Social Networking and Healthy Boundaries in Ministry: Asking Critical Questions

by M.L. Daniel and Marie M. Fortune

There is a sacred trust between spiritual leaders and those who have entrusted their spiritual well being to them. It is a trust that is governed by an appreciation for maintaining appropriate and healthy boundaries that clearly define each party's role. In traditional brick and mortar spiritual arenas, the challenges and benefits of boundaries, at best, can be described as complex. However, these same considerations have taken that complexity and multiplied it exponentially in our 21st century world where technology allows for connection virtually 24 hours a day/ 7 days a week. No matter where you are or turn, people are posting, texting, tweeting, facebooking, youtubing, checking email, voicemail or their calendar on the constantly evolving smart phones. In today's society, vast resources of information and social networks are virtually at our fingertips every moment of the day. What it means to be community, in communication or connected is being redefined daily in the fast paced world of virtual reality, as more and more people are embracing the technology both in and out of faith communities. Faith communities of all sizes and spiritual leaders of every background are increasingly establishing identities or presence in the virtual world. As such, the challenges and benefits of establishing and maintaining healthy and appropriate boundaries in this new frontier pose some critical questions for spiritual leaders and communities venturing into this arena.

Social networking is not new. Not so long ago, social networking implied face to face encounters that created and sustained community. People of faith gathered in public settings, in homes, mosques, churches and synagogues to worship and study together. However, the internet has taken social networking to a whole new level. There are social networks that cater exclusively to faith communities such as Tangle.com, Mychurch.org, and tuggle.it, and those that target a wider mainstream audience such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. What all of them have in common are memberships that increase every day. On Facebook alone, there are 500 million users, half of which log in on any given day. Additionally, they seem to have the attention of the very demographic that is disappearing in most mainstream denominations, those 35 and younger.

The extensive reach of these social networks is attractive and has enticed many faith communities and spiritual leaders to establish a virtual presence as a ministerial resource. For many, the social networks and the World Wide Web are exciting new tools for ministry. While these tools offer access to fertile grounds and present exciting opportunities for ministry, they are equally fertile grounds for ethical and boundary violations, both intentional and unintentional, by spiritual leaders and by those with whom they share the space. Like most tools, they are in and of themselves neutral and as such, have the potential for good or harm. As

such, spiritual leaders ought to enter this new arena having asked critical questions in order to uses these tools wisely and preserve their sacred trust.

Certainly, the greatest benefit represented by the internet and social networking is quick and easy communications. The mundane organizing and networking within faith communities can be much more easily accomplished through a congregation's website and email. The second greatest benefit is the potential for "marketing", i.e. letting people know who we are, what we are doing, and how it might interest them. But there are also landmines at every turn that we need to consider.

In the policies and procedures of some faith communities active in the virtual world, it is evident that they have given this issue some consideration, for which they are to be commended. Yet there still remains work to be done, and questions worth asking if ministry in cyberspace is to be done responsibly.

There are some basic questions and considerations for all faith communities and their leadership who are either considering establishing a virtual identity or presence or those who already have. Looking first to organizational considerations:

- Does the faith community have an internet use policy or procedure that addresses employee and leadership engagement in social networks?
- If so, does it speak to professional and private/individual communications, disclaimers and the organization's expectations?
- Are the organization's rules on public speech and private speech clear?
- Have employment issues been considered in relationship to supervisor or leadership "friending," "unfriending" or seeking access to subordinates within social networks?
- Can the information gained by an organization or supervisor via a social network be used to make employment decisions such as hiring, firing, promotions and demotions?
- Are there employment factors to consider and what is the liability exposure for the organization for the actions, statements, or oversight of its leadership that is engaged in social networks on the internet?
- Does it set up a checks and balances for how oversight will be conducted?
- How does the policy deal with supervision of the leadership that is responsible for vulnerable populations?
- Are there safeguards in place to identify predatory leaders who may have unfettered access to not only your population, but to their social networks by virtue of their position and the organization virtual presence?

Considering just the issues surrounding leadership and vulnerable populations, the bottom line should be transparency. This operating principle rests in the reality that there is no privacy or confidentiality on the internet and that whatever is posted on social networking sites is there forever. With these things in mind, here are some practical applications that faith communities can consider that would be helpful.

1. Social networking pages should be regularly monitored by senior leadership. Senior leadership charged with supervising the site, should be looking not only at how the site is being utilized and the posting, but at how the leadership assigned to minister to this population is responding to the post, interacting with the community, managing the site, and utilizing the internet, and where appropriate, offer training or corrective action. The objective of such is the fostering of accountable and responsible leadership and healthy communities.

2. Every friend request accepted should be accompanied by an electronic copy of the sites, code of conduct that expressly states the expectations for post, a covenant of understanding, and a clear explanation of how violations, offensive and objectionable material will be addressed. With respect to site participants, the site moderator should have sole discretion to determine what material is objectionable or offensive and when a violation has taken place. Also, it should be explicitly stated that any and all posts are public information and that there are no expectations of privacy or confidentiality of any party utilizing this method of communication. Further, that no information posted on the site maybe used without the written permission of the author.

3. The organization should adopt a policy of screening anyone outside the target demographic that is unknown to the organization before allowing them access to the site. Equally prudent is policy for persons in leadership to only accept friend requests and to prohibit solicitation of them. Additionally, if parents or guardians of the target population are welcomed at actual meetings or gatherings, the same should be true with regards to any virtual meeting place; this assists in creating a transparent atmosphere. When working with vulnerable populations in an arena that is changing daily, accountability, responsibility, and transparency are foundational.

These limited questions are in no way exhaustive, but they are the introduction to the more difficult conversation organizations should be having around social networks and establishing healthy boundaries.

Just as faith communities should be taking on the challenge of addressing boundary issues, so should each individual spiritual leader engage in her own self assessment. Here are some points to ponder:

- The very nature and design of social networks tend to contribute to the line being blurred between the personal and the professional. As such, it begs the question whether the establishment of a public page and a private page solves the dilemmas?
- What challenges arise from mixing public and private time, or public and private space?
- What are the implications of doing so when some members/students/followers are friended or are granted access to your private page while others are excluded?
- How about when one spouse or partner is friended and not the other?

- Regardless of the character of the virtual identity, how do you manage content on your site, both your own content and the content that others post on your site and its dissemination?
- Do you engage in political speech on your page and if so, are there guidelines?
- How might your awareness of so much about congregants' private lives through social networking be detrimental to your ability to serve effectively as a spiritual leader? Conversely, what happens to your ability to lead when the protective boundary between the leadership and followers has been effectively removed?
- What can you share and what pushes or violates appropriate boundaries, and how will you know when it happens?
- Is there anything about your engagement that could lead another to believe her/his communications to be confidential in nature?
- Are there legal implications for your community that can flow from what you do and say in the virtual world?
- Does your presence in the virtual world alter the realistic expectations of your community about your availability and or responsibility to the community?
- How do you handle former congregants when you are no longer their minister but they are part of your friend community?
- How much of your time is the utilization of technology demanding and what might be sacrificed because of it?

It is in the exploration of all of these questions and others in which a spiritual leader would benefit from not only ethical training, but training that begins to help identify and clarify ministerial boundaries and the scope of the work to be done with respect to same. This new technology offers the temptation of virtual community and virtual intimacy. Critical questions remind us of the limitations of both.

Regardless of whether you choose to engage or not engage in social networking, an informed decision requires fully entertaining all of the critical issues. Social networks and the internet may very well be the tools for outreach and organizing today; however, faith communities and spiritual leaders have an obligation to engage this new frontier carefully and responsibly, so as to maintain the integrity of ministerial relationships and protect the sacred trust inherent in ministry.