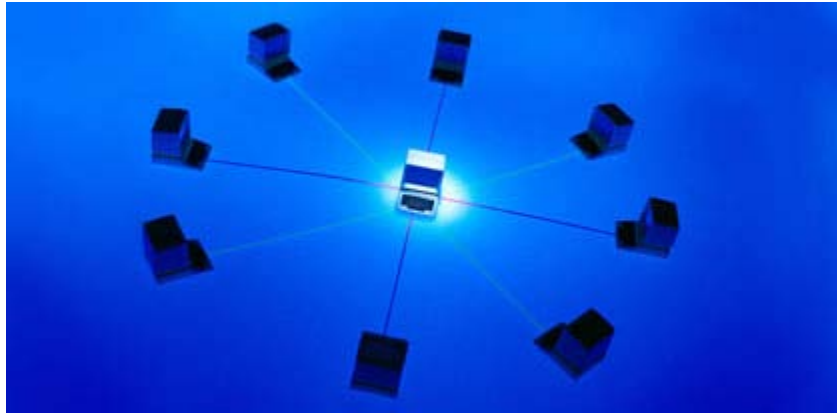


# Web Ministry: Social Networking



If you remember the Faberge Organics shampoo commercial featuring “I told two friends, and they told two friends,” you are not a digital native. “I’m not a what?” you may ask. A “digital native” is someone born in the Internet age, which officially began when the World Wide Web went public in 1989. Those born before that year—who have migrated online—are “digital immigrants.”

In the aforementioned ad, the television screen suddenly divided into a hundred mini-screens of Heather Locklear’s talking heads in stereo. In the “good old days,” we took advantage of word of mouth. However, “word of mouse” is becoming more pervasive in today’s 21<sup>st</sup> century digital age. Through social networking in cyberspace, inviting two friends means connecting with their friends, and the cycle repeats itself. In this first of two articles on using social networking to make connections in cyberspace, we will provide background information and help you to set up your online profile.

## **Jesus and John Wesley networked.**

Some will argue that Jesus was the first to use social networking effectively. He definitely understood the power of word of mouth, and he valued the viral—or infectious—nature of friends and family sharing the good news and bringing others to a life-transforming faith in God. If you remember Luke 10, Jesus even sent people out in pairs to spread the gospel. They told two friends, and so on ... and so on. You get the picture.

John Wesley also used the power of social networks to build the Methodist movement in America through organizing small bands of followers into class meetings and using circuit riders to spread God’s word. Today, we can carry on these traditions in our own culture and context through opportunities in cyberspace with social networking sites.

## **What is social networking?**

Begun as a part of the Web 2.0<sup>[1]</sup> revolution, social networking sites took the Internet by storm just a few years ago when MySpace and Facebook perfected the concept of early pioneers like Classmates and SixDegrees. Those early sites were developed to help students reconnect with classmates and friends who had lost touch with each other over the years. The primary purpose of social networking sites is to build online communities and make connections between people who share common interests. With more than 200 million people in the United States using social networking sites, it is easy to understand “the Internet has become the campfire around which people gather to tell their stories, meet people and form relationships.”<sup>[2]</sup>

## **More than a blog.**

The main difference between social networking sites and blogs is the organic connections that spread like wildfire when you add a friend or become a friend or a member of a social networker’s profile or group. While you can subscribe to others’ blogs, that doesn’t get you much more than a one-to-one relationship. However, like a blog, you can post messages, upload photos and videos, and share links on your social networking profile as well as make comments on others’ profiles and groups. In this way, you can quickly multiply your reach and easily follow your networks with a many-to-many web of connections.

## **A word of caution.**

Be aware that people use social networking sites for different reasons and purposes. Some individuals and groups will present opinions and content you find offensive or inappropriate. You can protect yourself by refusing invitations from people you don’t know and “ignore” or “block” them as well as report your concerns to the networking service. Be sure to read the terms of use and privacy statements to learn your rights and responsibilities when joining a social networking site.

Before you start using a social networking site, get to know what it is like and what goes on there. You can visit one of the sites listed below and search for friends, groups or causes without having to sign up. Once you’re ready, here’s what to do next:

1. Sign up for a free account (e-mail address required).
2. Create your profile and upload a photo or avatar (a representation of yourself or your alter ego). You can complete the basics and add more details later.
3. Decide how public or private you want your profile to be.
4. Start finding friends and inviting them to connect with you.
5. Upload photographs or videos and share links to Web sites or blogs.

6. Post notes or comments to others' profiles.
7. Join groups or causes to expand your personal network and connect with others who share your interests.

### **How do I set up a group?**

It is quick and easy. Here are the basic steps, but remember each social networking site will have a slightly different set-up process:

1. Establish an individual profile on a social networking site.
2. Log into your individual profile and create a new group.
3. Give your group a descriptive, succinct name.
4. Add basic information about the group.
5. Upload an image, graphic or avatar to represent the group.
6. Decide if the group will be open to the public, by invitation only (private) but viewable by others who are not members of the group, or viewable only by those invited to join.
7. Use the features of the group profile, such as forums, videos and photographs to begin sharing information.
8. Locate and invite others on the social networking site to join the group.
9. Enlist the support of group members to serve as moderators, hosts and regular contributors to the social networking group to keep content fresh and focused.
10. Post links on the group profile to the church Web site, e-mail and any other Web presence for your church. Provide contact information and an address for the church so online interaction easily can transition to offline participation.

An alternative to setting up a group on most social networking sites is to use Facebook Pages. With Facebook Pages, your church can have its own professional presence without being created as a group under an individual's profile. People become "fans" of your page and can interact in much the same way as groups. To learn more about Facebook Pages, [visit the Facebook website](#).

Dale Carnegie said, "You can make more friends in two months by becoming really interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you." Although his comments preceded Internet-based social networking, Carnegie was on target. With the contagious nature of social networking in cyberspace and a few well-tested relational strategies, your church can grow its ministry and fulfill its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

### **How can I reach out and draw people in?**

You can find many meaningful and creative ways to use social networking sites to take your church's ministry and mission to cyberspace. Some churches create social networking groups for youth or young adults to stay connected throughout the week or to reach out to other teens and young adults across the World Wide Web. Some churches host social networking groups to attract seekers and visitors, while others focus on nurturing adult members and providing opportunities to strengthen their spiritual lives online. One way to learn how other churches use social networking sites for specific groups is to visit a site like Facebook or MySpace and search for the keywords "United Methodist" under groups. On Facebook alone, more than 500 United Methodist groups reach tens of thousands of people.

### **What is the secret to setting up a social networking group?**

Most social networking sites require an individual profile before allowing you to set up a group profile. It is a good idea to gain the support of your local church leaders and Web ministry team. Likewise, it is a good idea to discuss the purpose of the social networking group, define the intended audiences and determine what information, events and resources you will share. Based upon the decisions you make about the purpose of your church's social networking group and its intended audiences, you should select an appropriate social networking site. For example, if your goal is to strengthen church members' spiritual lives, using a faith-based social networking site like MyChurch is appropriate. A group for young people wanting to reach other young people might be better situated on MySpace.

### **What are the benefits?**

Establishing a group on a social networking site for your local church greatly increases your church's visibility on the Internet. With a social networking group hosted by your church, you can include links to your church's Web site or e-mail address, upload videos of sermons, share upcoming events and enlist others in causes sponsored by your church. The key to a successful social networking group experience hosted by your church is to maintain active interaction among group members. To accomplish this, you must infuse the group with relevant, timely information and moderate discussions to keep them focused, supportive and appropriate. With careful attention and a little time, your church's social networking group can become a growing, vibrant place to developing meaningful connections that transform lives.