"Everything I needed to know about social media, I learned from church work."

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Perhaps I should first introduce myself. I am an Associate Professor of Information Systems in the Carroll School of Management at Boston College. I have been studying social media and social networks since 2002. I have been teaching about it to our students since 2006, using various forms of social media in the classroom. As relevant as my experience in social media to this conference, however, is my experience in church work. I am an ordained United Methodist Clergyman. I earned my Masters of Divinity from Emory University in 1998, and I worked full-time in church work for 12 years before joining academia. This transition may seem an unlikely one, but I actually find many more similarities between social media and my previous church work than one might expect. In fact, I have often noted that I would like to write a paper someday entitled "everything I needed to know about social media, I learned from church work."

Although I teach, research, and consult about social media in contemporary businesses, social media has the potential for a greater impact within the church and other non-profit organizations. The reason for my belief is quite simple. Built relying on modern technologies (e.g. telephone, elevators), modern organizations are largely bureaucratic, relying on very strict command-and-control structures. The church, military, and educational institutions, however, all pre-date the modern organizational form. Pre-modern organizations developed prior to modern technologies and typically invest more power in its agents to exercise the mission of the organization. Since social media technologies provide greater power for individuals to communicate and organize, it will be better suited for organizations whose agents have considerable authority to act, unlike organizations whose employees have to wait for explicit directions from their superiors.

As such, social media can potentially have an extremely influential impact on the church. We should not be surprised at this claim, as technology has always influenced the mission and ministry of the church. The Apostle Paul relied on Roman trade routes to spread the gospel through personal visits and letters. The printing press provided the average person access to the scriptures, facilitating both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Technologies such as radio and television have provided greater reach for evangelists (some good, some not-so-good) to spread the word of the Gospel to a greater number of people that ever before possible. Thus, it should come as no surprise that social media can influence the mission and ministry of the church. Of course, this influence can be for good and for not-so-good, but the choice as to which will ultimately be the case resides largely with us.

Social media technologies are not "magic." They are new types of communication technologies that facilitate the upload and download of information from the Internet. This ability to both upload and download all types of information – text, hypermedia, multimedia – renders the Internet an interactive platform for group action. The author Clay Shirky notes that the key functionality of social media platforms is "ridiculously easy group formation." These groups can form in response to an event (e.g. Arab Spring or Haiti Earthquake), around a particular topic (e.g. people engaging in reflection on lectionary texts), or in response to injustice (e.g. Kony 2012, or the BP Oil Spill).

Based on my teaching, there are a number of common misconceptions about social media technologies. 1) Social media "friends" don't exist in a vacuum. Most online friends are also friends offline or were at one time. 2) What may seem like trivial information sharing (e.g. "what

I had for breakfast") may lead to valuable serendipitous connections. For instance, tweeting about one's meal in a restaurant may lead a friend to discover he or she is close by and can meet up. 3) Social media is not completely different than what has gone before. Many psychological and sociological characteristics translate well into the social media space, although their manifestations might be somewhat different online.   4) Although social media is perhaps over-hyped right now, this is a natural part of the technology adoption cycle. The hype will certainly dissipate, but it does not mean these tools are going away. After all, everyone also said the Internet was a fad in 2001. 5) Organizations cannot just ignore social media. Your stakeholders are using these tools, and will be talking about you whether or not you are a part of the conversation.

There are a number of different social media tools that serve very different purposes. As the Society of Jesus considers whether and how to adopt social media for networking, it is very important to first consider what purpose one hopes to accomplish and then adopt the right tool. Based on my previous work, I have some guidance for how to adopt social media. 1) Use existing tools, do not try to build your own. There are many great tools out there, and the average organization cannot compete with Silicon Valley. 2) Start small, with existing practices. I recommend trying to integrate social media into what you are already doing, rather than try to develop new practices around the tools. 3) Experiment, fail, and refine. You won't get it right the first time. Try new things and reflect on the strengths and weakness of the outcomes. Do not be afraid for something not to work. 4) Cultivate social media disciplines. Effective social media use will not just happen, you need to commit to doing it (writing as well as reading the work of others).   A community can only be built if you and others will commit to it. 5) Build on existing communities and relationships. Social media works best when augmenting existing relationships, not creating new ones.

If you choose to experiment with social media, however, be sure to do so in a mindful way. Social media technologies (as all information technologies) are a double-edged sword. They can both hurt and help, facilitating positive as well as negative information and interactions. Adopters of these technologies need to consider how to become mature users of the technology as individuals and organizations. You should recognize that there will be some aspects of face-to-face networking that you should not replace or augment with social media. Nevertheless, part of critical adoption is learning precisely what those irreplaceable elements are. Simply arguing, "we have always done it this way" or claiming that "there is just something about face-to-face communication that cannot be replaced," without articulating precisely what is irreplaceable, is not sufficient. Recognize what you do not want to give up but also what you might start doing better, faster, differently, more effectively, or to a greater and more diverse community with the tools now available to our world. Social media tools present great opportunities for organizations like the church.