



# Nurturing Lifelong Faith Online

Lynne M. Baab

**T**hree years ago, I was buried deep in a study of congregational websites. I was finishing a PhD in communication, and I had chosen to study the way congregations use their websites to communicate their identities. I looked at hundreds of church websites, enjoying the rich diversity in the congregations represented there.

When I started the study in 2004, blogs had barely appeared on the scene, so I didn't include blogs by ministers or congregations in my research. When I finished my study of websites in 2007, I wished that I had studied blogs as well. In 2007, just three years ago, social networking websites weren't even on my radar screen. At that time, Facebook and other forms of online social networking were used mostly by teenagers and university students, but not by older adults like me. At that time, most leaders of congregations used email frequently, consulted websites occasionally, and got on with the work of ministry.

In the three years since I completed that study of websites, things have changed dramatically. People of all ages are connecting with their friends on Facebook, following celebrities on Twitter and reading diverse opinions on blogs. Because so many people now spend time online making connections in new ways, congregations and other organizations are beginning to figure out how to have an online presence beyond their website.

Websites remain essential communication tools for congregations. Email, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs are now used by congregations to supplement the website and to point people toward it. The various forms of online communication work together to direct people back and forth between them. At their best, all these forms of communication highlight the central priorities of the congregation. And one of those priorities should be lifelong faith formation.

In this article, I want to sketch some of the ways the various forms of online communication can work together to nurture faith.

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# Communication Today

Many people today make a seamless transition between various forms of communication: face-to-face, telephone, cell phone, email, Facebook, Skype, Twitter, websites, blogs, online photo sharing, and other forms of internet connection. Any one person may use only a few of those ways to connect, but some form of electronic of communication is embedded in everyday life for many, many people.

Congregations and Christian leaders are increasingly giving careful thought to strategic use of electronic communication in faith formation. Several of my Facebook friends are ministers of congregations, and I love to watch the ways they use Facebook to post Scriptures, prayers, quotations from Christian books, and links to interesting faith-related articles available online. I have signed up as a member of numerous congregational groups and pages on Facebook and Twitter, just to watch the way congregations are using these new ways of connecting with their members.

Congregations are using Facebook and Twitter to announce congregational events, sermon topics, Scriptures for the Sunday service, the arrival of overseas visitors, birthdays of congregation members, prayer requests, and significant happenings in the wider community. In addition, Facebook and Twitter are often used to post links to new material on the church website or the minister's blog, as well as links to interesting articles on other websites and blogs. Many congregations are using Facebook's internal email to send messages to the people who have signed up as members of the congregation's page or group.

I'll illustrate how this works by imagining a congregation that has just begun to host a neighborhood food bank on its premises. The minister has written a blog post about the foodbank, and photos of the new foodbank have been posted on the church's website. The congregation uses Facebook and Twitter to provide a link to the minister's latest blog post and another link to the photos. The church website also has a link to the blog, and the blog post has a link to the photos on the website. An email is sent using traditional email as well as Facebook email to say that the photos of the foodbank have been posted on the website, and that the minister's new blog post this week focuses on the foodbank. The email provides a link to the photos and to the blog.

The next week the minister writes another blog post about the foodbank, this time reflecting on generosity as a fundamental Christian virtue. The minister has found two wonderful articles online about the way acts of generosity enable Christians to grow into the likeness of Christ. The blog post provides links to the two articles. Posts on Facebook and Twitter provide links to the articles as well, encouraging the members of the congregation to read the articles and reflect on the role of generosity in their own lives.

In the next few weeks, the minister also preaches a sermon about generosity and writes an article for the printed church newsletter about generosity. The traditional means of church communication—such as sermons and newsletters—are not neglected but they are amplified through online communication. The sermon is posted on the website (either in written or audio form), and the article is posted on the website as well. Links to the sermon and article might be sent out through Twitter and Facebook as well.

Notice two things about the scenario I have just sketched. First, the minister and the people in charge of congregational communication understand that a congregational event—the opening of a foodbank—is also teaching moment. Everything a congregation does has the potential to shape the spiritual development of congregation members. Often this is forgotten, and the events are viewed as an end in themselves. Feeding people in need is a good thing, and in that sense it could be viewed as an end in itself. However, that would be a waste of a good opportunity to reflect on the nature of generosity in the life of faith. Other topics that could be stressed in connection with this event include God's call to care for the poor, God's invitation to engage in acts of social justice, or the connection between evangelism and acts of mercy. Leaders of congregations must always remember that congregation members usually need to have events interpreted; the significance of everyday acts of obedience to God in the larger scheme of faith formation needs to be explained.

Secondly, notice the way that online communication these days is interwoven and interconnected. Increasingly, Twitter and Facebook are being used to post links to other information: blog posts, helpful articles, and new information on organizational websites. Increasingly people are realizing it's not enough to post new photos or announcements on websites. People need to be

alerted to the fact that new material has been added to the website.

In this article, I want to give two more extended examples of the way internet connections can complement traditional means of communication in faith formation in congregations. My first example will focus on fasting. Many Christians are rediscovering the joy of engaging with spiritual disciplines, which are practices that help us draw near to God and which make space for God in the midst of busy lives. More congregations are encouraging their members to engage in spiritual disciplines as individuals and in community. Communal spiritual disciplines can involve people of all ages, and having a significant internet component can encourage younger people to participate. Fasting is just one example, an example that works well to illustrate the multiple means of communication that can be used to nurture a spiritual practice that usually bears much fruit.

## Fasting & Online Connections

Fasting was an accepted and common practice for most of Christian history, but it fell out of favor in Western countries for most of the twentieth century. The resurgence of interest in fasting began with Richard Foster's 1988 book, *Celebration of Discipline*, which has a chapter devoted to fasting. Many Christians have become motivated to give it a try. Another factor that has contributed to the rise in interest in fasting is exposure to Christians in Asia, Africa and Latin America where fasting is an everyday practice in congregations. In addition, Christians in Western countries have experienced a dawning realization that giving into every desire may not be the best thing for human beings to do.

Introducing the concept of fasting in a congregation requires a lot of education. What exactly is fasting? Why fast? What is the biblical basis for fasting? What are the benefits of fasting? How can fasting be done safely?

About two dozen incidents in the Bible recount stories of fasting, and several passages describe the significance of fasting (Isaiah 58, Joel 2:12-13, Matthew 6:16-18, Mark 2:18-20). People who fast report many of the same themes that occur in the biblical accounts. Fasting helps them draw near to God in prayer, and fasting helps them experience a purity of heart that centers on Jesus.

Christians today are fasting in amazingly creative ways. Some Christians fast from food, others fast from coffee, shopping, internet use, television, and other components of everyday life. Forms of fasting from food vary as well. Some Christians fast from all food and drink only juice or water, and some fast from certain categories of food, such as sweets or meat. A person who has had an eating disorder should never fast from food in any form, so the non-food options for fasting need to be promoted and encouraged. Children can fast in a limited way from food, such as giving up sweets or some other favorite food, but they must never be encouraged to abstain from all food.

A definition of fasting for our time needs to take into account these varieties of ways of engaging in a fast. Here's a definition I like: *Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community or nation* (Baab, 16).

The information sketched briefly in the previous paragraphs is the kind of information people in a congregation need to know in order to consider the way fasting might contribute to their lives as individuals. Much of the same information is necessary for encouraging a congregation to engage in forms of communal fasting. How can that information best be disseminated?

For about a decade, a church in the Midwest of the United States has encouraged the whole congregation to participate in a month-long fast every fall. Each week a different kind of fasting is encouraged. Testimonies about the benefits of fasting are presented during the worship services leading up to the fast, and usually one or two sermons on fasting are delivered. Basic information about fasting is available in booklet form. Specific prayer requests for each week are distributed in the weekly printed bulletin.

Let's imagine another congregation wants to encourage a week of fasting by all members. The minister has laid the groundwork by preaching on fasting, and a few people who fast regularly have given testimonies in worship. The congregational leaders want to give people the practical information they need about fasting, so they're considering how to make that information available.

The first and most obvious option is the church website. A statement on the home page could present the notion of a congregational fast, with a prominent link. That link could take the viewer to pages with basic information about fasting, some

biblical background, and suggestions for ways of fasting today. Testimonies from people who have fasted, explaining the ways fasting helped them draw near to God, could be written specifically for the website or could be transcribed from oral testimonies given during the worship service. Prayer requests for the week of fasting could be posted on the website.

Many, many resources on every topic imaginable are available online these days. One of the increasingly significant responsibilities of congregational leaders will be to find appropriate and helpful resources and provide those links to members of the congregation. Links to helpful articles about fasting should be included with information about fasting on the church's website.

A church's website is of little use if no one visits it, so encouraging visits to the website is essential. A description of the information about fasting on the website can be placed in the printed bulletin. A Twitter post could give the link to the information about fasting on the church's website, and additional Twitter posts could give reminders of the date of the congregational fast as it approaches. Facebook posts by congregational leaders could provide links and dates as well. Emails from within Facebook could be sent to the members of the congregation's Facebook page or group. Email reminders—sent from within Facebook and sent using traditional email—could include the fast dates, the prayer requests, and a link to the information on the website. If the minister or other congregational leaders have a blog, a blog post about fasting can also provide links to the information on the website.

After the fast is over, a few testimonies about the benefits of the fast could be placed on the website. Again, links to those testimonies could be sent out using Twitter, Facebook status updates, Facebook email, and traditional email. Links can also be listed in the printed Sunday bulletin.

Printing the information about fasting on paper may be necessary for people who are not online. The presence of the links to other online sources of information will be part of what motivates people to look at the church website rather than pick up a printed booklet. Information about prayer requests can be updated so much more quickly online as well.

Any spiritual practice can be encouraged in a congregation in a similar way: sabbath observance, contemplative prayer, intercessory prayer,

journaling, various kinds of personal Bible study, and other spiritual disciplines as well. Websites are wonderful places to provide extended information about a topic, including the biblical basis, guidelines for practice, testimonies about the effectiveness of the practice, and links to online resources.

Increasingly, people expect to see links to the information provided to them by email, Twitter, Facebook, or on blogs.

Congregation members need help understanding the significance of what they are encouraged to do in the life of faith. Nudging congregation members to adopt spiritual practices is a good thing. However, it is even better to provide help interpreting the significance of the things they do. Sermons, blog posts and personal testimonies in worship services or posted on websites can be good avenues for helping people understand the significance of their practices.

## Overwhelmed by Communication Challenges

Many ministers and congregational leaders feel overwhelmed by the numerous communication options that need to be considered today. Who has time, they wonder, to search online for resources, to continually post things on Twitter and Facebook and to keep up a blog? Very few people do, and that's where this kind of communication needs to be a team effort.

Every congregation will have a few people who love the online environment and enjoy spending hours on the internet. Those people can be recruited to set up a Twitter account and a Facebook group or page for the congregation. When something new is posted on the church website, these individuals may be willing to receive a brief notice by email so they can post a link on Twitter and Facebook.

For ministers and congregational leaders who are unfamiliar with Facebook or Twitter, ask someone to show you how they work. They have similarities, but each offers something different. Two years ago, I knew nothing about either one. I got some younger people to describe to me how they use them. I assimilated that information, then I got some more young people to show me how they worked. I then forced myself to sign up for both of them so I could learn about them. To my total surprise, I enjoy Facebook a lot and frequently use it

to connect with my friends. And I have been increasingly impressed with the strategic use of both Facebook and Twitter by congregations and by Christian leaders.

People who love to be online can also be asked to research topics that are relevant for the congregation's priorities and to pass on to the minister or other leaders links to articles. Those articles can be evaluated, and if appropriate, links to those articles can be posted on the congregational website, the minister's blog, and Facebook and Twitter.

Someone—the church secretary or a person who enjoys online communication—needs to be charged with the task of keeping up an email list of everyone who wants to be on it. Emails shouldn't be sent to everyone in the congregation more than once or twice a week, but those emails can be strategic indeed, pointing members to information on the website and highlighting issues and events.

All of this presupposes that the congregation has a website, an increasingly strategic tool for congregational communication. One of my sons, who is in his late twenties, calls websites "our new front door," and he says most people in his generation would never consider visiting a place they haven't read about online. Money spent on website design and maintenance is well spent.

Blogs are free, and I believe every minister should consider having a blog. Posting once a week is enough, and posts should be brief (200-300 words). A post might be a short review of a book, a link to an article, a thought that has come to mind during the preparation of a sermon, a story of something significant that happened, an alert about an upcoming event. Good blog posts are informal and conversational, an excellent opportunity for a minister to engage personally with significant topics and express his or her priorities to the congregation.

Blogs can also be used by ministries within a congregation. For example, a children's ministries program could set up a blog with a handful of contributors who might post brief biographies of new volunteers, information about upcoming lessons, and links to articles about ministry to children.

Because of the many communication options that are available now, ministers and church leaders will necessarily need to spend more time thinking about communication strategies. Communication, however, is never an end in itself. Communication always involves a focus on what can be

accomplished through it. I'd like to encourage an attitude in congregations that focuses first and foremost on the life-long spiritual development of the members of that community. As a part of the working out of that focus, leaders can consider the question of how best to express information and tell stories about that significant focal topic.

The best communication in our time will involve an awareness of the interconnectedness of the various forms of interaction. The examples above of the new foodbank and the congregational fast illustrate those connections. In addition, the best communication in our time will take into account the challenging fact that most individuals will use only some of the available ways to communicate, not all of them, so congregational leaders need to be thinking of multiple ways to get information out. One more illustration, a mission trip, will provide some additional options.

## A Mission Trip & Online Connections

Sandra just returned from Honduras, where she worked on a Habitat for Humanity house for a week with a group from her church. When she returned, she wrote up a summary of her week-long experience and sent it to her friends by email. The experience was deeply transformative for her. God's daily help with the physical labor in hot weather, the companionship with the others from her church, and the tender connections with Honduran people all worked together to give her a heightened sense of God's goodness and God's presence with her. She brought something of that awareness of God back with her when she came home, and her letter expressed her awe at the way God had blessed the trip and the participants.

More congregations are engaging in short term mission trips to locations within and outside their own countries. Many participants find mission trips to be significant learning experiences. Learning can be enhanced by intentional actions before, during and after the trips, and online communication can play a significant part in all those three stages.

The first stage of a mission trip is recruitment. Often a handful of people within the congregation are motivated to make the trip happen, and they dive into recruitment, trying to get people to sign up for the trip. Recruitment can be an excellent time to

engage in transformative education for the wider congregation as well. That education might focus on the physical or spiritual needs of people in the location of the mission trip, the activities of the churches in that place or the way that risk functions in the life of faith. Testimonies from previous trips, which are great recruiting tools, are also opportunities to encourage the congregation to reflect more deeply on the way God works in other parts of the world.

Intentional effort during the recruiting phase can meld recruiting and education. As congregation members learn more, they can be encouraged to pray and give financially, even if they can't come along on the trip.

Online components during the recruiting phase might include information and testimonies about the trip, as well as the educational components, on the church website. A minister's blog, or the blog of the church's mission committee, could highlight the spiritual significance of the trip. Links to that information could be sent out by email and posted on Facebook and Twitter.

As the team assembles, training of the team before the trip is another opportunity to nurture spiritual growth. Links to online articles about the destination for the trip can be provided to the whole congregation on the website, with special encouragement to the team members to read the articles. Prayer together before the trip builds unity and trust in God. Fund raising for the trip and recruitment of prayer partners can be spiritually transformative activities for the team members, and they need encouragement to view them that way.

A mission trip team might want to consider using a wiki as a part of their preparation. A wiki is a website where numerous people can work collaboratively on a document, each one making changes from their own home, on their own time. Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, is the most famous wiki, but a wiki can also be a simple one-page document. If the team has a task to do on their trip that will involve assembling and packing materials of any kind, one person might use a wiki to post a preliminary list of things to take on the trip. Others can log on and sign up for the things they can bring, as well as add things to the list. A wiki is much less cumbersome than a flurry of emails circulating around the group. A wiki makes tracking the progress on the list much easier than emails.

On the trip itself, team members may want to use the internet to upload photos so people at home can see what's happening. Options for places to upload the photos include photo-sharing websites like Flickr or social networking websites like Facebook. The website administrator might be willing to post photos on the church website, but that process is slower than the immediate availability of photos on Flickr and Facebook. For the website, a person back home has to find the time to upload photos from an email, while photo-sharing websites and social networking websites enable viewers to see the photos as soon as they are posted.

A blog can be another good way to show photos and tell stories about the trip while it is happening. The team on the trip can set up a blog before leaving home, and prayer requests can be posted before and during the trip, along with stories and comments about the trip. Links to the blog can be posted on Facebook, Twitter and on the church website.

After the trip, the whole congregation that has participated in the trip vicariously, by looking at photos and reading blog posts about the trip, needs further encouragement to continue learning from the trip. And the team members also need encouragement for further reflection as well. This can be done through testimonies in worship, which may be transcribed or recorded and put on the church website. A longer debriefing time by the team members, with an invitation to their family and friends as well as the wider congregation, can be held, with online invitations to that gathering.

A wiki could also be used for debriefing after the trip. "What we did" and "what we learned" could be two topics for a document that the team members work on collaboratively on the wiki. After the document is finished, it could be put on the church website for the congregation to read.

Mission trips by individuals and groups within a congregation can be an excellent opportunity for the whole congregation to engage with broader issues related to justice and evangelism. Intentional action before, during and after the trip make broader learning possible. The congregational website, blogs, wikis, and photo-sharing websites enrich the experience for everyone.

## A Few Implications

An effective church website requires careful design and time, as well as money. Website hosting costs money, and good website design and upkeep can also involve costs. Blogs, wikis, photo-sharing and social networking websites are free. It may be tempting to believe that a website can be dispensed with in the light of all these other free online tools.

At this time, nothing can replace a church website as a place for presenting comprehensive information about who a congregation is and what it values. Blogs, Facebook and Twitter posts, as well as emails, can highlight current issues and events and provide snippets of interesting information, but the pattern of posting makes a difference: information is posted or sent, then disappears behind later posts. Websites are like anchors, holding information in place, while the other forms of communication have a more ephemeral quality to them because previous posts are not easily visible. They can send people to the website for deeper material that is posted there. Websites, at their best, provide a systematic, well-organized presentation of the congregation's priorities and values.

All events and congregational activities have the potential to be learning experiences that contribute to the faith development of congregation members of all ages. Wise use of traditional means of communication—such as sermons, testimonies, newsletters and bulletins—accompanied by careful

use of electronic means of communication—such as websites, blogs, social networking, and wikis—will enable a rich focus on lifelong faith development.

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### Free Blog Websites

[www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)

[www.vox.com](http://www.vox.com)

[www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)

### Free Wiki Websites

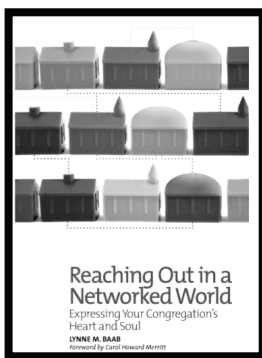
[www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com)

[www.pbwiki.com](http://www.pbwiki.com),

[www.wetpaint.com](http://www.wetpaint.com)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

Twitter: [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)



## Reaching Out in A Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul

Lynne Baab (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008) [\$18]

In *Reaching Out in a Networked World*, Lynne Baab examines technologies such as websites, blogs, online communities, and desktop publishing. She demonstrates how a congregation can evaluate these tools and appropriately use them to communicate its heart and soul, to convey its identity and values both within and outside the congregation. Baab urges congregation leaders to reflect on the way they communicate. The recent explosion in communication technologies offers many new ways to present values and identity. Baab seeks to help leaders use these new technologies with more precision, flair, and consistency. When congregations are intentional about communicating who they are and what they value, people in the wider community can get a clear and coherent picture of the congregation and its mission. Newcomers and visitors are more likely to see why faith commitments matter and why and how they might become involved in this congregation, while current members and leaders will greatly benefit from having a unified vision of the congregation's heart and soul.