



Related articles:

Accessing church with social media

(page 16)

Social media gospel

(page 19)

The Lutheran,
June 2014

Contact us:

The Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, Ext. 2540
lutheran@thelutheran.org
www.thelutheran.org

The Lutheran is the
magazine of the
Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide:

\$2.00

The digital church

Connecting beyond church walls

By Robert C. Blezard

In the beginning there was email, and we saw that it was useful. Now there are hundreds of ways to communicate by text, voice, photo or video—not only via computer but with all sorts of portable electronic devices. Social media has transformed how we communicate with one another, providing both challenges and opportunities for Christians.

Exercise 1: My social media

- Which social media—Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.—do you use, and how?
- Do you access it on computer, portable device or both?
- How has it changed the way you communicate with family and friends?
- Do you find yourself more closely connected or less closely than before?
- What are the ways you use social media now?
- How can you use social media to share your faith with others? To invite them into the life of your congregation?

Exercise 2: Media inventory

Social media offers many low-cost ways for your congregation to reach both members and people who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Starting with your church's website (it has one, right?), take an inventory of how your congregation communicates.

- What information is on the website?
- Can people read or listen to sermons, contact staff, view photographs, learn about Lutheranism, check on upcoming events, link to Lutheran sites or connect to other social media?
- Does your congregation have a Facebook page? How is it used?
- What other social media are used?

Now compare your inventory to that of a congregation in your community that uses social media to great effect. Report to your pastor or church council.

Exercise 3: Media mission

- Why, in God's name, should your congregation get involved in social media? How can it be a ministry?



Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to rcblezard@embarqmail.com

Contact us:

The Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, Ext. 2540
lutheran@thelutheran.org
www.thelutheran.org

The Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **The digital church**

continued

- What's in it for the church? What's in it for people?
- How would a social media ministry's purpose and mission be different from other ministries?

Draft a "media mission statement" that would outline the church's purpose, use and goals for social media.

Exercise 4: Ministry potential

What can you accomplish with social media? On a whiteboard or poster, list all of the specific communication tasks possible with the Internet and computer or mobile device. When done, review each one and list the potential uses for these congregational ministries: evangelism, stewardship, discipleship, worship, children and youth, family, senior citizen, advocacy, fellowship and education (others?). Give the list to your church council or pastor.

Exercise 5: Connections

Homebound members aren't the only ones who have a hard time coming to church. Discuss:

- Are people busier today than in previous generations?
- Has this affected church attendance and participation?
- What are other factors?
- How could social media help maintain or build connections between your congregation and its busy members?

Exercise 6: Newspeak

Younger people tend to use social media more than their elders. Discuss whether this is true for your community and congregation.

- What are the implications for outreach and evangelism among the younger generation?
- How can social media enable your congregation to better reach and maintain contact with younger people?
- Without social media, what are the prospects of outreach and evangelism among younger people?
- How can youth and young adults of your congregation help show the way?

Exercise 7: Media survey

How many people in your congregation have a computer and high-speed Internet access? Wouldn't that information be useful in devising a social media plan?

Put together a survey that catalogs how your members use social media, how



About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod.

He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg.

Contact us:

The Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, Ext. 2540
lutheran@thelutheran.org
www.thelutheran.org

The Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **The digital church** *continued*

much by computer and portable device, which programs they use, how they would like to be connected to church and what uses they would support. Then use the information to draft a social media plan for your congregation.

Exercise 8: Sacred media?

Prolific Christians who made a huge difference: Paul wrote letters to churches and Martin Luther published tracts, essays, articles, books and sermons.

- If they were alive today, how would social media help Paul's and Luther's ministries?
- What would Luther's Facebook page look like?
- What would be on Paul's blog?
- What would you read on Luther's Twitter feed?

Exercise 9: Out of it?

- If a church isn't using social media and has no intention of doing so, what opportunities is it missing?
- Of what larger problems might this be a symptom?
- What is the prognosis for a church that doesn't use social media?
- What is the prescription?



Accessing church with

Connecting beyond church walls

By Susan M. Lang

Martin Luther is frequently cited as a role model for increasing access to church for the people of his day. He translated the Bible into German and wrote the Small Catechism so families could easily study the Christian faith at home. If Luther were alive today, imagine how he might use social media tools and digital technology to connect beyond our church walls, especially with those who are homebound and/or disabled.

“For a church, if it is to be in any shape and form incarnational, we need to connect where people are and need to use the language they are using,” said Nathan Swenson-Reinhold, a pastor of St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Longwood, Fla. “We use social media less as a strategy and more because we are called to be in relationship with the world. We are an expression of God’s heart and God’s feet.”

St. Stephen uses various social media channels to connect with congregants, including sermon podcasts, YouTube and Vimeo videos, Facebook, Twitter, a blog, and live streaming on UStream.

“We haven’t had an intentional homebound focus, but the Internet is a natural connecting point for the homebound,” Swenson-Reinhold said. “We have people who want

social media

to worship with us on weekends but can't because they're traveling or even in the hospital, so they connect with us online."

In December, St. Stephen announced that one of its Christmas Eve services would be live-streamed—60 households around the world watched.

We've fallen behind ...

"How do we become more digitally present in the 21st century?" Swenson-Reinhold asked. "In the Lutheran church, we act as if this is a new idea. For a church that led the charge in sharing the word, we have been behind on this. We need to be intentionally engaged with our culture for the sake of the gospel."

In Kasson, Minn., St. John Lutheran "offered daily reflections during Lent on Facebook, Twitter and by email," said Katie Livingood, the church's communications and media specialist. "A middle-aged homebound woman let us know how much she appreciated what we were providing for those who are homebound. I was glad we were serving this special purpose."

Livingood said the congregation doesn't currently have a social media strategy that targets the homebound but acknowledges that a variety of people fall into this category. "Think about how often people are home recovering from surgery, or pregnant women who are on bed rest, or anyone suddenly stuck in bed every day for six weeks or three months. All these congregants are technically homebound and social media keeps them connected," she said.

St. Michael Lutheran, Harrisburg, Pa., started using Skype during worship services when the niece of its pastor, Larry Hawkins, got married at the church. "My

oldest boy was in the military and other family members couldn't make it, so we 'Skyped' them in," he said.

This started the conversation about using Skype to connect others with weekly worship services. One longtime member was homebound and really missed attending church. Her family helped her set up Skype so she could be more connected to the church's worship life again.

"We also sent communion to her home," Hawkins said. "She'd see the communion service and then a half hour later someone would arrive at her door with communion for her."

When this member transitioned from her house to a nursing home, Hawkins asked if the facility had Internet access for residents. It did. Her family helped her set up Skype there, too, so she could continue to be connected to St. Michael's worship life.

St. Michael has approximately 50 people in worship each Sunday, but Hawkins said seven to 10 people have taken advantage of this way to participate in services. They've had people who were sick on a Sunday call in and ask if they could join by Skype. Although this worship option intentionally targets homebound members, St. Michael's leaders have also used the platform for someone unable to physically attend a church meeting.

It took trial and error to set up the technology. At first they tried to use Hawkins' son's laptop but quickly discovered the camera didn't work well in the larger space, so they invested in a \$50 webcam. Sound on the laptop was also garbled, so they patched in a device typically used to assist the hearing impaired.

"It's a little FM broadcasting thing," Hawkins explained. "It's like a radio pack. It's kind of like the idea of old drive-in movies where you turn into a frequency and you hear the sound on your radio."

Instructions on how to connect via Skype are posted on the congregation's website in the FAQs section to assist members who want to participate. Worship bulletins are also posted online.

Meanwhile, on-site worshippers are encouraged to take photos and post them to social media and to tweet during worship using the hashtag #stmikehbg. As a result, those who are traveling can be part of the worship experience too.

"We're not trying to be innovative," Hawkins said. "We're just trying to proclaim the word of God."

Emerging technologies address isolation

Congregations are only now beginning to get a handle on



SHUTTERSTOCK

◀ 17

how they can use social media to connect with populations unable to physically attend worship or other events.

The Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society, a nonprofit provider of senior care and services based in Sioux Falls, S.D., collaborates through its Vivo innovation program with Verizon and Logic PD to create a technology called Window to the World. The initiative began when an ELCA pastor in Rapid City, S.D., approached Vivo because he was concerned about the isolation he recognized among elderly parishioners. Upon further study, it turned out that within just this one congregation some 82 families were impacted in some way by isolation.

“As seniors become less mobile, unable to travel or don’t leave their homes as often as they once did, they can become disconnected physically, socially and emotionally from the people and experience they love,” said Kelly Soyland, director of research and innovation for Good Samaritan.

The society “is innovating a solution that delivers what seniors miss,” she said. “The feature set includes audio and video as well as content customized to the individual senior’s interest.”

Early field tests connected a homebound parishioner with the quilting group she hadn’t attended for several years because she was uncomfortable leaving her husband, who had restrictive health issues, at home alone.

“Getting a text or even a picture via a phone from a friend or loved one is one thing,” Soyland said. “But being able to look them in the eye on a large TV monitor on the senior end is quite a different experience.”

Window to the World will use devices that already exist in a person’s home, so the box that connects to the TV will enable the functionality. At the other end, smartphones, laptops, tablets, action video cameras or video production entities will be used.

Soyland said the technology has a variety of applications, such as reconnecting seniors with worship services, Bible studies and committees they once attended in person. “Being connected is so important to all of us if we are to thrive as we age,” she said.

Jacqui Pagel, pastor of Trinity Lutheran, Phoenix, said the congregation set up a closed Facebook group that members use to connect more deeply beyond Sundays. They share prayer requests, joys, concerns and lots of photos.

“I hope to have Facebook open and running on our screens during worship so anyone not physically present can see what’s going on,” Pagel said. “Perhaps stream it live and post questions about the service and even see who’s there. God created us to worship God, so we’re going to do whatever we can to get people worshipping God.” □

Social media gospel

A conversation with Meredith Gould

By Susan M. Lang



Gould

Meredith Gould, author of *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways* (Liturgical Press, 2013) is a digital strategist and communications consultant who works with churches and judicatories across denominations.

The Lutheran asked her (using social media, of course) about helping congregations and ministries use social media as tools for reaching out to the homebound and those who can't physically attend church.

The Lutheran: How is social media both a mission tool and a mission field?

Gould: Newcomers to social media tend to view social media platforms as tools for communication, and rightly so. These platforms allow us to share content (e.g., links, pictures, videos) and engage in conversations from which relationships—and community—emerge. They morph into *tools for mission* when we share experiences of how God's grace is revealed in daily life, when we articulate how gospel values are actively lived.

For example, posting to Facebook about the felt

experience of grace while distributing blankets or food or cleaning up neighborhood blight is using social media as a tool for mission. Posting Instagram pictures or creating Pinterest boards with images that illustrate feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, comforting the sorrowful, etc., is also a way of using social media as a tool for sharing the gospel. Bonus points for adding captions like "Here's where I saw God's mercy today."

Used consistently, over time social media becomes a *mission field*.

To illuminate this dimension, I invite people to think about who they connect with through social media. What percentage of those connections are from church? Generally speaking, their Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest or Twitter networks are dominated by family, friends from school days, co-workers and others from the secular world.

Social media becomes a mission field when posting about the significance of faith and church involvement is so seamless (read: not pushy and obnoxious) that secular friends notice enough to ask about it. Using social media itself or through other means, these questions emerge: "Why do you post about your faith so much?" or "You seem to spend a lot of time at church. Why?"

Boom! Mission field, as well as mission tool.

20 ►

Top three myths about the homebound

Myth #1:

In general, homebound parishioners are ill and old.

Reality: Being disabled is not the same thing as being ill.

Myth #2:

Aging or elderly members are unlikely to engage via digital technology.

Reality: Although recent research indicates a drop-off of Internet and broadband use at around age 75, we

can no longer assume lack of interest in or use of digital technology among those age 70 and older. Plus, today's 60-somethings who do use the Internet are tomorrow's seniors.

Myth #3:

People with motor disabilities can't use computers.

Reality: Voice activated/recognition programs, many of which are used by the able-bodied (think: Siri), plus assis-

tive devices (e.g., mouth sticks, head wands, eye-tracking) make computers accessible.

To learn more about assistive technology, search for resources by Edward S. Rosenthal (<http://office.microsoft.com>); articles at <http://WebAIM.org> (search "motor disabilities"); and for "Older Adults and Technology Use" by Aaron Smith for the Pew Research Internet Project (www.pewinternet.org).



Strategy is the foundation to using social media well. What should congregations consider as they seek to reach out to the homebound and people with disabilities?

I urge congregations to carefully explore the nuances of these special audiences before crafting tactics (e.g., how and when to connect) as well as choosing tools (e.g., which social media platforms to use).

I cannot overemphasize the importance of checking commonly held assumptions against the reality that:

- Not all homebound congregants are aging, nor should we assume that those who are can't or won't use online tools.
- Not all congregants with disabilities are homebound, although we may be forcing them into that status whenever the church-the-building is inaccessible.
- Being homebound and/or disabled doesn't automatically mean the congregant is ill. That noted, some congregants are, in fact, ill with chronic conditions that make regular worship attendance and community participation impossible.
- Disabilities vary in type (e.g., physical, mental, learning) and intensity.
- Congregants who require care usually have caregivers who are also unable to attend worship and/or participate in church activities because of time and/or exhaustion.

Thought bytes

Reaching out to as well as proactively accommodating people with disabilities is the ethically right thing to do. As you review online strategies and tools, ask:

- Do we generally understand and respond fully to the needs of people with disabilities?
- Are we willing and able to make special accommodations for people with disabilities without isolating them?
- How will the social media tools we choose welcome more participation by people with disabilities?

The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways (Liturgical Press, 2013)

What are some of the challenges you see as church leaders begin to think about using social media to connect with the homebound?

Even without using social media, reaching out to these congregants (and visitors) challenges churches in radical ways. A whole new world of critically necessary and needed sensitivity training opens up when churches not only commit to this ministry, but understand this is

about engaging people in the life of church community, not just making sure they get news announcements.

In addition to bumping up against assumptions and stereotypes, it's almost impossible to begin this conversation without wrestling with fears and prejudices. Now add general ignorance about what churches are required to provide under the Americans With Disabilities Act (see resources) and there's a whole lot of educating that needs to go on.

I've seen more than one church community go into complete collapse around this, in large part because it hasn't acknowledged that this deep work needs to be done on so many levels—practical as well as theological.

Still, this predictable messiness shouldn't stop church leadership from moving forward.

Digital technology in general and social media in particular completely change the form of this ministry from passively delivering covered dishes and eucharist, to active engagement in church community by the homebound and/or congregant with a disability.

I'll also add that the disability community is generally in the lead when it comes to figuring out how to use technology, so this ministry must include them. Simply acknowledging that digital technology enhances the probability of participation is an important first step.

In the ELCA, 6,007 of our 9,580 congregations have an average worship attendance of fewer than 100 people. What is one thing—or the first step—that small congregations can do?

It all begins with strategy—know your audience.

First, find out how many of your members are physically unable to attend worship and/or meetings at the church. Next, find out whether that's because they're aging or disabled in some way or are busy giving care or working jobs that prevent them from attending.

You absolutely cannot craft a tactic for digital outreach and delivery until you know this basic information.

Meanwhile, you might want to rip out pews in the front and mark the parking lot so there are parking spaces to accommodate people with disabilities, including those who drive vans since those spaces need to be configured in a special way. □



Author bio:

Lang is an ELCA pastor who serves ecumenically as a leadership retreat facilitator and church consultant in

Perkasie, Pa. (www.revwriter.com).

MICHAEL D. WATSON



Disabilities” (www.elca.org/disabilities).

Ecumenical resources

• **National Council of Churches, USA:** Download the Equal Access Guide to ensure accessibility for meetings, conferences, large assemblies and wor-

ship (www.nccusa.org/elmc/disabilitiesmanual.html).

• **The Episcopal Church:** Links to other networks and resources (www.episcopalchurch.org/page/people-living-disabilities).

• **United Methodist Church:** Created by its Disability Ministries Committee, the site includes quick links, especially those from Methodist Women, on transformative education and mission (www.umdissability.org).

• **Tweet:** Since July 2011, an ecumenical community has met on Twitter (Tuesdays, 9 p.m. ET) using the hashtag #ChSocM to chat about using social media tools and the church. All are welcome. For more information, visit: <http://churchsocmed.blogspot.com>.

Resources

• **Americans With Disabilities Act:** This civil rights legislation prohibits discrimination against people with physical and mental disabilities. Its website (www.ada.gov) provides information about regulations and enforcement, detailed guidance for creating accessible design and technical assistance materials. Search for “revised ADA requirements” or “effective communications.”

• **www.disability.gov:** A federal government website with a wealth of information about programs and services for people with disabilities and their caregivers.

• **ELCA:** A biblical and theological overview of the church's commitment to inclusion. See especially “A Message on ... People Living With