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Local religious leaders ask: What would Jesus tweet?

Houses of worship are using Facebook, Twitter to reach out

BY NIRAJ WARIKOO
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

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Religious groups are increasingly trying to harness the power of social media -- from a Pentecostal church in Canton using Facebook to reel in new members to a Catholic priest in Plymouth who uploads podcasts of sermons to an Oak Park rabbi sparking national debates on his blog.

And with its own particular rules and rituals, the world of social media has become, in a way, its own religion.

"It creates a buzz about what's happening without you even trying," said Tami Frailey, 42, director of Twitter and Facebook accounts at Connection Church in Canton.

With the popularity of these sites growing, the U.S. Catholic Church issued guidelines this summer for its leaders and members to keep Jesus in mind when they tweet.

But that can be difficult to practice in the freewheeling world of the Internet. Still, houses of worship are diving into the world of social media to create larger communities that can help spread the faith.

They have a ways to go.

The Vatican -- which oversees more than 1 billion Catholics around the world -- has only about 6,700 followers on Twitter combined for its English- and Spanish-language accounts. Snooki, star of the MTV reality show "Jersey Shore" (and a Catholic), has more than 383,000.

A social network of faith

"Haven't talked in a while ... busy?"

That's what Jesus might tweet if he could, says Frailey. She uses social media for everything from alerting people about an evening lecture to urging people to pray for a member whose loved one has died.

And when she does, she keeps in mind the church's overall purpose: "To bring people closer to Him," she explains.

The use of social media at Connection Church in Canton is mirrored across metro Detroit in churches and other religious centers. The tweets and posts help create excitement for church activities, attracting worshipers who might ordinarily see church as off-putting, Frailey and others say.

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Tami Frailey, 42, of New Boston uses Facebook, Twitter and even old-fashioned e-mail to get the word out for Connection Church in Canton. Last week, she used her phone to tweet in the church's sanctuary. (REGINA H. BOONE/DFP)

A version of this story appears on page 5A of the Sunday, Aug. 15, 2010, print edition of the Detroit Free Press.

RELATED INFORMATION

What would Jesus tweet?

Here's what some local churchgoers said he might write on Twitter, a public microblogging tool that requires all posts to be 140 characters maximum. There's actually a Twitter account already on that topic, @wwjtteet, but it hasn't been active lately.

Tami Frailey, 42, of New Boston

He'd probably invite people over to dinner, to eat with him. A possible tweet:

"Follow me"

Brittany Omilion, 19, of Wayne

He would tweet about just loving people, how you should love people like Christ loves us.

The Rev. Bob Cornwall, 52, pastor at Central Woodward Christian Church in Troy

"Love God, love yr neighbor, btw even love yr enemy, b/c God loves u"

Christie Martin, 35, of Newport

"I love you all."

Rakhi McCormick, 34, of Royal Oak, youth director at Archdiocese of Detroit

"There are people who are afraid to walk in church," Frailey says inside her softly lit office, a wooden cross on the shelf nearby. "But when they see you answer their questions on Facebook, they think, 'OK, they were cool.'"

The effort is seen in other houses of worship, too.

Rabbi Jason Miller of Oak Park has become probably the most tech-savvy Jewish leader in metro Detroit: He has his own blog, 2,500 friends on Facebook and a Twitter account with about 770 followers.

"The fact that I can disseminate my Torah, my Jewish wisdom, to so many people is a modern miracle of sorts," said Miller of Tamarack Camps in Ortonville and Congregation T'chiyah in Oak Park.

And Muslims in metro Detroit are increasingly using Facebook and YouTube to offer worshipers a way to hear the imam's message without visiting a mosque. Imam Mohammed Ali Elahi of the Islamic House of Wisdom in Dearborn Heights says social media is "a good, fast way of sharing information."

Ethical concerns

In many houses of worship, it allows for parishioners to interact more with clergy rather than having one-way communication. And many use it to draw closer as a community by sharing personal information.

But as the use of social media among religious groups increases, so do concerns about how to reconcile it with their values.

Miller says he wrestles often with ethical issues in online activity. For example, Miller argues that during the high holidays -- a time when Jews are called upon to repent and seek forgiveness from those they've wronged in the past year -- it's inappropriate for people to apologize through Facebook or Twitter. And posting on Facebook isn't the best way to convey your condolences to a close friend who has lost a loved one, he says.

Jews have long had religious laws that today have implications for social media. They include rules that prohibit inappropriate slander such as motzi shem ra, which refers to spreading malicious lies that harm a person's name.

Such rules of etiquette also are being hashed out by Catholic dioceses and parishes across the U.S. The pope noted this year that digital communication "can offer priests and all pastoral workers ... greater communion in ways that were unthinkable in the past." It "makes us appreciate ... St. Paul's (call to) preach the gospel."

At the same time, Catholic bishops cautioned that the Internet is no substitute for face-to-face gatherings, and warned about users filled with hate.

"Do not allow those unwilling to dialogue to hold your site and its other members hostage," read guidelines issued this summer by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. They also urge social media users to "practice Christian charity."

In the Archdiocese of Detroit, church leaders are still working out their policies, but are increasingly setting up YouTube sites and Twitter accounts to get out their messages. Last fall, the Archdiocese set up its first Office of Digital Media -- to communicate beyond its newspaper and church bulletins.

"We see forms of social media as ways to engage and evangelize," said Joe Kohn, spokesman for the Archdiocese. "We see (it) as an opportunity to communicate Christ."

Social media certainly is more popular with younger worshipers.

Brittany Omilion, 19, a Wayne resident and member of Connection Church, uses Facebook and Twitter to virally disseminate messages about upcoming youth events. And she also likes to quote Biblical verses that can inspire people at random.

"If I post something encouraging, someone can stumble upon it, and maybe that will shine a little light of Christ in their life," Omilion said. "You never know how someone can be impacted."

Spreading good news can be difficult to do in an arena where vigorous discussions about faith and identity can often spill over into vitriol. But that only compels the Rev. Bob Cornwall of Troy to use it more often.

The author and pastor at Central Woodward Christian Church blogs daily and uses

"U shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. U shall love your neighbor as yourself."

NIRAJ WARIKOO

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Twitter to communicate with his flock and reach a national audience. He started about four years ago after sensing the need for a more moderate Christian voice.

penalty

"I wanted to share a message that was more progressive, more moderate, pluralist and open," Cornwall said. In recent weeks, Cornwall has written in favor of the proposed Muslim community center near Ground Zero in lower Manhattan, criticizing other Christians who rail against Islam.

"There is no place for stereotypes that lead to hate in our communities," Cornwall argued on his blog. It drew a fierce discussion online, with some strongly disagreeing with his post, while others backed him.

Such open discussions are what attract many to the world of social media. Conservative Christians sometimes see the mainstream media as biased against them, so they rely on social media to get their views across.

But regardless of the views, all sides say they try to keep their religious values while online.

When Frailey encounters someone ranting on Facebook, she just ignores it or turns the other cheek.

"We don't feed into that," Frailey said. Or, she will try to be "kind and loving back."

Contact NIRAJ WARIKOO: 313-223-4792, wariwoo@freepress.com or @nwarikoo on Twitter.

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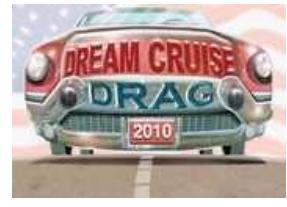
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