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# THE CHURCH ONLINE - THE IMPACT OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS ON CHURCH CONGREGATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This study will investigate the impact of online social networks for church members on those members' levels of engagement in the life of the church. Specifically, we endeavor to determine how and whether social networks for the church, including online calendars, discussion boards, blogs, photo sharing, and other such tools might contribute to behaviors such as greater involvement in church activities including worship, small groups, and volunteer leadership roles. Additionally, we will examine whether use of such tools also contributes to higher levels of giving, either to specific requests or to the routine fund raising of the church. Research hypotheses and a research methodology are proposed, along with directions for future research.

## Keywords

Online social network, church, engagement.

## INTRODUCTION

Our objective is to determine the impact of online social networks for church members on those individuals' levels of engagement and involvement in the church. Specifically, we are interested in seeing how congregational social networks – collections of people connected to each other through congregational relationships – can be enhanced with the new online social networking tools available today. In other words, how might these new and developing tools for social networking contribute to a greater sense of congregational commitment, involvement in congregational activities including worship and volunteer leadership roles, as well as a greater awareness of special needs of individual members? Additionally, we would like to study whether the use of such networking tools may also contribute to higher levels of financial support, either to specific benevolence requests or to the ongoing financial support of congregational ministries.

Many mainstream churches report sluggish growth or decline in total membership, going back at least 40 years (e.g., General Commission on Archives and History, 2008; Lutheran World Federation, 2008). At least in part, this decline is due to the aging of the congregations, and the failure to draw new younger members to rebuild as the congregation ages. Knowing that one fertile ground for these new members is among youth and young adults [the group Prensky (2001) dubbed “Digital Natives”], it seems reasonable to believe that it might be helpful to use online tools and services to attract and engage these individuals, as well as to engage the “Digital Immigrants” (those who did not grow up with technology, but have since engaged with it).

Anecdotal evidence of church leaders' belief in the potential of technology may be found in the number of churches offering social networking tools as part of their church's web presence. For example, Ning, a social networking service allowing creation of branded, private social networks, had at least 350 branded social networks that included “church” and one of four major Protestant denominations as part of their keywords (as of February 20, 2009).

Finally, beyond the formal academic and practitioner literature we find significant interest in online social networks among church leaders. Not only are there large numbers of church-based social networks, as noted previously, but there are also active online discussions that allow pastors and other church leaders to collaborate and learn from one another in this area (e.g., CPOneAcademy, 2009)

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: The literature review provides background for prior research in this area, along with development of hypotheses to be tested. A research methodology and research subject selection approach are proposed, along with anticipated conclusions, followed by limitations and directions for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Numerous authors have written on the subject of church growth and effectiveness, though relatively few in scholarly publications. Many appear to be practitioners with substantial data to support their recommendations, though their works are not peer-reviewed. Callahan (1983), for example, counts the following among his twelve keys for church effectiveness: worship vitality, concrete mission objectives, “significant relational groups”, strong leadership, and high visibility. These “relational groups” are instances of social networks in the pre-Internet, “offline” sense, and could potentially be impacted in various ways through the use of online social networking tools (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Arn & Arn (1990) provide more specific direction to measure church health, growth, and effectiveness. Such measures include ratios related to revitalization, evangelism, church school, and worship. These measures provide another set of data points that will be used in our study as potential measures of the impact of social networks and other factors.

Churches can be expected to use their social networks to improve the overall engagement of their congregations. Dimensions of this area include, for example, inviting others to participate and serving the community and the church (Winseman, 2007, p. 39). Beyond the church literature, consumer loyalty concepts include such elements as “patronage behavior,” which corresponds to attendance and giving, in the church setting (Dick & Basu, 1994). Djupe combines these two into the concept of “religious brand loyalty,” wherein individuals, by their affiliation, become embedded in dense social networks that help to create a momentum of affiliation that is difficult to reverse” (Djupe, 2000). Djupe was referring to traditional (“offline”) social networks, but the online tools may provide ways to augment that “momentum of affiliation”.

One example of this was offered by a church administrator interviewed in preparation for this study. She reported that she “staggered invitations (e.g., first my own personal friends who I know will be attending anyway, then other personal friends, before the mass ‘all group members’) and had [a] better response” because “members are more likely to say ‘yes’ to an event ... if there are already lots of others who have said ‘yes.’” In this way, Facebook’s online invitation and RSVP service served as an evangelism/marketing and attendance-boosting aide.

Large numbers of churches, and certainly those in mainline Protestant denominations, capture a great deal of numeric data about their members and events. These data provide a solid foundation from which to measure impacts of online social networks. Data include worship and church school attendance, leadership roles, membership statistics, small group attendance, youth ministries, and measures of giving and spending activities (e.g., California-Pacific Conference United Methodist Church, 2008). We anticipate leveraging this data collection process to provide data for this research project.

Online services of various types have been postulated to increase both loyalty and total value to the operator of the online service. For example, in banking, Witman & Roust (2008) showed that active users of online banking services were dramatically higher in net monetary value as bank customers, due in significant part to their online banking usage. This usage seemed to motivate the user to conduct more of their relationship with their online banking institution, due to the greater convenience and visibility it provided. Roust and Witman (2006) also showed that active online banking users were more loyal and left their financial institution at lower rates than non-online banking users, due to the switching costs of moving that relationship to another institution. Graeber further notes that, based on a 33 month study, individual active online banking users actually became more valuable over that time period to their institution than did similar users who did not use online banking (Graeber, 2003).

Ellison et al (2007) define a measure of Facebook intensity that involves both metrics for actual use (minutes per day), as well as psychographic questions. Facebook itself (2009) provides metrics for usage and activity on fan pages, including posting quality assessments and fan demographics. One can also derive information about the activity on the page by reviewing user postings, user comments, and similar empirical observations about the posted activity on the page. Ning provides similar features. We will utilize available data from the social network service to create a measure of user engagement on the page, and that measure may vary based on the social network in use by the church.

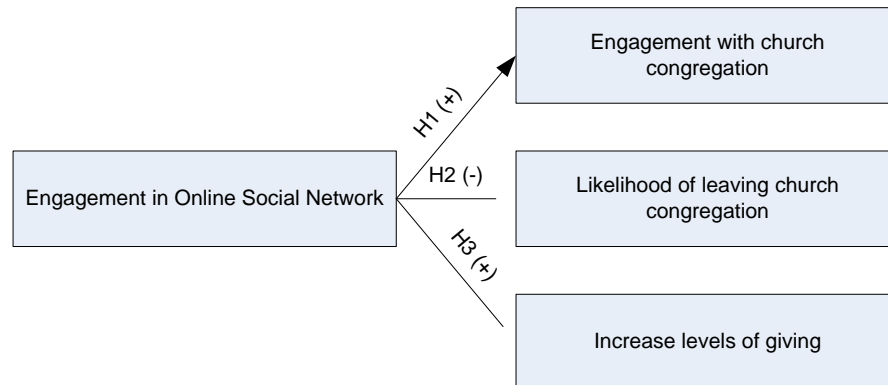
From the combination of measures of church effectiveness and the anticipated impact of online services flow the following hypotheses:

H1: Church members who are more actively engaged in the use of social networking tools related to their church congregation will be more active with their church congregation. In this case, we will define church activity as a combination of measures of engagement, as noted previously – leadership roles and attendance at worship and small-group meetings.

H2: Church members who are more actively engaged in the use of social networking tools related to their church congregation will be less likely to leave their church congregation.

H3: Church members who are more actively engaged in the use of social networking tools related to their church congregation will, at least in aggregate, increase their levels of giving more so than those who are not as engaged. (Aggregated rather than individual giving levels will likely be used in this study due to the need to protect member privacy and the sensitivity surrounding release of individual giving records by churches.)

The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1, below.



**Figure 1 - Proposed Theoretical Model**

## METHODOLOGY

We will conduct this study in two phases. The first phase will capture initial data on church member involvement and online community activity, and if possible, historical church member involvement data. This will allow us to make an initial assessment of the impact of the online community on the life of the congregation. Subsequent data collections, six to twelve months later, and beyond, will permit more complete assessment of the impact of the online community. The longitudinal data will allow analysis of the effects of numerous variables, including the use of online social networks, on the interactions of the congregations' members in the life of the church. The primary unit of analysis will be at the individual member level within a particular church congregation.

Data from church congregations, including demographics, attendance and participation records, and giving records if available, will be anonymized before delivery for analysis. All data will be encrypted as additional security for the privacy of the member information. Social network records will be anonymized and encrypted in a parallel manner, so that data from the social network can be matched to demographic and member information.

While we intend for the data collection process to be unobtrusive to congregation members, so as not to bias their behavior, we do expect to gather some data via limited interviews and e-mail discussions with church staff and volunteer leaders. This data will be captured and analyzed per case-study best practices (Yin, 2003), and will be used to triangulate with the quantitative data extracted from church participation and social network records.

Social network analysis techniques (Knoke & Yang, 2007) may also be valuable in our analysis of user behavior. In particular, identifying which members are more actively connected to other members may provide an additional data point with respect to analyzing switching costs and engagement. Selection of specific techniques will depend on the availability of data and ability to collect the data without compromising member privacy.

There are a variety of social network services in use by churches at the present time. From our informal review of a large number of church sites, these tend to fall into two major categories – church-specific sites and secular sites. Church-specific sites include a service called MemberConnect, operated by Concordia Technology Services, and another service called mychurch.org. MemberConnect provides integration with core church management software, along with a variety of social networking, calendaring, contact management, and other tools for use by church administrators and volunteers, and by volunteer leaders and members of individual groups, while mychurch.org provides a somewhat broader range of facilities, including blogs and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, while offering less integration with church management tools.

The primary secular networks include Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)), along with targeted networks such as those hosted by Ning ([www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com)). Data collection from each of these networks will need to be targeted to the capabilities of the administrative tools for the networks, and may require more manual data collection, such as gathering information from the network's pages about membership in groups, postings, and other similar data.

An example of a church social network site, promoting its prayer ministry, is shown in Figure 2. This particular church uses both Ning and Facebook, leveraging Ning's more exclusive access model for internal church discussion, and Facebook's broad reach as a tool for evangelism and outreach.



Figure 2. Use of social network to promote a church ministry

## RESEARCH SUBJECTS

We will work with at least three churches, in three different denominations. Our first research subject is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation in New Mexico. Our second subject is a United Methodist congregation in southern California. Our third subject will be a United Presbyterian congregation, also in southern California. We have chosen these three denominations to get exposure to different church administration models across the denominations, and will seek out churches with diverse congregations to help ensure generalizability of our results. We anticipate the results to be valid and meaningful to other Protestant denominations and perhaps to other branches of the Christian church as well.

## CONCLUSIONS

Congregations will learn and benefit from this research in a number of ways: First, the ministry of congregations concerns connections – connections internally and connections externally. This research will better help congregations identify and use the tools and technologies which make congregational networks more effective and enduring, thus enhancing congregational mission. Second, this research will assist congregations and congregational leaders in connecting with a younger generation that is very connected and for whom social relationships are routinely grown and maintained online. This research will help congregations explore how they can develop new ways to think about appealing to younger potential members using network strategies.

We anticipate this study will provide insights into the impact of Internet technologies, and specifically online social networks, on the life of church congregations and their members. To the extent that the use of online social networking tools is early in its adoption by churches and church members, the research will help to document the actual effect of these social networks, and will help to guide the adoption and usage of social networks by other churches. We expect that churches new to social networking can use the research findings to plan their initial online launch for greater effectiveness, and that churches already active in social networking can enhance their effectiveness based on information gained from this research.

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The proposed study is clearly limited to Protestant churches in the United States, though some of its results may ultimately be generalizable beyond those groups. Due to the very limited direct contact with church members, the study is also limited in

its ability to control for additional variables, including history of church involvement, psychographic factors, etc., but will attempt to mitigate this issue via discussions with church leaders to identify and control for other causative factors for the observed behaviors among church members.

Future research will gather detailed initial quantitative data from at least three church congregations and assess that data relative to the research questions. Follow-on research will gather longitudinal data from the same congregations to assess changes over time, and to attempt to determine the impact of the various independent variables on the dependent variables. Other follow-on activities may include investigation of other Christian denominations, other sizes of churches, and perhaps other faiths as well.

Further exploratory research may reveal additional levels of granularity which can be captured and measured. For example, it may be possible to categorize different types of church activities, such as social, Bible study, spiritual formation, and service. It may then be possible to assess the impact of social networking tools on the different types of activities, and help churches to ensure that their primary mission objectives are being met.

Crumroy, et al (1998, pp. 269-271), in a broad text on the subject of church administration, note the importance of developing volunteer leadership in the church. Another path that we plan to pursue is related to the volunteer effort required to maintain online content. We understand that if information systems do not satisfy their users' expectations or if users do not find the system useful, users will not continue to use these systems (Bhattacharjee, 2001). As such, continued maintenance and updates of the content for which various administrative volunteers have responsibility is critical to the overall continued use of the social network. Mathieson (2007) offers some insights into the motivations of volunteers to maintain such content (and to do more technical work as well), including their skills and training, their engagement with the organization, their commitment, and their desire to be of service.

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