

Facebook Revolution

The site provides marvelous ministry opportunities, but beware of social networking anxiety

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

Social networking sites can be a great way to stay in touch with overseas missionaries, to minister to non-Christians, to connect with old friends and to find out what relatives are doing.

They also can be places where people waste hours of time, get caught up talking about themselves and even develop addictive behaviors.

For Christians, sites such as Facebook and MySpace offer tremendous rewards — and worrisome temptations.

Only three years ago, MySpace had 10 times as much traffic as the nascent Facebook. But Facebook has more than doubled MySpace in popularity as more and more in middle age and the senior years set up page profiles, publish news feeds and upload images.

Facebook enables people to connect with long-lost friends — from high school, college or churches in communities where they used to live — people who meant a lot at one point but

slipped from contact. It can be a rewarding way to communicate with people young and old, near and far, those you met years ago or last week, mere acquaintances or intimate friends. By listing interests, it's possible to find like-minded individuals who become genuine new companions.

CLOSER CHRISTIANS

Facebook also can draw members within a congregation closer. The person who is reluctant to talk in a Sunday School class or a small group often finds a voice on a computer screen. Those who are reluctant to speak up in front of a group can readily offer a prayer or word of encouragement via a laptop keyboard.

MinistryMarketingCoach.com founder Chris Forbes, 46, says social networking has been a godsend for his wife, Angela.

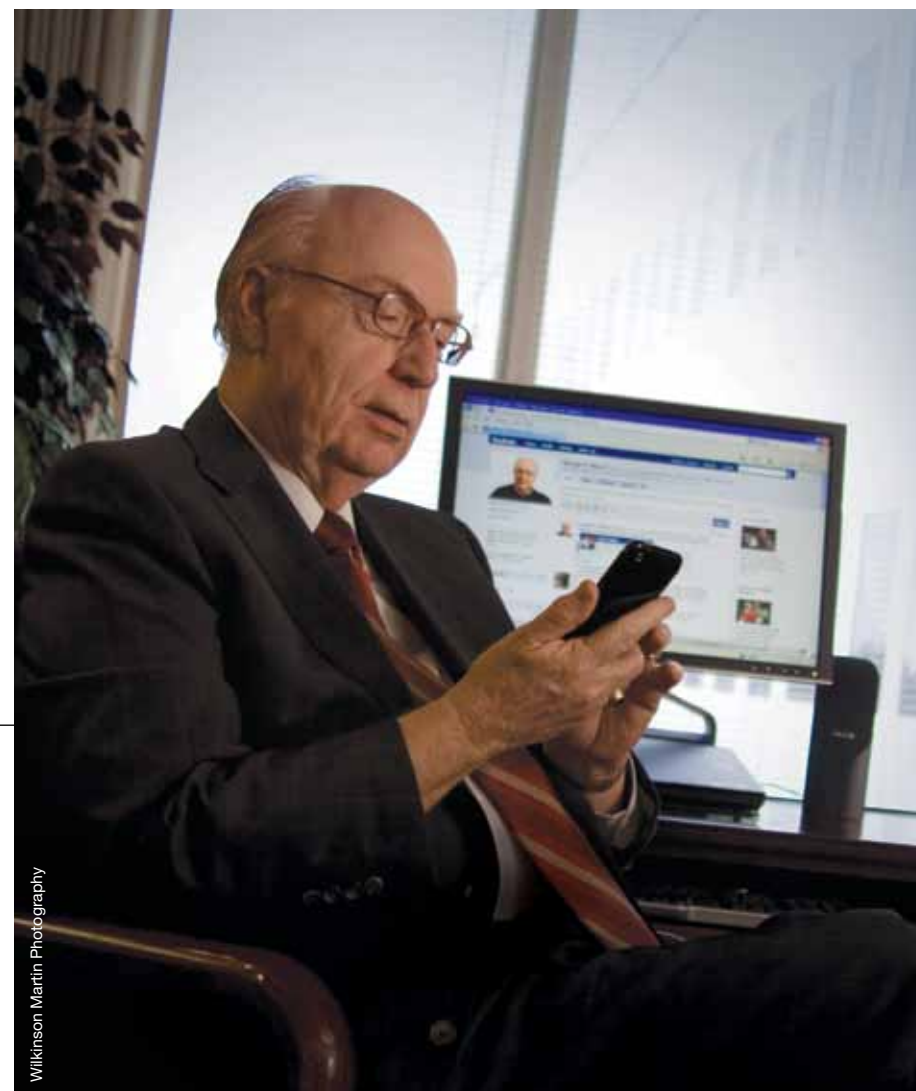
“My wife is shy and likes to think through what she wants to say,” says Forbes, a former overseas missionary who lives in Edmond, Okla. “On Facebook,

she can think through what she wants to say and look at it before she sends it. She has more confidence.”

Assemblies of God General Superintendent George O. Wood joined Facebook last year after receiving multiple invitations to join. And as he has done with the electric typewriter, the computer, the cell phone, the iPhone and, most recently, Twitter, Wood decided to immerse himself in the new technology. By corresponding on Facebook, the 68-year-old national church leader has attracted attention among the technologically savvy younger set.

“It's a fun way to communicate. It's a way to be in tune with young people, and it has helped personalize my office,” Wood says. “It fits in with our core value of strategically investing in the next generation.”

Pastor Bob J. Adams restarted Radiant Fellowship in Waupaca, Wis., five years ago with eight attendees. Now 100 people come Sunday mornings to the AG



AG General Superintendent George O. Wood tweets on Twitter from his iPhone and also connects with constituents through Facebook.

church, and Adams, 35, says half are there as a result of social networking, including blogging.

The church's Facebook and MySpace accounts promote concerts and other upcoming events at the church in the town of 5,500.

The church Web site also is a place for Adams to post sermon podcasts.

The online sites save Radiant Fellowship \$230 a month in printing costs as few congregants request a mailed newsletter.

“Facebook provides a point of social connection, and for Chris-

tians, the model we're presented with is it's all about the body of Christ,” says Evangel University professor Timothy Rohde, who also studies literacy in popular culture. “Social networking sites enable us to have interaction and fellowship.”

Communicating via the Web permits those who might be limited because of physical impairment or geographic isolation to connect with electronic friends elsewhere with just a few keystrokes. Social networking allows an individual to spread a prayer request to dozens or hundreds of

people immediately, any time of the day or night. Many people respond faster to a Facebook query than even a phone voicemail message. Facebook claims about half of its 200 million worldwide users log onto the site at least daily, with more than 30 million people updating their status at least once a day.

Rohde says the fact that he received 50 e-mail birthday greetings in July from people of all ages and all walks of life greatly encouraged him.

“Social networking venues allow us to keep contact with family and friends in a more or less ‘real time’ manner,” says Dr. Donald A. Lichi, 57, a licensed psychologist with EMERGE Ministries in Akron, Ohio.

NETWORKING LIMITATIONS

Because the interactions aren't human encounters, it's unrealistic that Facebook can make someone more social.

“A lot of people look at Facebook as some kind of tool that will somehow automate their relationships,” Forbes says.

For all its benefits, Facebook can appear to be narcissistic and self-indulgent. Some people even try to create a narrative that is an alternative storyline to their real life. The photo albums and video links of their trips and parties almost appear to be patterned after a reality TV episode. Lichi even knows a family whose home was ransacked — as they issued daily updates about their vacation.

And there's the potential of appearing irrelevant by posting minutia throughout the day: detailing every meal, TV show viewed, shopping trip or day-dream fantasy. In addition, some people incessantly request others to take quizzes or to join causes.

“Facebook allows us to take micro-moments that aren't that

big a deal and put them up for 600 people to see," Rohde says.

Posting too much information about oneself and doing so too often can be annoying.

"People who can't talk about anything but themselves perturb me," Forbes says. "These are also the people who perturb me offline."

Of course Facebook thrives on frequent posting of personal information and opinions.

"You need to find the balance in talking about yourself and talking about things that matter to other people," Forbes says. "I'll post something if someone in my network might find value in it."

Rohde, 42, notes that some people have different Facebook accounts for different circles of friends, such as roommates, co-workers and relatives.

"I'm sure some of my students may not want their professors to have equal access to some of the information they want other students to know," Rohde says.

Lichi notes that EMERGE has counseled clients who have established clandestine social networking accounts and hidden it from their spouses.

"These tend to feed into one's fantasy life," Lichi warns. "It is a pseudo-relationship, and we've seen a number of affairs started from this venue."

Lichi likewise cautions against impulsive electronic communications that are instantly read by others.

"Emotions can change quickly," Lichi says. "A posting cannot."

"Facebook isn't a substitute for personal interaction that is needed in other ways of genuine friendship," Rohde says. "Being physically present is different."

STILL LONELY?

Forbes, who uses Facebook to network as an independent consultant, has 3,400 online "friends," some of whom he's run into at conferences but didn't recognize.

"You can isolate yourself by befriend-ing everyone you see on Facebook," Forbes says. "My wife has 150 close friends and family members, and she knows them well."

Some people try to collect Facebook friends the way they would baseball cards. But, by default, the more links created, the more superficial the relationships become and the more erratic the contact.

"It's not the number of friends you have on Facebook as much as it is the quality of the relationship you have with those friends," Forbes says. "Facebook is not a contest to see how many people you can add to your friend list. The real prize is developing and maintaining authentic relationships."

"Someone can have thousands of friends on Facebook and still be lonely," Wood says. "It's important to get to know one another on a deeper level than Facebook."

Wood, as leader of the Fellowship, quickly found he reached the 5,000-member friendship limit on Facebook. Wood says he now must ignore friend requests, and he has to limit himself to 15 minutes a day on the site so it won't be so time consuming.

Still, Wood notes that social

networking sites are just one recent method that is transforming the way people communicate.



Pastor Bob Adams of Radiant Fellowship in Waupaca, Wis., credits Facebook with increasing church attendance.

Texting and Twittering are others, but Facebook may have the most impact.

"There is the potential for Facebook to be a very enriching experience," Rohde says. "It's rewarding for students from years past to find me and to reconnect."

Wood encourages pastors to be on Facebook and Twitter as a way to communicate with people in the congregation, especially youth.

"Those in leadership should try to be on the cutting edge rather than the lagging edge of technology," Wood says.

"This type of communication is here to stay for better and for worse," Lichi says. "People should ask themselves, 'Does what I post, write, read and view enhance God's potential in my life or detract from it?'" **e**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of the *Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.

Silent night Or Holy night?

What will
Christmas
be for more
than 2 million
Americans
incarcerated?

Another lonely time behind bars?

Or an uplifting reminder of Jesus' birth?

Your gift to the Key Bearers ministry will make a difference for many inmates this Christmas.

Just \$1 per week for a year will provide approximately 200 copies of the Pentecostal Evangel or the Spanish-language Evangelio Pentecostal to those who need to know why God's Son was born in a stable more than 2,000 years ago.

When you consider that a Key Bearer-sponsored copy of the Evangel is typically read by at least five prisoners, the potential is enormous.

Please help us reach those who need to hear "good tidings of great joy."

Three easy ways to become a Key Bearer:

- Donate via credit card on the *Evangel's* secured Web site, www.pe.ag.org.
- Call 1-877-840-4800 and mention project 028001-0085928.
- Designate your gift "LFTL Project 028001-0085928" and send it to: Light for the Lost, 1445 N. Boonville Avenue, Springfield, MO 65802.

