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Social Media and Ministry, You Call This a Community?

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Abstract: Some churches are embracing novel technologies to leverage creating community and aiding in the educational process. This study sought to explore the nature of such technological advances. Limiting its scope to the experiences of one suburban church community, this research is a start at creating space for such dialogue.

The relationship between religion and education has reflected a strong bond for a substantial period of the history of the United States. Recently, the academy has examined religious education relative to a larger, more encompassing lexicon of “spirituality.” English and Tisdell (2010) posit there is a significant difference between religion and spirituality. While religion refers to an *organized community of faith* with an official creed and codes of regulatory behavior (determined by those with the most power in these institutions) ... *Spirituality* on the other hand refers to an *individual’s* personal experience of making meaning of the sacred. (p. 287).

Issues of spirituality, while individual and personal in themselves, when addressed in a formal church setting take on the overtones of the religious community. It is in this context of how a religious community facilitates the spiritual learning of its members in community, this research resides. It was through the theoretical frameworks embraced by Argyris and Schon (1978), Senge (1990) and others of error based inquiries by individuals that can lead to organizational learning that this research was focused.

Given the traits of the “Net Generation” or Gen X and Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Hartman, Moskal & Dziuban, 2005) and interaction with Knowles (1984) concept of andragogy; how does the role of technology impact each participant’s need for learning, intersect with his or her own ability to make meaning? It is the application of these concepts that offers a particularly intriguing opportunity for study.

Need and Utility

As a Human Resource practitioner, I have witnessed the power of technology to leverage efficiencies and have embraced appropriate use of such tools. Given the loss of church membership, particularly as it relates to young adults and the traits of the “net generation” as digital natives in churches, it is compelling to investigate the intersection of these factors. The effects of such digital influences may one day be as liberating as those influences experienced within the church with the advent of the printing press.

Drawing from Kaplan & Haenlein’s (2010) definition that social media is a “group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user generated content.” (p.61) this study looked at why a church may choose to use this new medium and its perceived effectiveness by community members.

Methodology

As the research questions center on “how” and “why,” the investigator has little or no control over events and the focus of the research is on contemporary events a case study methodology was indicated (Yin, 2008, p.9). This case study examined the use of social media as it impacts the ministries of one Christian congregation. The congregation studied is a mainline Protestant denomination, of approximately 900 baptized members and average weekly attendance of approximately 225 members.

Suburban Lutheran Church (SLC) is located in an affluent suburban community of a large Midwestern city. The ethnic diversity of the congregation is consistent with the traditional makeup of the denomination. Participants of the study consisted of six members of the congregation not bound by race, gender, cultural identification or any other demographic characteristics. Participants were chosen based on their engagement within the congregation and represented ordained and lay staff as well as lay membership.

A significant body of knowledge exists relative to social media in education (although most is germane to primary, secondary and higher education). Very little research exists that is relative to the utilization of social media in adult educational settings; particularly as it addresses issues of spirituality and community.

A central holding of all Christianity is to spread the teachings of Christ Jesus to all nations. Because of this “great commission” an important element of most churches is securing larger numbers of participants in each congregation and denomination. As such, it is not uncommon for church organizations to utilize a wide variety of methods (including novel use of technology) to attract and retain members.

Beyond the scope of this research but perhaps having an influence on the behaviors of the study participants is the history of the turmoil experienced by Martin Luther, a troubled and guilt ridden monastic Catholic priest who, in 1517 questioned the inequities and behavioral practices of a corrupt Roman Curia and the resulting hegemony of the Catholic Church. As was the custom at the time, in an attempt to debate his understandings, he posted “Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum” (Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences - commonly referred to as the Ninety-Five thesis) on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg Germany (Marty, 2004; Mullett, 2004). This action is often attributed to as the start of the protestant revolution, which resulted in the Catholic Church’s asserting its teaching authority and ultimate excommunication of Martin Luther. Luther’s actions set the stage for the freedom with which some practitioners of protestant religions experience in the challenge of church authority.

Rising out of a background based in protest to church rules, it is not surprising that many of the findings of this study reflect a variation of views from the members of this relatively small yet close knit community. In its simplest form, one of the preliminary interview questions centered on “Has Social/Digital Media changed how this community celebrates its ministry?” Two participants in a quick response to the initial issue responded that it has not, while four responded that it has. This type of dichotomy left me with frustrations of self-doubt and confusion to the nature of this research. Frustrations not unlike some of what Martin Luther most probably encountered.

Themes

Nine themes were identified in the interviews and one sub- theme was also present. In all, 9.5 opportunities are explored.

1.0 Experimentation

Garvin (1998) builds on the work of Senge (1990) but highlights the importance of experimentation to the effectiveness of the learning organization. A strength of SLC is its willingness to try new things. The young pastors are willing to try new activities, programs, preaching and worshiping styles. The pastors self-identified their comfort level relative to social media as “being in the top 25% of all ELCA pastors utilizing social media.” While this may not identify either pastor is on the “leading edge” of all social media activists; relative to their population base (mainline protestant pastors) each of them is in the most active / adaptive quartile. The pastors were also cognizant of the importance of clarity and consistency in the church’s vision. “We need to keep our focus on where our focus should be ... our purpose is to proclaim the Gospel ... not build the biggest network of Facebook friends.”

2.0 Social networks

All participants consistently responded that they considered the use of ANY social media tools to be IN ADDITION to the current face to face tools used to create community in the congregation. A physical presence was important in the creation of community. “It [Corporate Worship] is the heart of our community, it is what we do!” “Everybody comes together for Sunday worship then [we] go off to our individual interest areas.” The basis of the community rests in personal relations initially developed in face to face encounters. Synchronous physical contact is the traditional means of worship. Driscoll & Bresser (2010) identify “Corporate Worship” as an important form of worshiping together in a physical setting. We worship together out of a need.

3.0 Social Media Concerns

The ordained staff carries a unique burden relative to the use of social media. The traditional pastoral care delivery is one of synchronous physical presence with the congregants. In this traditional model, the church, as an institution is fixed and central in the delivery of pastoral care. While the both the congregation and pastors of SLC are supportive of a ministry that extends beyond the building, social media presents a variety of unique challenges for the pastors. The most popular social media platforms are designed as *personal* communication platforms, but when used in a congregational setting create certain *professional* expectation. Likewise, the use of these tools can blur ethical boundary lines.

4.0 Resources

This research identified that one of the critical elements in utilizing social media is the availability and utilization of those resources. In this sense, resources are not the actual social media tools that are utilized to integrate content, but rather the people and procedures that identify how social media gets used in the community context. Social media resources identified in this research can be grouped into three subheadings: Social Media Management, Sustainability and Return on Investment and Direction, Decision-making and Management.

5.0 Communication

It is important to recognize how each person gathers his/ her information. Social media can impact the manner in which information is communicated. The adoption of technology is often slow in a church setting. The use of social media although in a developmental stage at SLC is more advanced than in most similar congregations. Topics explored in this domain included the potential for missing pastoral care needs as social media represents both “push” forms of communication for the originator and “pull” forms of communication for the recipients of the content.

6.0 Teaching and Learning

Investigating the utility and value of social media as a teaching and learning tool uncovered three related issues. First, social media can be used to create powerful content especially when considering personal narratives. Second, while the message is central and consistent the understanding of the power of the tool differs by individual. Third, the use of social media can provide for an immediacy of information and communication.

7.0 Engagement

Most often the metrics of engagement reported by churches deal with weekly attendance at corporate worship or financial support. Unlike the declining national norms of membership, SLC has enjoyed an increase in both baptized and confirmed members for the past five years. Financial support of members has declined in each except the last year of the same period. Neither of these metrics provides a sensitive measure by which to measure how engaged the laity is within a church organization. Study participants uniformly expressed the importance of weekly worship. Hence, a more sensitive measure of general engagement of the members can be found in average weekly attendance. The study participants also identified that the most recognized use of social media in the community is the publication of daily devotions and email blasts to notify large numbers of members of rapid developments.

8.0 Time Shifting and Place Requirements

One of the unique features of social media is its functionality to reduce the limitations of community members being in the same place at the same time to interact. The push / pull of information that is available through this new technology relaxes the constraints that have traditionally prevented some members of a community to engage and enjoy the resources of a given community. The frequency with which elements of this theme appeared throughout the study made this theme particularly compelling for analysis.

9.0 Marginalization

Good research design would expect in cases where there is emerging technology, issues of the availability and adaptability of that new technology to be part of the investigation. Accessibility statistics (Gallup, 2013; Comscore, 2013; Amisco, 2013) demonstrate that, if marginalization is taking place at SLC, it is not due to accessibility to the technology – especially given the affluence of the community in which SLC is sited. As we addressed what social media represented in terms of the study, each participant, in his or her own words indicated what was his / her impression of the use of social media at SLC. As it is incorporated more fully into the daily activities of the congregation the expectation is that it would be “in addition to” the current channels that are in use.

The possibility and problems of marginalization was succinctly addressed by one of the SLC pastors in the commentary “If a pastor focused entirely on providing pastoral care through social media, there is a whole wide swath of folks who are not connected, you know. And that would be the tragedy.” In a separate interview, the other pastor echoed “social media is the tool to build community, to proclaim the Gospel, whatever your organization – in our case to proclaim the Gospel. That’s the tool, not the purpose. And, so, the tool always has to serve the purpose, and if I’m doing it, just because I can, that’s not useful.”

9.5 Tools

This section of themes provided a compendium of social media tools referenced by the study participants. While the most prevalent platforms discussed were Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, Linked-in was conspicuously absent from the discussion space.

Implications

Research scholars walk a fine line between what is relevant and what has already been researched. Nowhere is this challenge more evident than where practices are novel and rapidly evolving. In these cases there is a paucity of literature due to the unprecedented nature of the phenomena. Churches are exploring methods to meet the needs of their communities. Some churches are embracing novel technologies to leverage this activity and aid in the educational process. Limiting its scope to the experiences of one suburban community this research is a start at creating space for such dialogue. This inquiry is novel and benefits not only the organization on which this research is based but other churches that may be considering the adoption of social media tools to facilitate the development of community within their own congregations.

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