and through her, other friends. It is my conviction that God orchestrated the whole thing as He knew I really needed a friend who shared a lot of the same interests, was Christian, and just all round fun to be with after hours. As it turned out she too had cared for her parents and knew exactly what it was like for me and although we did not spend a lot of time talking about that, I knew she understood. She would also need a friend. A few weeks after we met on Facebook her husband was diagnosed with lung cancer. It was then we met face-to-face and gave each other moral support and encouraged one another. Two months later he was dead. Then, a few months after that, my mom passed away.

Through this friend I added some of her relatives, discovered other people I knew and located cousins I had lost touch with over the years. I have made new friends, male and female alike, through friends of friends because of discussions we get into on various topics.

Then there are the games such as Scrabble, Lexulous,

Word Challenge and Sudoku played with other family members and friends that keep the mind stimulated and one plays while parents nap. Watching TV or listening to the radio was taboo. Talking on the phone was definitely out of the question unless it was an emergency.

Because of Facebook I can keep up with news from my friends at home and share with them what is going on in my life. So many of my friends became grandparents for the first time and they posted pictures. I didn't feel so left out. I can communicate with some of the young people with disabilities I worked with and took out into the community. Being able to stay connected to them and their families is beneficial to both sides as

our lives were interwoven for nearly two decades. One parent pointed out that my not being there left a large hole in their lives. I know this to be true as it created a hole as well in mine. But I had to weigh the priorities and my parents came out on top.

Through Facebook I have met with other Christians and Christian groups and kept up to date with what is happening in my own church community. There is no LCC in Halifax and communicating with this community is a source of deep comfort. We Christians have been a source of encouragement to one another and often shared our struggles, concerns and faith. We offer prayers and genuine concern when the need arises. I've also had the opportunity to share what I believe with those Facebook friends professing not to have any religious affiliations/beliefs.

Facebook has been a blessing for me both mentally and spiritually. It has filled in many long and lonely hours that I am away from husband, son and his family and my home. It has been a huge source of joy in many areas for countless reasons.

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