The Church and Facebook

Facebook (www.facebook.com) is a social networking site and is one of the most frequently visited websites on the web. Facebook currently claims more than 200 million active users and is particularly appealing to older users. A January 2009 report cites a 276% growth in the number of 35- to 54-year-old users in a six-month period. The over-55 demographic has grown by almost 200% in the same period.

Numbers such as these raise two important questions for the local church:

1. Should the local church have a presence on Facebook?
2. Should the local church have guidelines for the use of Facebook?

Should Your Local Church Be On Facebook?

The short answer is yes! Many local churches and denominational groups already have Facebook groups. Anyone can set up a group. A group page provides a common place for users to meet and share information.

Setting up a group is a simple task for the Facebook user. (Click on Applications, Groups, Create a New Group, and follow the prompts.) The person who sets up the group is called a group administrator or admin. The admin can assign administrator rights to other

users, if desired. There are several decisions that have to be made during the group setup. Consider these options carefully.

1. Do you want to enable the discussion board and wall? Enabling these options will help facilitate online discussions between members but the admin loses some control of the content of the page.
2. Do you want to enable pictures, video and links? If you do, you then indicate if you want everyone to be able to post pictures, video and links, or if you only want administrators to have these rights. Again, the trade-off is loss of some control of what appears on the page in exchange for a more open community for sharing.
3. You can allow all users to join your group or require new users to be approved by a site admin before they can join the group. You can even make the group secret so that users must be given an invitation before they can join. I suggest allowing all users to join the group. If you have a user who is behaving badly, the admin can remove the user from the group.

Suggested Guidelines Prior to Setting Up Your Group:

1. Find some members in your church who are already using Facebook. Ask them to serve on a startup committee to get your new group going.
2. Discuss the options listed in the section above and get consensus from the group on settings.
3. Get commitments from at least 2 or 3 people who will be willing to serve as group admins. (This is particularly important if all users have to be approved before joining the group or if only admins can post video, pictures and links.) These admins should agree to monitor the site daily to ensure questions are answered, inappropriate content is removed, and users are approved.

Ministry Protection Memo

"MPM" is a series on various topics relative to Church and safety. Send your comments and interests to AME Zion's Director of Ministry Protection.

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4. Set guidelines for the types of pictures that can be uploaded. For example, can individuals be identified by name? What about minors?

5. Should prayer requests be listed on the discussion board or the wall? If so, you should be very sensitive to individual privacy issues. For example, it may be okay to write, "Pray for Mrs. Smith who will be traveling this week." It is probably not okay to write, "Pray for Mrs. Smith who is traveling to Florida to meet her son who is getting out of rehab."

6. If your local church has a standing committee that needs to approve this, schedule a time to meet with this group.

7. Set up the Facebook group using the options approved by your committee.

8. Specify any restrictions and guidelines, i.e., pictures and prayer requests, for everyone to see on the group page.

Getting Things Going

1. Inform the congregation. This can be done through Family Night programs or small groups in the church. This is a wonderful opportunity to also teach about general internet safety precautions associated with social networking.

2. Remind everyone that they should never, ever, post anything online that they wouldn't want everyone to see. Once you have posted something online, you have lost control over it. Never assume the privacy settings are perfect. Facebook has had security breaches that allowed unauthorized users to see private photos and information.

3. Remind everyone that people are not always who they say they are online. They should use caution when adding friends online.

4. Ask a couple of the volunteers from the committee to make regular visits to the group page and add pertinent information. If the users see that the group is active and helpful, they will be more likely to participate.

Resources

Facebook Demographics
http://tinyurl.com/8yoccn

Facebook
http://www.facebook.com

Facebook on Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook

Parents Guide to Social Networking
http://www2.state.id.us/AG/protecteens/
ParentsGuideToSocialNetworking.pdf