How technology is changing our 'church'

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Dec. 11, 2008

It?s taken about six months since moving back home to Madison, Wis., but I?ve finally found a worshipping community to which I?ve gone back to multiple times. It?s been a relief after spending so long looking for a church in Oakland, and then having to leave and start the process all over again. It?s been tough to find time to be involved other days of the week with the worship services that the Benedictine women in Madison run, but the 20-25 minute commute each way on Sundays has been worth it (that?s a long commute by Madison standards).

Of course, I never was too far away from a church community during this search. With the explosion of the Internet and social networking sites such as Facebook, it hasn?t been too difficult to keep tabs on theological thought. The best part, it?s all coming to me without me having to search hard for it.

A friend describes Web 2.0 tools like this: Ten years ago the average user was only able to download media; now we are able to upload media. Then, it was cool to ?surf the Web? and find a video to watch. Now, it?s cooler to upload our own.

What does all this mean for our church?

I won?t go so far as to say that I?ve figured out a way to worship online, but just checking my Facebook feed tells me a lot about the intimate thoughts of my church community that is spread all over the globe. It is the information from this feed that shapes how I might think about a church issue or a moral issue, and what I might pray for when I do enter a worship space. It is affecting what might be on someone?s mind when it wanders during the Sunday sermon, how someone might react to a liturgical nuance, and what the person next to you in the pew might pray for.

In this morning?s Facebook feed, I get a broad range of information about what people in my life are going through, information that would take days or years to gather otherwise. Let?s face it; it?s tough to keep tabs on the day-to-day mundane pieces of life of the people I care about who live far away. Heck, in Oakland, it was hard enough to keep tabs on friends who moved a four dollar toll and 45 minutes away across the Bay Bridge in San Francisco.

I?ve talked to people older than me (I?m 29) and the feedback I always get on sites like Facebook is that it?s not really socializing -- that it?s all just gibberish. It can be. Sure. I guess it depends on who you?re connected to and what they are posting. I?m sure my feed looks a lot different than my 18-year-old stepbrother?s.

On my feed, I find a link to an article posted by a friend about white families adopting black babies. I learn that another friend will be attending a Palestinian craft sale at a church this weekend. A couple friends went from

being single to being in a relationship -- good to know, because it makes it easier to pick up the phone and ask them what?s new! Another friend is spreading the word about fundraising events she is planning to fight Huntington?s disease, which her mother has and she has a 50 percent chance of getting. Facebook helped remind me to put this Saturday?s five-kilometer race fundraiser onto my calendar.

Of course, Facebook has its limitations. On the one hand, the fastest-growing age group that is signing up is 40 and older. The generation gap between users and non-users is narrowing every day. However, the majority of users remains high school graduates and college educated. That means billions of people around the globe will probably never even think about using Facebook. In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, It only covers a swath of the global audience that our Church tells us to be conscious of.

What is important to remember is that there is church going on inside worship spaces, and there is church being defined by documents from the pope in Vatican City or the bishops in Washington. But then, there is also church taking place online: connections on Facebook, reflections on blogs, and sharing religion through other media on the Internet. I would venture to say that it is important for Catholics to be a part of all these dialogues -- whether it?s in an actual parish, learning from the documents passed down through the hierarchy, or learning from what real faithful people are sharing online.

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