

# Shalom!

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## Using Social Media Effectively

**WHEN FAX MACHINES** first came out, I remember wondering why anyone would need one. What documents could possibly be so important that they had to be sent and received immediately? Now my question is laughable as I get upset when people don't respond to my emails quickly. Fifty years ago, my husband and I began our courtship by letters across the Atlantic Ocean. For one and a half years, we wrote longhand letters to each other on those iconic blue aerogrammes. No phone calls, no emails, no texts, no What's App, no Facebook or Twitter—just handwritten letters. I've often wondered how our relationship would have been different if we had been able to email or call each other.

On the one hand, I sometimes feel like I was dragged kicking and screaming into the world of electronic communications. I've always been a print person. I still prefer reading actual paper books and magazines. Over the years, I've debated with various people that this publication is worth continuing to print. On the other hand, I fully understand that we are living in a different world: I have a Facebook page and my own blog, I rely on email and text messages, and I appreciate that the internet has exponentially increased our ability to communicate quickly, effectively, and to more people.

Yet there is a downside, as we are discovering in these days of extreme polarization and partisanship. Sometimes, as I scroll through my Facebook feed, I despair—not because of the range of information that is available there, but more because of the

mean-spiritedness and lack of attention to truth and facts that seem to characterize so many posts. I stay on Facebook for several reasons: to connect with others, to enlarge my "bubble," to express myself and promote causes I believe in, to stay abreast of a wide range of views. When I'm not sharing photos of my wonderful grandchildren or the beautiful places we visit, my challenge as I communicate on Facebook and in my blog is to model the civility I expect in others while also finding ways to speak forthrightly about things that are important to me.

The contributors to this edition of *Shalom!* represent national organizations, specific congregations, and themselves, and share their principles for communicating via social media and other electronic forms of communication. Whether you manage social media for an organization or a church, or whether you just manage your own participation in social media, I hope that this conversation about how to use (or not to use, as one writer has chosen) social media effectively will be helpful.

When I see what feels to me like mean-spiritedness in some of my Christian friends on Facebook, or am tempted to retort with my own mean-spiritedness, I try to remember what Paul said: "[S]peak the truth. . . Let no evil talk come out of your mouths [or fingers], but only what is useful for building others up . . . and [use] words that give grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:25-29). Now that's a challenge!

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

### THIS ISSUE OF SHALOM!

<i>Jesus and Social Media</i>	2
<i>Principles for Social Media Use</i>	3
<i>Communicating Digitally</i>	5
<i>A Communications Vision</i>	6
<b>MCC</b> <i>Social Media That Connects</i>	7
<b>MIDNIGHT MUSINGS</b> <i>Opting Out of Social Media</i>	8
<i>Social Media and Church Planting</i>	9
<i>Being Faithful and Effective</i>	10
<i>Avoiding Social Media Angst</i>	12

# Jesus and Social Media

By Perry Engle

**WORDS MATTER.** AT least that's what the Bible tells us. For that reason, social media is an ideal vehicle to make Jesus known.

Jesus said, "Out of a person's heart come the words that they speak." That's why in Proverbs we are told to "Above all else guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Prov. 4:23). Paul expressed it this way: "Whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17).

As Christians, every word we speak and write is to be for Jesus and to reflect the Jesus we claim to follow. Our primary purpose in all discourse should be to bear witness for Christ. More than anything else, we should

long to give evidence of who Jesus is in our lives. Our greatest desire should be for people to hear Jesus, experience Jesus, and come to know Jesus.

The problem is that social media—Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and their spawn—are most often used to make ourselves known, rather than Jesus.

The genius of social media (both positive and negative) is that we are affirmed in what we say and post through a vast array of hearts and smiles, likes and thumbs-ups. Social media provides us with a simple and immediate medium to gain popularity, notoriety and fame—all those things we hope we would have outgrown in middle school. It reinforces to us that what we think and say really matters—giving us instant gratification for the part of us that longs to be noticed and valued.

Yes, we matter. We are of eternal value to God. And we certainly want to matter to others. But most importantly, we matter not because of our opinions or the articles or photos we post, but because of what Jesus has done for us, and who he is in our lives. Here are four questions I like to ask myself before posting on social media:

**Do my words reflect the heart of Jesus?** That is, do they reflect the gentle and humble heart of the one who provides care and rest for our souls (Matt. 11:29)? The Apostle Paul seems to summarize Christ's heart most perfectly when he exhorts the Philippians: "[W]hatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). Those things which we internalize will ultimately come forth in our speech and self-expression. When they do, our words should reflect the heart of Christ.

**Do my words proclaim the teachings of Jesus?** Maybe it's because I am a preacher, but I feel that social media posts are wonderful opportunities to educate a largely biblically

illiterate culture on the ethics and teachings of Christ. I would suggest that our posts be generously sprinkled with phrases like: "Jesus said . . .," "Jesus taught . . .," and "Jesus emphasized . . ." What did Jesus say about the use of violence? What did he teach about how we should treat those on the margins? What was his take on us judging other people? How did he instruct us to treat our enemies? The problem isn't that Jesus' teaching isn't clear; on the contrary, it is extremely straightforward and counter-cultural. The real problem is that we don't take Jesus at his word, don't take him seriously, and don't proclaim his teachings when given the opportunity. On a regular basis, social media provides us with a wonderfully open forum to show that we know Jesus, and desire to make him known to the world.

**Do my words reinforce the priorities of Jesus?** Jesus was not primarily concerned with political change. He didn't run for office, form a militia, or debate social structures. Instead, he gathered a core group (his disciples) and planted a church (Matt. 16:18). When confronted by Pilate, the Roman governor of the day, and asked if he was a political leader, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36). Jesus' priorities reflected allegiance to a higher set of values—a heavenly set of values—and he would not allow himself to be dragged into the arguments of the day. On the contrary, Jesus was overwhelmingly concerned with heart-change, repentance, and with people taking up their crosses and following him (Matt. 16:24). We would do well to reflect those same priorities as well in our online conversations.

**Finally, do my words glorify Jesus or glorify myself?** If the answer to this question is ever in doubt, I try to do myself and everyone a big favor and have the discipline to say nothing at all. I'm not always very good at this,



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but I certainly don't want to get too far away from the advice of Jesus' brother, James, who said that we should be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. . . ." (James 1:19). Truth be told, far too many of my posts—or at least, those I am tempted to post—are most often about me proving that I am smarter, wittier, and more sophisticated than my other online "friends." So when I find myself wanting to present a perfectly curated life that shows how great I am, how great my family is, and how unbelievably

tasty my breakfast is, I need to back up and consider how I might instead offer a humble admission of how great God is in my life, and how grateful I am for being able to live in his grace.

Like any other technology, social media has great potential for good and for evil. And I'm sure that before too very long, this medium of communication will be replaced with something else. Until then, let's determine to use social media to make Jesus known. When we post an observation, an

opinion, or a photo of that perfect cup of coffee with the Eiffel Tower in the background, let's make sure that it is Jesus who is getting the credit, and not us.

Because words matter. They matter a lot. It's all the more reason to make sure we are using them and all forms of self-expression to make known the One who matters the most.

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## Principles for Social Media Use

by Steve Schwartz

**THE DAWN OF** social media has had an interesting effect on our relationships. On a positive note, we can communicate more and learn from the differing perspectives of our family and friends. On a negative note, we can communicate more and learn that our family and friends have differing perspectives.

Writing about politics on social media is fraught with danger. In one sense, it's an ideal medium to spread information and rally people to action. But it's often packed with emotion, and we lose the nuance, tone of voice, and back and forth of a face-to-face conversation. How we can discuss issues vital to our communities, our neighbors and our nation in ways that are constructive? Here are some principles that have been helpful to me.

### Value relationships over being right

When I was younger and had a strong opinion, it was important that I take a stand for what I felt was right. This is noble in some sense, but I learned the hard way that maintaining relationships is often more important than being right. There are instances of injustice or evil where we may need to clearly challenge or confront wrong-headedness. But often it is vital to state our opinion graciously, with nuance, with humility. Whenever I write something political, I try to think of one to three dear friends who I think might have a differing perspective. Is what I'm writing fair to them? Am I avoiding log-

ical fallacies? Am I painting with too broad a brush? Have I written it in a way that invites conversation? Writer and religion professor David Dark suggests we "leave open a door for anyone wanting to walk through it: the possibility of further exchanges between morally serious adults who value conversation over accusation." How can we learn to love our enemies if we can't even love our friends who vote differently than us?

### Value diversity of people and perspectives

As Christians, we are called to welcome the stranger and foreigner, and to show them hospitality. Embracing those who are different than us, even politically different, can enrich our lives. Parker Palmer writes, "Hospitality rightly understood is premised on the notion that the stranger has much to teach us. It actively invites 'otherness' into our lives to make them more expansive, including forms of otherness that seem utterly alien to us." We can stand by our principles while being civil with those with whom we disagree. And we mature in our principles when we are willing to learn from others' experiences, or learn some situations are not as simple as we once thought. It is easy to lob opinions on border policy, for example, from the comfort of our living room.

### Avoid inflammatory rhetoric

This should be such a basic principle that it need not be listed here, but these days we see offensive rhetoric daily from politicians,

pundits, preachers, and even our pals. If you include the word "libtard" or "rethuglican" in your political statement, or some similar broad-brush degradation of liberals or progressives or conservatives or Democrats or Republicans, I will immediately label you as a partisan person incapable of having an engaging conversation. My least favorite political slur of recent years is RINO, meaning Republican in Name Only. This slur is often directed at Republicans who have occasionally worked across the aisle to get something done. Due to their willingness to compromise, purists suggest they should be thrown out of the party, and they often are. Party diehards demand more purists in each of the two major parties, then complain that politicians are divided and unwilling to work together. We reap what we sow.

### Don't watch cable news

I have a beef with cable news. I try to avoid it at all costs, but seem to get stuck watching it in public waiting rooms. My biggest pet peeve is the condescending tone of a host or panel member saying something to the effect of, "well, I just don't understand how someone could be opposed to such-and-such policy and say they still love America." To me, this is just about the most anti-American, unpatriotic statement someone can make. How can dissenting opinions on everyday matters be un-American? Cable news is flawed at the core because the news organizations must fill 24 hours of screen

time with “news” and opinion each day. So a minor issue gets hashed and rehashed all day long. A comment from a politician gets played and replayed ad nauseum. News is best served like a simple meal: once or twice a day to give us the basics. But cable news is a 24-hour all-you-can-eat-buffet that leaves us bloated, magnifying and manufacturing drama, and belittling those who think differently. It deadens our sensitivities to when there are actual corrupt politicians or policies because the drama just seems like more of the same back and forth bickering. Don’t be a news glutton. Limit your daily intake, and read from a variety of sources to hear differing perspectives.

### Stop . . . and think before you react

I’ve learned to take a deep breath, to pause before I react in anger or frustration, to take time to consider the other principles on this list. Am I posting something I will later regret? Am I slamming people with a different perspective? Do I have all the facts? Will I harm a relationship over something trivial?

### Stop . . . and seek the truth

I’ve been sniffing out fake news for years before fake news was called fake news. I learned the hard way in the early days of the internet, after being duped myself. The willingness of many Christians to repeatedly pass along articles that slander public leaders if it fits their opinion of that leader still amazes me. I confronted a pastor one time for posting a damning quote from a politician which was fabricated. It was easily debunked. When I brought the truth to light, instead of apologizing, correcting the record, and being a bit embarrassed as I would be, he responded, “well, he could have said it because that is what he believes.” This politician was a member of this pastor’s very denomination, yet the pastor was willing to bear false witness against his brother because it fit a narrative he wanted to believe. Sites like Snopes.com, Factcheck.org, and Politifact.com can be used to research the veracity of stories.

### Stop . . . and seek first the kingdom

As Anabaptists, we understand we are citizens of the kingdom of God first and foremost. Our ancestors were persecuted by the

government over theological differences. Therefore, we believe in the separation of church and state as protection for both the church and state. Issues related to our local or national government, national borders, and politics are of secondary importance to our allegiance to God’s kingdom. We are called to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as a ourselves; to care for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner in our land; to clothe the naked and feed the hungry; to seek first the kingdom of God. These priorities laid out in God’s word trump party platforms, governing documents, and politician’s edicts. Of course, we wrestle with the realities of what this looks like in specific situations, and we seek to be a voice of influence for just, humane, and righteous policies and actions. But we must be guided by kingdom principles, not party or politician.

### Sometimes simply STOP . . .

I’ve learned to say less than I’m tempted to say on social media regarding politics. I see people who post or share daily for or against specific candidates or parties. I find I begin to mentally overlook these posts especially as a good portion are nit-picky, highlighting even very minor missteps of their chosen opposition. Those who choose their opportunities to speak more carefully tend to have a greater impact when they do speak. David Dark writes, “The heat of opinion is always with us, but we can also delay our judgment, decline to react and, if the context requires it, refuse to voice an opinion.”

But . . .

There are times we must speak out. We must call our political leaders to righteousness, truth telling, integrity, and justice. Evangelical ethicist Dr. David Gushee writes:

When politicians become seducers to wrongdoing, the most important civic virtues are a clear, immovable sense of right and wrong, and the courage to stand up publicly for what is right. It is precisely this immovable moral clarity and courage that political seducers — and their propagandists — intentionally seek to weaken. Through appeals to patriotism, partisan loyalty, and the purported evils of the enemy, political seducers seek to erase previously clear

moral and political norms. Right becomes wrong, wrong becomes right, because the Leader says so.

So in closing, a prayer:

*God grant me the serenity to refrain from mouthing off at every impulse on social media, the courage to speak up for righteousness and truth when called, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

. . . and a reminder: I’ve quoted two Davids in this article already; here is a third to remind us our help does not come from a political leader or party or policy:

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 121:1-2).*

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## Editor’s Notes

**2019 subscription renewals:** Thank you to all who have responded generously to the 2019 subscription letter with your renewal and additional contributions. If you haven’t yet renewed your subscription for 2019, please do so as soon as possible. Send your check, payable to Brethren in Christ Church U. S., to the editor (address on page 2). You can also renew or contribute online at [bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom](http://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom).

**Upcoming topics:** The topic for the fall edition will be end-of-life and aging issues. Topics under consideration for 2020 include economic justice, living peacefully in an age of outrage, and creation care. The editor always welcomes your ideas and offers to write.



# Communicating Digitally in Love

By Rod White

## COMMUNICATE DIGITALLY

**BECAUSE** you love people, not because it is effective.

Asking whether “social media and electronic communication” are “effective” is, of course, like asking whether any communication is effective. The answer is: “It is not as effective as I want it to be!” If communication were effective, my toddler would hear me telling her to put her shoes where they belong. If I could perfect communication, someone would remember the sermon I just spent a couple of days producing. So no, digital communication is no more effective than all the other means we use. People understand us poorly face-to-face, on the phone, or on Facebook. And too many of us feel strangely alone when the family is gathered for a holiday and we still don’t understand why our brother said that hurtful thing and why it bothers us so much.

The incarnation of God in Jesus demonstrates how hard it is to connect with humans. They are always looking for love, but they don’t always take it, even when you have made a video and shared it directly on their page. Digital communication amplifies all the joys and troubles of being human. Since it is a daily tsunami pounding on whatever dike you have wisely constructed, we have to be careful not to conform to its worst character traits. But like Jesus daring to get next to us and woo us into eternity, I prefer to amplify the joys and possibilities of the not-so-new-now media. Let’s use it to love all those humans decked out in ear buds.

Circle of Hope has it all and does it all. Our communications manager spends a lot of his time managing it all. He spins plates. We see our media as targeting concentric rings of our constituency and moving them from remote to connected. We accept virtual on the way to face-to-face. Our goal is “street to seat.” But we accept that we have a nationwide constituency and we will never see some of our online friends in person. We hope those ghosts become solid over time.

This year, we grew more adept at harvesting new connections from the outer rings,

from our media and public events. Yes, we even put a pop-up sign-in on our website: [circleofhope.net](http://circleofhope.net) (about a 1000 hits a week). We set a goal for how many connections to generate (we’ve made about 500 so far this year). Then we started producing ways to deepen our new connections through various forms of media. Once a week we send a virtual mailer to a growing list of people who aren’t connected to us yet via whatever online platform links us to them. Each one highlights one of the attributes of our church. Once a month we send a physical or email mailer to people who are not regular attenders if we have a U. S. mail or email address.

We are consciously moving people from Instagram to in the room. A form of it appears on Facebook (@CircleofHopePhillyRegion), Instagram (@circleofhopenet) and Twitter (@CircleOfHopeNet). We are often shocked at its reach. Last week a new friend who is a mail courier said he found us after he took a picture of one our “intriguing” cards he was delivering on his route! Social media is not as effective in making connections as we would like. But we have learned that most of our face-to-face connections check us out on our website or other media before they come to a meeting. So we use it sincerely.

The inner rings of the constituency have forms of media interaction that take more commitment. We like listservs. Our covenant members have one, as does our Leadership Team, our pastors, and each of our congregations. They are all open to whatever anyone brings to them. The rules are applied in reaction; the lists are not moderated, just pastored. The website for those who are connected is The Way of Jesus, where we collect all sorts of aids to growth. The Leaders have their own pages of “lore” there. We rarely hand out paper.

Then there are the blogs. Jonny Rashid is the most committed to a public face and the exercise of his journalism background (750+ hits a week). My blog is mostly directed at developing leaders (400+ hits a week). We

have two daily prayer blogs: WIND for beginners (~200 hits a week), WATER for deeper interaction (~400 hits a week). If you blog because you want to be read, blogging is rarely effective (pro bloggers get tens of thousands of hits a month!). If you want to shine your light and influence who you can, or if you just need to write, that is effective enough. The biggest bane of social media is looking at oneself producing social media responses.

The question of whether all this communication is effective undoubtedly dissuades anyone from getting involved. Since we have the info to compare ourselves to the whiz kids from around the world, we start as losers. (Thank you, internet!) What’s more, in this era, all communication is suspicious, so we feel nervous about putting ourselves out there. If I walk down my block in Philly, 80 percent of those I pass will not even look at me looking at them, waiting to say hi. That does not mean I don’t look and am not ready for whatever response I might get.

A positive response to Jesus and his people takes a lot of time and effort. We are not losers if our attempts seem meager. It generally takes a salesperson about eight touches to get a meeting with a new prospect. They have to get the target’s interest, then get them to consider what they are selling, then woo them to make a commitment. Christians I know seem to think if they hold a meeting, everyone will be looking for what they are offering. God goes through the suffering of becoming a human to offer what everyone intrinsically needs, and even then, Jesus has to sell it! We will not be anywhere close to effective, no matter what tool we use, if we don’t follow Jesus and find a way to get next to people, even if they can only be reached online! Although the new media is as difficult and ineffective as the old, I think using it to persevere in love makes sense.

*Rod White* is development pastor for the Circle of Hope Network of Brethren in Christ Churches in Philadelphia, PA. You can follow his blog at <https://www.circleofhope.net/rodwhite/>.

# Fulfilling a Communications Vision

By Anna Haggard and Will Teodori

**AS THE BROTHERS** in Christ U. S. communications team, we're responding to some questions about our denominational communications strategy.

**Today, the denomination primarily uses electronic platforms to communicate: How does online communication fulfill the broader mission of BIC U. S.?**

Family is often how we describe ourselves in the Brethren in Christ. Such a word reflects one of our closely held core values: community. While technology changes, the purpose of communications in the BIC U. S. remains the same—to deepen our sense of community by:

- *Starting a conversation among our family:* In the last few decades, our denomination has grown from a small, culturally homogenous family of congregations to a nationally recognized denomination. While the growth has been positive, it can be more challenging to feel connected across geographic distances and cultural differences. An online platform enables us to frequently share stories of the denominational body across the United States, strengthening our sense of family.
- *Building trust through stories.* The more we know one another's stories, the better we can understand one another. As the denomination continues to grow in size and in geographic scope, it's essential we continue to tell our stories to build a foundation of trust, essential when we come together to make decisions.

**What was the strategy behind shifting from *In Part* [print magazine] to more electronic platforms?**

We live in a world of rapidly changing technology. To engage this dynamic, we have begun embracing digital platforms, such as stories published on [bicus.org](http://bicus.org) (blog or news) and social media, while also publishing a print-based annual report and other print media.

Here are a few advantages of digital plat-

forms:

- *Digital platforms enable us to connect with our denominational family as never before.* Through a web-based presence, we can interact with our family across the U. S. and around the globe. For example, we have recently been thrilled with the increased engagement from our international Brethren in Christ conferences through our stories released on social media. This never would have happened through print media.
- *We can frequently update online content, allowing the Brethren in Christ community to interact more quickly, as well as to mobilize to address urgent needs.* For example, earlier this year Cyclone Idai devastated the region of Southern Africa where we have many Brethren in Christ brothers and sisters. Through a call to action on our social media, we as a church family were able to provide emergency food and supplies to more than 570 families in the hardest-hit areas of Mozambique and Malawi. Through our community rallying together quickly, we were some of the first responders to the crisis in both countries.
- *We can publish online content at a fraction of the cost of print media, and we want to ensure we are wisely conserving our denomination's resources.*

We're excited about the ways embracing digital platforms can help us communicate more often, to more of our family here and overseas. At the same time, we celebrate *In Part's* significance to the denomination and acknowledge, in focusing on digital stories, we lose some of the benefits of print. Since we highly value print media, we have begun publishing an extended annual report and distributing it through our congregations.

**Much of social media/online content can be divisive. How does the Brethren in Christ community use online content to instead foster unity?**

We value healthy debate, believing it sharpens our denominational body spiritu-

ally, emotionally, and intellectually. One purpose of our communications team is to familiarize the BIC U. S. family with one another through telling our family's stories—so when we sit across the table from each other, we will have a foundation of trust to engage in healthy discussion.

According to recent studies by University of California, Berkeley and the University of Chicago, debate was more effective in person than online. For example, you'll be more likely to influence someone of a theological belief by having conversation over dinner (versus sparring on social media). In fact, online arguments often caused more harm than good: People with opposing views who engaged in online disputes experienced increased disconnection from one another.

We believe places do exist for healthy discussion online, such as digital chatrooms, and we encourage our Brethren in Christ family to have those conversations. We don't see our social media channels as that platform, however. Our purpose for social media is to help the BIC U. S. family know one another's stories better, so that when we wrestle with issues together, we will have a bedrock of connection and mutual understanding.

**How can our readers connect with the various platforms and channels that BIC U. S. uses to communicate today?**

We're so glad you asked! As a church family, we share our stories in the following ways.

- Check out our website and blog at [bicus.org/blog](http://bicus.org/blog).
- Like and follow us on Facebook at [Facebook.com/BrethrenInChristUS](https://www.facebook.com/BrethrenInChristUS).
- Sign-up for our bimonthly Connect newsletter and World Missions prayer resources at [bicus.org/subscribe](http://bicus.org/subscribe).
- Check out our annual reports at <https://bicus.org/resources/publications/annual-reports/>.

**What do you love about your role in online communications for the denomination?**

We believe the Brethren in Christ have a

lot to offer the world. We as people innately long for purpose, safety, and belonging—and where better to meet those human needs than within a safe, close-knit community of people focused on following Jesus Christ, the lifegiver, who provides ultimate meaning, acceptance, and purpose? We as a communications team get the opportunity to share how our denominational family is extending the acceptance and grace of Jesus Christ to others.

For example, we recently published the story of a Brethren in Christ leader who be-

came the chaplain for the local roller derby team. We were moved by the way Gloria Wolfe leads: Amid her work as business owner of Wolfe Communication Systems and ministry at Jemison Valley Church, Westfield, Pennsylvania, she gives of her time selflessly to the team, traveling to bouts and practices, leading team prayer and devotions, baking gluten-free snacks, preparing fundraiser meals, praying for the team regularly, and being a consistent encouragement and support to them. The only chaplain in the roller derby league, she influences many

through her love, grace, and leadership. We get the opportunity to celebrate leaders like Gloria in our work: It's exciting to join with the people of God in the Brethren in Christ Church to celebrate what Jesus Christ is doing among us.

*Anna Haggard, writer and editor, and Will Teodori, creative director, make up the Brethren in Christ U.S. communications team. They enjoy sharing stories and highlighting Brethren in Christ ministries across the country. They each live in the greater Harrisburg (PA) area..*

## Social Media That Connects: MCC's Approach

By Anna Yoder

**SOCIAL MEDIA IS** complex. It somehow manages to highlight the very best of humanity and the very worst of society all while celebrating things like #nationalkittenday, (which is on July 10 in case you were wondering). Social media is, in fact, very human.

Traditional marketing and communications strategies that work for print and even online markets do not work the same way on social media. Social media moves quickly, and the feedback is instantaneous. It also is prone to change its mind.

Back in January 2018, Facebook announced that it would be changing its algorithm again, this time with much more emphasis on content from individuals' friends, families and groups appearing in the News Feed.

Facebook's head of News Feed Adam Mosseri stated, "With this update, we will also prioritize posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions between people. . . . As we make these updates, Pages may see their reach, video watch time and referral traffic decrease. . . . Pages whose posts prompt conversations between friends will see less of an effect."

After Facebook made this announcement, Facebook business page managers freaked out. I know this because I was one of them. Despite our long-held approach to communications as relationship, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) page

(facebook.com/MennoniteCentralCommittee), as well as most Facebook business pages, was using Facebook (and social media in general) more as a broadcasting system than as a platform to spark meaningful social interaction. Suddenly, we needed to do more to connect.

After the initial panic, I realized that these changes made sense. At the heart of MCC's work is the desire to align our constituents' passions with what we do. We want our social media followers to feel inspired to make a comforter, donate to a disaster response, or consider service with MCC. We want our values and ministry to be meaningful to our supporters.

Social media is a key component of MCC's communication strategy. While it does function differently and cannot be treated in the same way we handle other communications tools, it follows the same communications standards. In fact, it allows for quicker input from those involved. It is not uncommon for an MCC partner to comment on an MCC post in which they are featured. Things happen quickly. While the nature of social media requires flexibility, it does not mean our standards are any lower.

Below are excerpts from MCC's Social Media Content Guidelines. They may be useful to you as you navigate the social media world yourself, or on behalf of your congregation or organization.

**Good judgment matters.** Social media is personal and suspicious of institutional control. Permission to express oneself freely and well is often a key to a site's success. But looser institutional control raises the expectation that participants will show good judgment about what they say and how they say it.

**Be aware of the diversity of our audiences.** There is a wide range of customs, values, and points of view in both the public and our constituency. Postings should not conflict with what is already on the MCC website or other MCC publications. Don't be afraid to "be human" in social media messaging but be sensitive to subjects or language which our audience might find objectionable, inflammatory or offensive.

**Respect the rights of ownership of written material, audio/video and photos.** It is critical to respect copyright laws and fair and ethical use of material owned by others. MCC goes to great lengths to maintain the integrity of its brand and reputation. We return this courtesy and provide attribution on content that is not our own.

**Don't embarrass others.** Don't post photos or information that may embarrass or diminish a person. Respect the privacy of individuals and organizations.

**Handle controversial comments carefully.** When your goal is to engage and interact, it's not surprising that social media occasionally attracts unwelcome comments





or opinions. The decision on if and how we should respond is a judgment call. Allow dialogue to happen organically. Often, a constituent will reply to defend MCC, and official intervention is not needed. If a simple clarification of facts is needed, it's probably okay to do that. However, if the response requires more finesse and sensitivity, we should discuss this internally. Removing a comment altogether is generally considered to be poor social media etiquette, but comments that are offensive should be taken down immediately. Don't feed the trolls—people who constantly post negative things are often just

looking for attention. Not engaging with them is often a more effective way of refocusing the conversation than getting into an argument. No one wins an online argument.

**Don't disparage MCC or its partners.** Social media isn't a place to take disagreements with MCC or its partners. The general tone with social media is genuine but positive. Mistakes happen; social media can be forgiving because posts often capture a point in time and are quickly superseded by new information. However, whenever possible spelling and grammatical errors should be corrected.

Love it or hate it, social media is shaping our world. At MCC, social media is just one tool in our communications toolbelt. But it is one that can humanize our work in new and exciting ways.

*Anna Yoder is the social media coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee. She lives and works in Newton, KS. Her favorite Instagram filter is lark.*

## Opting Out of Social Media

By Zach Spidel

**THE TOOLS OF** a culture inevitably shape that culture in profound ways. Tools make certain previously impossible things possible while simultaneously foreclosing other possibilities. A hammer can pound down a bent nail, but it will not help you shorten up an over-long beam. To hold a hammer—or any tool—in your hand, then, is to make a choice about what needs doing and to choose one particular path of action while abandoning others.

Tools shape human potential and guide it along certain paths, and for this reason we ought to reject as naïve the popular idea that tools are inherently morally neutral things. This popular point of view holds that tools are neither good or bad; it just depends on what use you put them toward. Such an idea seems compelling at first, but it crumbles upon close inspection. Tools are, definitionally, objects with a telos—an end or goal toward which they are designed to help human beings move. Some tools have many such applications united by their foundation in the tool's design; some tools have only one real use. But every tool has a telos.

Christians, too, have a telos. Our telos is to become more and more like Christ as we come to share more and more fully in his life. We judge all tools and their respective telos by this one overriding concern. It is on this basis that I have recently decided to disengage almost entirely from social media.

Some background: after using Facebook

somewhat frequently, I ended up slowly abandoning that site over the last five years. Until the end of last year, however, I remained an avid user of Twitter and had to make an intentional decision to step back from it this past January. I used Twitter as an information aggregator; I followed Christian authors and thinkers of all stripes, as well as professors, journalists, and pundits from a similarly broad spectrum, and I threw in some purely humorous or funny accounts for good measure as well. I rarely posted and when I did it was largely to retweet something I found interesting or important. Mostly, however, I simply absorbed (and became absorbed in) great gobs of the conversations du jour.

The first reason I decided to disengage from social media is bound up with the fact that it could not help but shape me to care about those conversations du jour. The very way in which Twitter (and most social media) is structured includes a baked in recency bias. Sites like Twitter proclaim that what is happening now is what really matters. They induce, with their endless scrolling, what the kids call FOMO: fear of missing out. I found myself spending too long on Twitter itself, and then even longer thinking about whatever controversy or controversies had been animating the conversation that day.

And it was controversy that largely drove the conversations I imbibed on social media.



I would read conservative Christians condemning the latest heresy of some Christian they deemed too liberal, and progressive Christians condemning the heartlessness or cluelessness of some unwoke Christian conservative. Sometimes those initiating the controversies spoke politely and out of genuine concern; other times Twitter felt like an angry mob, but in BOTH cases my attention was focused on what was supposedly wrong with somebody else. And “Christian Twitter” (or my own personal version of that) was indicative of the site everywhere else as well.

Twitter's feed is algorithmically designed not only to privilege the recent, but to privilege the attention-grabbing. It will make sure you see the most retweeted and commented on posts when you log in. Given human nature, it turns out that the things that most easily attract attention typically are either outrages or spectacles, and Twitter, in my personal experience, seems especially adept at elevating the outrages. It does this because Twitter, like all social media, is a tool that is designed to monetize human attention.

Twitter is designed to make people want to use it, use it for a long time, and use it frequently. Part of what makes it effective in ac-



complishing this is that it is designed to feel like it is really a tool in the hands, or on the phones, of its users. It certainly felt to me at first like it was my own tool—useful for learning about and engaging with the world around me. In reality, I now believe it was a tool in the hands of a corporate board to which I had given far too much of my own attention.

I found not only that it was difficult not to overuse Twitter (again this is by design!) but I found that Twitter (also by design) focused my attention toward the recent and the controversial—neither of which was spiritually healthy for a Christ follower. As a Christ follower I am called to cultivate a perspective in which the eternal kingdom of God looms far larger than the controversies of twenty-first century America or even of twenty-first century American Christianity.

As a Christ follower, I am called to love and never to judge other people, yet Twitter encourages a near constant practice of judging as it lifts up controversy after controversy into my algorithmically driven feed.

Finally, I found that Twitter was unhelpful even in how it allowed me to choose who to follow. Twitter lets its users build their own social cosmos, but then everything about the site is designed to help those users forget that the world they're seeing is one that has passed through three highly powerful filters: the filter of their own choices of what to see and not see, the filter of the company's algorithms that are designed to attract and keep users' attention, and the filter of a screen that can't help flattening out the complexities of real people in the real world in order to present them as a series of words and images scrolling quickly by. I felt like I was

learning about the world on Twitter, about other people, new ideas, important political events, etc., but I wasn't learning about the real world. I was being encouraged to make snap judgments about people and things far removed from me, based on inadequate and highly filtered information. I was looking not at the real world, which God has made, or at real people in all their marvelous complexity, but at a flattened image of the world and of those people fed to me via a tool that is designed to turn my attention into money. That was no help to me in my life as a follower of Jesus, and that is why I've opted out.

*Zach Spidel is pastor of the Shepherd's Table, Dayton, OH.*

## How Social Media Can Help Your Church Plant

By Keeley Powley

**THE DAYS OF** announcement boards or pamphlets being the primary method for a church to share important information with attendees are quickly fading into the past. We are living in an increasingly digital world, and the church has to keep that in mind to reach as many attendees (and potential new attendees!) as possible. For most people, the easiest way for them to find information about anything is by logging on to their preferred social media platform. This makes creating eye-catching social media content incredibly important for churches.

REUNION Oakville is a Be In Christ church, planted in Oakville, Ontario. We started out meeting in a living room or pub once a month. Social media was integral to our church during this time. We used Facebook to share news about our church, invite new people to check us out, and to remind people of when and where we would be meeting that month. Posting regularly on Facebook helped keep everyone in our new community involved and well informed as we worked to plant and grow roots in Oakville.

We grew enough so that in September 2015 we started meeting every Sunday

morning. Since moving to gathering regularly, and in a consistent location, our small church plant has seen significant growth. As people began connecting with our community, our attendees began posting pictures of our gatherings online, tagging us in posts, and sharing our page with friends and family to invite them to join. Now our church averages 80 adults and 24 children, hanging out every Sunday in a small community movie theater in Oakville.

Although we have a consistent location and gathering time, social media is still very important to our church. During our Sunday morning gatherings we share announcements, but our volunteers are already in classrooms and miss hearing what's coming up next. Being in a movie theater we don't have a board where we can post flyers to share information about upcoming events. Instead, we choose to continue to use social media. It helped us grow in the beginning, so we now use it to help keep our regulars informed! By posting on Instagram and Facebook about important information, events, and closures, we are able to ensure that all of our regular attenders know what's going on if they miss a morning because they are away or volun-

teering.

This also makes it easy for someone interested in checking us out for the first time. Because we are small church plant, you can probably imagine how tight our budget is for regular Sunday expenses. Spending money on advertising is not even remotely on our radar. By using social media platforms, we are able to reach new people for free. By encouraging our attendees to simply click "share" on our posts or page, our ability to reach people in the Oakville community multiples exponentially!

These social media platforms have also begun to challenge our thinking on what really is the church. Do you have to meet in a building to connect with other Christ followers or to follow a teaching series?

YouTube has been an incredible resource for us to share our teaching series online to connect with more people. We started out recording our teaching every Sunday and posting it to YouTube to make sure our kids volunteers never missed out. In time, other people began finding our channel and regularly watching our videos. Our most popular video, our take on The Daily Examen, is up to 26,284 views.

We would never be able to reach this many people on a Sunday morning alone. YouTube has given us a place that allows us to be a church online. We can now reach out to people who cannot come on a Sunday morning, whether because of inability to travel or because they live too far away (even in another country!).

Based on a recent survey, the average person spends at least two hours on social media per day. With that in mind, how can

churches challenge themselves to reach people in a new way? If people are gathering online, how can we make ourselves present in those moments, and with those groups? Who will we meet by just logging online?

For our little church plant, social media certainly has made a big impact. Being active online has allowed us to connect with people we may otherwise have never met, challenged our idea of where church happens, and opened doors to ways we can plug into

our community. It makes our attendees feel connected when they see us post about announcements and events, and it gives them an easy way to invite other people to join our table.

Share your church's story online and see how your friends circle grows!

*Keeley Powley is pastor of REUNION Church, Oakville, ON.*

## Being Faithful and Effective in an Age of Technology

By Sheila Derr

**ALL THROUGHOUT HISTORY**, the Church has faced the reality of a changing world and what it looks like to be faithful and effective Christ followers within it. How we seek to engage the world around us is not only shaped by our life in Christ, but also the point in time that we exist, the context we find ourselves, and the people to whom we are uniquely called. When we lose sight of this as Christ followers, we risk a watered-down faith, missed opportunities for evangelism and discipleship, and a lack of relevancy in a world that desperately needs to hear the message of the Gospel.

### Purpose and priority

As Christ followers, our priority in the world is discipleship—being and making disciples. Our Father's longing is to see his children growing closer to him and each other and inviting others to that same life experience. Jesus provided a focus for our life together and the work that we are called to do in the world when he said, "[G]o and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. . . ." (Matt. 28:19-20). This focus and priority must inform everything we do in the local church, and that includes our priorities and strategies for communication.

But while Jesus offered us perspective for life and ministry together, he did not provide a specific formula for how to engage every people group, in every context, for all times.

We are offered general principles, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the truth of scripture, and the encouragement of community as we seek to engage the world around us. And we are blessed to live in an incredibly diverse and dynamic world that invites us to take the posture of a learner, regularly observing what is occurring around us and discerning how that we can continue to effectively engage those to whom we are called.

### The why behind the what

In the world of marketing, why customers think and behave the way they do is critical in considering how a company will seek to engage and interact with their customer base. Companies know that in order to attract and keep customers, or to expand their customer base, they must understand the needs and motivations behind their customers' behavior. We see this same principle exercised in the arena of missions as missionaries seek to step into cultural contexts that are not their own.

Missionaries must understand the people to whom they are called. They must seek to gain perspective on the why behind the what of a particular people group's traditions, customs, and practices. In doing so, they are able to interact with and invest in their target community with greater intention. Many of us in the local church today would do well to consider the same principles as we develop our own strategies for internal and external communications, particularly when considering how to leverage social media as a tool

for engaging our congregations and local communities.

### Rethinking our communication strategies

A 2011 Gallup poll asked more than 17,000 U.S. adults about how they used social media. They were asked to evaluate everything from the latest social media platforms and apps to old-school word-of-mouth interactions. What they discovered is that the use of social media by organizations does not drive customer acquisition and social networkers are not all the same. They were also reminded that social networking is not just an online phenomenon, and those who are most engaged in an organization are those who are emotionally invested. In reflecting on studies like this and others, we can draw a couple of conclusions:

### One size doesn't fit all

It is vital to remember that our communities are made up of people with diverse life experiences and preferences. How one person consumes information or shares of themselves with others may look very different from the next. We need to take time to get to know the people in our church and local community. In doing so, we will not only gain a better understanding of their defaults and preferences but will also begin to understand the needs that they may have.

### Choosing platforms for communicating

We need to look for themes and concerns as we dialogue with folks in our congrega-

tions and local communities. Are there cultural and generational preferences? Are there socioeconomic or literacy barriers? Are there folks for whom the internet presents some very real struggles? Are there folks we are called to reach, but aren't yet reaching? A church's strategy and platforms for communication can then be formed around what has been learned through this process.

### Every platform has limitations

There are limitations to every communication platform (i.e. bulletins, email, social media, website, old-school word-of-mouth). It is good to articulate goals for communication and to consider what we want to communicate, and to whom, before we embark on the task of exploring what platforms a local church will use. And once communication platforms have been identified, it is also good practice to define how those platforms will and will not be used.

### Planning to communicate

In general, the larger a church's audience, the longer the lead time. It is said that individuals need 3-7 encounters with information before they will act on the information being presented. This means that information should be presented multiple times, in

multiple ways, and through multiple platforms.

As Christ followers, we must regularly consider how to faithfully and effectively invest in the world and how the continuing rise in use of technology and social media fits into that picture. This not only requires an ongoing process of learning as students of Jesus, but also a commitment to observing at the same time what is taking place in the world we live.

### Reference

Blaise James and Jim Asplund, "Making the Most of Social Media," September 15, 2011, <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/149411/making-social-media.aspx>.

*Sheila Derr is pastor of administration at Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.*

## The Antidote to Polarization

*(on social media and elsewhere)*

### Causes of polarization

- Economic inequality
- Identity threat
- Racism and sexism
- Differing moral universes
- Global nationalism
- Balkanized media
- Political structures
- Leadership-driven polarization
- Social sorting

### Be hard on issues, but soft on people

- Know yourself
- Self-define
- Invite disagreement
- Seek out information that counters your bias
- Practice paraphrasing
- Stay curious
- Acknowledge dignity

*Excerpted from a presentation by David*

*Brubaker, Eastern Mennonite University, at the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church, January 2019.*

*continued from page 12*

there is a lot of new research out there on the connection between mental health and social media, from eating disorders and bullying to herd mentality and dopamine hits to your brain.

Recently, I reached out to Evan Donovan, a college friend with whom I keep in touch on social media, because I noticed that he retreats from Facebook from time to time. When I asked him about it, he shared that the practice of breaking from Facebook was directly related to his mental health: "Some people just have the will power to say, I don't like what this [being on social media] is doing to me or my use of time, or I can see how I feel better when I don't use it and quit it cold turkey . . . but I need more intentionality." For him, it's also spiritual: "When I get up in the morning to start my routine, instead of being like, 'Oh, let me see who com-

mented on my Facebook post,' I'll go and read Scripture and pray a bit."

Evan admits that it's still an ongoing learning process. Under stress and with lack of sleep, recently, he's found himself being drawn into social media: "In the short term, I still find myself wanting that quick hit of affirmation when someone likes your post—but I know that spiritual practices are more rewarding in the long term."

### Learning from the youngsters

Word on the street is that Generation Z, the first cohort to have been born into a world with social media already in existence, is already proving wiser and more savvy at navigating social media than those who have come before them. Recently, my 18-year-old brother called me out on something I'd said online—and he was right. I often find myself

still feeling awkward in the social media space whose advent didn't arrive until my college years, yet for those who've grown up with it, it feels natural and even easy.

These seem like difficult times in which we face many heavy, painful issues on social media, as well as in face-to-face conversations. My prayer is that, in whatever I say or refrain from saying on Facebook, I would love the Lord and honor my third cousin, preschool friend, college roommate, rock climbing buddy, work colleague, mother-in-law, pastor, and neighbor down the street with that labradoodle well.

*Kristine Frey is a writer and editor who lives with her husband and their two children in Columbia, Pa. The family is part of the Millersville Brethren in Christ Church.*



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## Three Ways to Avoid Social Media Angst (While Still Sharing Meaningfully)

By Kristine Frey

**THERE ARE VERY** few things that I would tell my third cousin, preschool friend, college roommate, rock climbing buddy, work colleague, mother-in-law, pastor, and neighbor down the street whose name I struggle to recall but who walks her labradoodle like clockwork. And even if I did have something profound or clever enough to share with people from all of those circles, I doubt that I would communicate it to each of them in the exact same way.

Yet this is exactly what Facebook (and other social media platforms) forces us to do: post that image, recipe, quip, reflection, or idea to those in every one of our life circles. And it's probably why, as someone in the field of communications, Facebook stresses me out.

When I first joined Facebook, I usually kept it light—a snippet of a song lyric here, a picture from a family vacation there—because, again, how much do I have to share that people from all life chapters need to know?

But looking back, I can see a notable shift: Starting around the time of the 2008 presidential election, the nature of my posts began to change, as I began speaking about

politics and faith, two areas that stir my passion and conviction.

During that time, I learned some hard lessons about the personal pain, spiritual discouragement, and relational disconnection that “social” media can, in reality, create, and I grew quiet.

It's only been more recently that I've started to venture out again in posting about sensitive or controversial topics—and the responses to my posts have been different than before.

As I reflected and talked to others about their own experiences, here are a few ways I'm feeling challenged to mature in my use of social media:

### Adjusting my “posting posture”

A decade ago, when I'd post about the connections I saw between national health-care and Scripture's teachings on the government's responsibility to care for the vulnerable, I did it mostly to change others' minds. I grew up in an area with a different political landscape than the one in which I live now, and the posts of those from my hometown were at odds with my perspective—and that rankled me. So, I'd post, hop-

ing to make some of my friends and family think twice about their position. Bitter arguments ensued, and I confess that at least a couple relationships sustained terminal damage as a result.

Today, I find myself posting less for others and more as a way for me to go “on the record.” And I will often clearly state my goal: I'm not trying to change your mind, I'm not trying to say this is the only perspective, I'm not trying to start an argument—I simply cannot remain silent on this any longer, and I need you to know where I'm at with this.

As an unexpected (and rather delightful) byproduct of this approach, I've found that although fewer dissenters respond, more affirmers do. So, it's become a way of networking with others who are coming from a similar place, creating a community of support, care, discernment, and mutual learning. Honestly, it's stirred rich conversation!

### Not discounting mental and spiritual health

As someone who has experienced depression much of my life, I find social media to be a difficult sphere to keep tabs on. But

*continued on page 11*