

ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING AND EVANGELISM

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For centuries, the gospel of Jesus Christ has spread through social networking circles. While the printing press, radio, and television and other forms of mass media have allowed the good news to be proclaimed outside of these social circles in recent decades, surveys indicate that most people today still come to faith in Christ because of a friend or relative.<sup>1</sup> Now, however, the Internet has emerged, providing a method of communication that is fast, powerful, and interactive. What role does this new medium play in evangelism?<sup>2</sup>

Since the Internet's inception, its potential for magnifying various outreach efforts has been tantalizing. Unfortunately, this potential has remained largely untapped, with most churches using their websites as little more than easily accessible church brochures. Now, however, technology and social networking are combining in powerful ways, enabling organizations—including churches—to “harvest external knowledge, resources, and talent on a scale that was previously impossible.”<sup>3</sup> Not only is the Internet powerful, it is a communication tool whose use tends to reflect many of the values of today's postmodern culture—non-hierarchical authority and leadership, collaboration, empowerment, diversity, and transparency.<sup>4</sup> Postmodern expressions of the Church, such as the emerging church

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<sup>1</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 73. Rainer's study, like others, shows that 75 to 90 percent of people come to faith because of a friend or relative.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase, “the medium is the message.” McLuhan's point in part was that the medium or tool that is used in communicating the message has a shaping effect upon the user. Marshall McLuhan and W. Terrence Gordon, *Marshall McLuhan* (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2005). See discussion in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21 Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 149-156. The Internet, as a technology tool, is a medium, and therefore it has an effect upon the message. This effect will be explored in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, expanded ed. (New York: Portfolio, 2008), 269.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent introduction on postmodernism, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). For an examination of how postmodern culture has affected authority, leadership, collaboration, and empowerment issues, see Eddie Gibbs, *LeadershipNext: Changing Leaders in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 47-68. “Social Networks are spontaneous,

movement, were made possible through the Internet, though its appeal is not limited to this church expression.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, research shows that churches of various theological persuasions that are using Internet-based technology are the churches that are most effective in reaching young adults, a key group for evangelism and a group that has been raised in postmodern culture.<sup>6</sup> The new social networking technologies of the Internet have caused these postmodern values to be brought out even more by increasing the ability and ease of Internet users to communicate and collaborate.

Print, radio, television, and the Web 1.0 were one-way communication mediums. In contrast, the new Web 2.0 technologies<sup>7</sup> are characterized by high levels of interactivity, enabling Christians to easily engage in dialogue and relationship building with people next

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informal, horizontal, heterarchic, dynamic and shifting. Institutions, by contrast, are constructed, formal, vertical, hierarchic, static and rigid.” Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta, *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom: How Online Social Networking Will Transform Your Life, Work, and World* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008), 2. For a discussion of the importance of transparency, see David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity-- and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 52-60.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Jones says, “The emergent church has serendipitously pioneered a new ecumenical connectivity simply by virtue of the fact that it showed up at the advent of the Internet.” Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 189. The emerging church movement, while it has had some missional elements, has largely been a church renewal movement that has sought to make the church expression more current with postmodern culture, particularly on worship issues. Dan Kimball’s *Emerging Church* reflects this emphasis, with only one chapter on evangelism, spiritual formation, and leadership, and nine chapters on worship (as well as a separate book on this). See Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). Some emergents, however, see mission as their purpose. See Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Richie Stanley, Ed Stetzer, and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2009), 179.

<sup>7</sup> The term “Web 2.0” was coined in 2004 at a news media conference in San Francisco which was attended by Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Jerry Yang of Yahoo, and Marc Andreessen, founder of Netscape. “Web 1.0,” the first generation of the web, had resulted in disappointment due to the “dot com” meltdown in 2001. Web 2.0, in contrast, was received with excitement with its new and interactive capabilities. Fraser and Dutta, *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom*, 2.

door or around the world.<sup>8</sup> The year 2006 marked a tipping point from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 technologies, leading Don Tapscott, author of *Wikinomics*, to state, “The immutable, standalone Web site is dead.”<sup>9</sup> In order to capture the potential of the Internet in sharing the gospel, Christians and churches must learn to use the power of these new technologies. This paper will present a rationale and strategy for using online social networking in its various forms for evangelism at the High Pointe Church of Christ (hereafter, High Pointe) in McKinney, Texas.

### **Biblical Theology of Missional Outreach and Social Networking**

In a previous paper I have laid out the biblical and theological basis for the missional nature of the Church; that is, the Church exists to participate in the ongoing story of God’s redemptive mission in the world, especially as it has been exhibited in the life of Jesus Christ and lived out by the Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Evangelism is an important subset of this mission,<sup>11</sup> which I define as the following:

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<sup>8</sup> Tapscott and Williams, *Wikinomics*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. The authors write, “2006 was the year when the programmable Web eclipsed the static Web every time: flickr beat webshots; Wikipedia beat Britannica; Blogger beat CNN; Epinions beat ConsumerReports; Upcoming beat evite; Google Maps beat MapQuest; MySpace beat friendster; and craigslist beat Monster.”

<sup>10</sup> James Nored, “Missional Engagement in Suburbia” (a paper written for the course, “TM710: The Local Congregation as a Missional Outpost,” Fuller Theological Seminary, 2006). Reggie McNeal offers a definition of the missional church as “the people of God partnering with God in his redemptive mission in the world.” Reggie McNeal and Leadership Network, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 24. The classic modern work on this is Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> In the missional understanding, evangelism is an essential (though not the only) part of the Church’s mission. Scott Jones writes, “The church’s mission is wider than evangelism and includes all that God expects the church to do. At the same time, evangelism is an essential part of mission; when there is no evangelistic component the missionary activity is inadequate.” See Scott J. Jones, “The Evangelistic Love of God & Neighbor: A Theology of Witness & Discipleship,” (2003): 101.

Evangelism is the proclamation of the good news of *Jesus Christ* (his birth, person, life, death, burial and resurrection) and the kingdom of *God* (God's rule or reign in the world and over his people) *by the church and individuals* through the power of the *Holy Spirit*, accompanied by good deeds and ministries of healing, with a call towards conversion to the lordship of Jesus Christ and initiation into the Christian community through faith, repentance, and baptism. God is the initiator in evangelism, the Son is the model for and focus of evangelism, and the Spirit is the one who convicts humanity in evangelism. This involvement of all three persons in the godhead and the church in evangelism shows its fundamental importance to God and the church's mission.<sup>12</sup>

This definition is in contrast to definitions or practices of evangelism that are “word only” (lacking in good deeds), individualistic, lacking in a concern for conversion, and those that reduce the gospel to merely an exchange of belief for forgiveness of sins and eternity in heaven. (All of the above-mentioned practices and ideas are particularly off-putting to young Christians.) Often times, as this paper will contend, evangelism in the time of Jesus and the early Church occurred through social networking.<sup>13 14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For references used in the various aspects of this definition of evangelism, see footnote ten in James Nored, “Spiritual Gifts Discovery and Use and Its Impact Upon Evangelism” (a paper written for the course, “EV715: Reinventing Evangelism: New Perspectives on Outreach, Conversion and Discipleship,” Fuller Theological Seminary, 2008), 5. For a work that both explores Jesus' message and the kingdom of God and makes application to postmodern culture, see Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Dictionary.com defines a “social network” as “a person's family, neighbors, and friends with whom they are socially involved” and “a website where one connects with those sharing personal or professional interests, place of origin, education at a particular school, etc.” See Dictionary.com, “Social Network,” Ask.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/social%20network> (accessed 5-18-09). Dictionary.com defines a similar term, “social networking,” as “the use of a website to connect with people who share personal or professional interests, place of origin, education at a particular school, etc.,” clearly identifying social networking with the online component of social networks. See Dictionary.com, “Social Networking,” Ask.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/social%20networking> (accessed 5-18-09). While the Internet did not exist two thousand years ago, if the definition of social networking is expanded to include connecting with family, neighbors, and friends as well as using some type of connection hub to connect with people who share personal or professional interests, place of origin, education, and the like, then clearly the testimony and demonstration of the New Testament and the early Church is that the gospel spread through social networking.

<sup>14</sup> This is a phenomenon that is not unique to Christianity. Rodney Stark, drawing a conclusion from his research on the subject, explains, “The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments.” The key to these movements continued growth is staying open as movements. See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How*

Jesus was himself shaped by his social connections, and his ministry was launched through these connections. On a divine level, he was sent by the Father to the earth, and he was conceived through the Holy Spirit. The Father was well pleased at his baptism, and the Spirit descended upon him at this time (Matt. 3:13-17). On a human level, Jesus was raised by parents that sought to be obedient to God (Luke 1:21-40), and he followed the ministry of his relative, John the Baptist, preaching this same message: “Repent for the Kingdom of God is near” (Matt. 3:2; 4:17).<sup>15</sup> While his mother, brothers, and sisters were at times skeptical of his messianic claims, after his death and resurrection his mother Mary and his brothers were present at Pentecost, and his brother James became a foundational figure in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14; 15:13; 21:17).

The synoptic gospels seem to portray Jesus calling the disciples out of nowhere and without any prior connections; however, the gospel of John makes it clear that Jesus used social networking as he made this call, beginning with Andrew, one of John the Baptist’s followers, and then spreading through Andrew’s family and friends (John 1:40-42).<sup>16</sup> Jesus of course also worked through other social structures of his day to spread the gospel, including the rabbinical schools, the synagogues, and agrarian society. Galilee, where Jesus grew up, also would have provided Jesus with various points of connection, serving as a

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*the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Jesus’ connection to John the Baptist undoubtedly helped him tremendously in launching his ministry, a concept that is both testified to in the gospels (John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus) and by social construction theory. The authors of *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* state that kinship was the primary social domain of ancient Mediterranean societies, followed by political structures and associations. K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>16</sup> “Instead of immediately leaving one’s everyday work place and following without hesitation, [in John] there is networking with kin and friends in the villages.” See Dennis C. Duling, “The Jesus Movement and Social Network Analysis: (Part II. The Social Network),” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (2000), <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-94331533.html> (accessed 5-14-09).

physical hub connecting him to all sorts of people, including fishermen, farmers, tradesmen, artisans, tax collectors, and others.<sup>17</sup>

On Pentecost, the number of Jesus' followers who were gathered together was a mere 120 people. And yet, as the Spirit of God was poured out and Peter preached the gospel message, more than 3000 responded (Acts 2:1-41). While the apostles and other evangelists would play a key role in the spread of the gospel, increasingly the gospel would be spread by ordinary Christians through their own social circles. The structure of the book of Acts is made up of radiating people-group circles, with the command to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This rate of the transmission of the gospel through social networks would increase as persecution broke out against the Church and "all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1). As has been long noted, the physical and social structures of the world of the early Church made networking possible on a grander scale. The Roman roads connected cities around the Empire, and those at Pentecost and those scattered by persecution were able to quickly take the gospel to their old or newly developed social networks. The common Greek language provided not only understandability, but a common way of thinking and reference point for those sharing the gospel. The Diaspora assisted in the message transmission, with the synagogues serving as nodes or distribution hubs, connecting missionaries like Paul to family, friends, and a vast network of people who already believed in God and were looking for a Messiah. And as Paul goes through the household codes in his letters to Christians and draws out the implications for the gospel, he repeatedly encourages his readers to reach out to

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<sup>17</sup> See Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*, 99-129. See also Dennis C. Duling, "The Jesus Movement and Social Network Analysis (Part I: The Spatial Network)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (1999), <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-94332368.html> (accessed 5-21-09).

outsiders, make the most of every conversation, and impact every social stratum which they occupy for Christ (Col. 3:18-4:6).<sup>18</sup>

In *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green gives a historical examination of how the gospel spread in the first three centuries after Christ.<sup>19</sup> He presents evidence that “full-time” located evangelists, wandering evangelists, apostles, bishops, presbyters, theologians, and philosophers played a significant role in sharing the gospel; however, Green also contends that “the very fact that we are so imperfectly aware of how evangelism was carried out and by whom should make us sensitive to the possibility that the little man, the unknown ordinary man who left no literary remains was the prime agent in mission.” Unlike the public evangelism of the “full-time” evangelists, this “ordinary evangelism” would have worked primarily through social circles. This is the very type of evangelism on display in Origen’s response to Celsus, who charged that Christians spread their beliefs in women’s quarters, leather shops, and laundries.<sup>20</sup>

In its beginnings, it appears that Christianity was largely a movement amongst the lower class, Jews, women, and agrarian society in Palestine, but it soon became a movement that encompassed Gentiles, men and women, the educated, and urbanites across the Roman

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<sup>18</sup> For a summary of the conditions that favored the spread of Christianity, including the Roman roads and common language, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2d ed. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 579-80. In regards to the Diaspora, Stark writes, “In all the major centers of the empire were substantial settlements of Diasporan Jews *who were accustomed to receiving teachers from Jerusalem*. Moreover, the missionaries were likely to have family and friendship connections within at least some of the Diasporan communities. Indeed, if Paul is a typical example, the missionaries were themselves Hellenized Jews.” See Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Origen, as cited in Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 208-09.

Empire.<sup>21</sup> While there were many sociological, religious, and political reasons for this, social networking undoubtedly played a major role in the numerical growth and demographic shift of Christians in the first three centuries. After Constantine, the era of Christendom was ushered in, and Christianity soon became something that a person was born into in the Roman Empire. Evangelism during this time was largely relegated to the “barbarian” regions of the empire. Now, with the crumbling of Christendom in the West, evangelism as it was practiced pre-Christendom must be rediscovered. Robert Webber, author of *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, advocates just such an approach, rightly concluding that “today’s church must be a hospitable community of people who reach out through social networking.”<sup>22</sup>

### I. Preparation for Evangelism through Social Networking

One of the ways that online social networking can help in evangelism is by preparing individuals and churches by pooling resources and by problem solving. Social theorists have long recognized the “wisdom of crowds” – that a large group of people tends to come up with the right answer much of the time.<sup>23</sup> Now, with the Internet, the combined wisdom and

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<sup>21</sup> Stark’s entire work, *The Rise of Christianity*, lays out these reasons and others for Christianity’s growth in the early centuries.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Formed Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 57. It should be noted that this paper’s perspective reflects my Western, post-Christendom context in North America. For a seminal work on post-Christendom, see Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2004). Christendom is, of course, coming now for the first time to non-Western parts of the world. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Rev. and expanded ed., *The Future of Christianity Trilogy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Alan Hirsch states that the gospel spreads like a virus, being “sneezed” and passed from one person to another. The conditions under which this virus will thrive “arise from a complex interrelationship between our communication with culturally resonant ideas through meaningful relationships, using new media, understanding human need for the gospel, engaging the existential search that is going on, and facing the adaptive challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 211.

<sup>23</sup> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

power of millions, potentially billions, of people connected across the globe is staggering.<sup>24</sup> Businesses have been on the cutting edge of understanding the problem-solving potential that comes from connecting millions of people on the Internet, and much of these insights can be applied to evangelism.<sup>25</sup> According to website industry experts, there are several keys to starting an online community: 1) ease of communication, including low cost;<sup>26</sup> 2) a commitment to openness; 3) a willingness to “give away” secrets and collaborate; 4) a high number of participants; and 5) a diversity of participants.<sup>27</sup> Again, these characteristics reflect the value system of postmoderns. If an online community could be formed around evangelism with these and other online social networking principles, the potential for providing positive solutions for evangelism in the “postmodern matrix” could be

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<sup>24</sup> Jeff Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Business, 2008), 159.

<sup>25</sup> A classic example of this problem solving is the “Goldcorp Challenge.” At one time Goldcorp was a struggling geological firm, and the company was having difficulty finding new deposits of gold. Inspired by Linux, CEO McEwen decided to share all of the company’s geological data with the world, offering prize money of \$575,000 for those who came up with the best ideas for finding new gold deposits. Ideas and solutions came flooding in within weeks from around the world, not only from geologists, but also from mathematicians, physicists, and ordinary people. This collaboration resulted in identifying 110 new targets – and more than eighty percent of these new targets produced substantial amounts of gold. Tapscott and Williams, *Wikinomics*, 7-9.

<sup>26</sup> Ease of communication has greatly increased in recent years through the expansion of broadband. Furthermore, the overexpansion of broadband cabling in the “Internet boom” of the late 1990s may have led to bankruptcy of many technology companies and the “dot-com” collapse; however, this overexpansion also dropped the cost of Internet usage all the way to India to virtually nothing. Low expense is a significant key to ease of communication. For a fascinating and detailed account of this expansion, see Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Rev. ed. (New York: Picador, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> The irony of “collective intelligence” is that it is the diversity of the participants, not crowd-like behavior, which enables the “wisdom of crowds.” In order for crowds to be wise, the crowd must be composed of people working as individuals and making individual contributions—not working as a group. This type of intelligence is displayed in the show “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” when the audience is asked to respond to a question. As they answer they vote *as individuals*. It only takes a very small number of people who actually know the answer to make the correct answer come to the top most every time. In collective intelligence, if the group is too homogenous or individual differences are downplayed and minimized, the this intelligence is lost. Fortunately, people contribute to open source communities as individuals. See Tapscott and Williams, *Wikinomics*, 80. Additionally, it should be noted that while some level of knowledge may be necessary to problem solve, studies show that diverse crowds often come up with right answer more often than a group of experts due to “amateurs” coming up with unorthodox solutions. See Howe, *Crowdsourcing*, 141-45.

phenomenal.<sup>28</sup> Based upon this premise, I created an online community called the “Missional Outreach network” to meet the above criteria, and numerous High Pointe members are participating in this community. While there are several different companies that provide a platform for online community development, this network uses a free platform called Ning to create a dynamic, interactive site that is devoted to missional outreach, or evangelism that is missional in nature.<sup>29 30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> As of May 2009 there are only two books in print from established publishers that address social networking and apply its uses to churches: Brian Bailey, Terry Storch, and Leadership Network, *The Blogging Church: Sharing the Story of Your Church through Blogs*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007). Ted Hart, James M. Greenfield, and Sheeraz D. Haji, *People to People Fundraising: Social Networking and Web 2.0 for Charities* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2007). This paper, therefore, draws significantly upon the technical expertise of those in business.

<sup>29</sup> See Marc Andreessen and Gina Bianchini, "Ning," <http://ning.com> (accessed 5-21-09) and James Nored, "Missional Outreach Network," <http://missionaloutreachnetwork.com> (accessed 5-21-09). In seeking to de-emphasize these negative aspects of what is typically thought of when the word evangelism is used, and to show how evangelism fits into larger mission of the Church, I have created a new category that we have used at High Pointe called “missional outreach.” This type of evangelism is more incarnational than attractional, and it still has a concern for conversion (an area with which the missional movement sometimes struggles) and blessing people’s lives through the doing of good deeds. Implicit in this definition, of course, is that there must be both a proclaimer/doer of good deeds and a person who receives this proclamation and good deeds. In other words, missional outreach occurs primarily person to person, even if there is a medium involved.

<sup>30</sup> While there is value in creating generic Christian networking sites, these types of sites are already in existence and are often lacking in a missional outreach focus. Furthermore, there are relatively few missional outreach types of websites, and the Missional Outreach Network provides a place for those interested in outreach and mission—a group that often feels marginalized in the church—to congregate. Clay Shirky tells the story of First Heiferfarm who started the social networking site, “Meetup.” See First Heiferfarm and Scott Heiferfarm, "Meetup," <http://meetup.com> (accessed 5-21-09). After a year, the fifteen most active groups on the site were almost all marginalized groups—including witches, pagans, vampires, and atheists groups—that have few opportunities to congregate outside of the Internet. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: How Digital Networks Transform Our Ability to Gather and Cooperate* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 197. This example helps explain the emergence of the new aggressive atheism of recent years. As atheists and other non-Christian groups have found online community—ironically, a Christian concept—they have felt free to speak out about their non-belief without feeling marginalized by society. For example, “Think Atheist” is a Ning site and is also very active on Twitter. See Morgan Matthew, "Think Atheist," <http://www.thinkatheist.com> (accessed 5-21-09). The presence of atheistic and non-Christian social networking groups is another reason why churches and individuals must be active in online social networking. While there are missional outreach types of social networking sites in existence—notably Shapevine—they are few, and each site works within a certain core group’s contacts. Many different sites of this nature encompassing many different “real life” social networks are needed to fulfill our mission. See Lance Ford and others, "Shapevine," <http://shapevine.com> (accessed 5-21-09).

The Missional Outreach Network was begun in November 2008 and has achieved some modicum of success.<sup>31</sup> In approximately six months time, there has been the addition of 357 members. There is diversity within the membership, with men, women, full-time ministers and vocational Christians, and people from numerous states and countries around the world. There is a diversity of race and language, with the unexpected strong development of a Hispanic presence from some of High Pointe’s Hispanic church-planting connections. Already a sizable amount of content has been added, including fifty videos, sixty-two songs, eighty blog posts, 178 photos, and 191 discussions. The site has averaged sixty-six visitors per day, with a total of 12,977 visits since the site launch in November.<sup>32</sup> With the number of members and traffic that the site has, it is clear that the Missional Outreach Network has passed a crucial first stage of development, with enough content, activity, and value to keep the members coming back to the site.<sup>33</sup>

The law of network effects says that the value of the site will only increase as more and more participants and content is added;<sup>34</sup> however, the site has already proven to be

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<sup>31</sup> In fact, the site has drawn enough attention within Churches of Christ to be written up in a fellowship-wide newspaper. See Bobby Ross, "Online Networking: A Tool to Help Save Souls in Cyberspace?" (2009), [http://www.christianchronicle.org/article2158735~\\_Online\\_networking:\\_A\\_tool\\_to\\_help\\_save\\_souls\\_in\\_cyberspace%3F](http://www.christianchronicle.org/article2158735~_Online_networking:_A_tool_to_help_save_souls_in_cyberspace%3F) (accessed 4-28-09).

<sup>32</sup> These website statistics for the Missional Outreach Network are as of May 22, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> This is no mean feat. The authors of *Groundswell* say: “Communities are cheap to create—you can create one for free at ning.com, for example—but to create an effective community, you must constantly support and maintain it. Communities need care and feeding—with content, new features, and redesigns—to stay relevant and successful.” See Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008), 123. Online communities also need continued “care and feeding” through encouragement of members, prompting, and recruitment of members to add content. “Support communities need activity—few will go to a forum that’s not buzzing with activity . . . Companies should estimate that between 1 percent and 5 percent of their customers will participate in a support forum.” See Li and Bernoff, *Groundswell*, 172. This is why, when beginning a site, creators should recruit a core group of content providers. See Larry Weber, *Marketing to the Social Web: How Digital Customer Communities Build Your Business* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 64.

<sup>34</sup> Fraser and Dutta, *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom*, 3.

valuable in preparation for evangelism in many ways. The site has helped bring about missional transformation through the sharing of how God is at work in mission. This story telling helps change the heart and heroes of a congregation, an essential step in missional transformation.<sup>35</sup> I have been able to share stories from groups such as the Food Pantry Outreach, Clothes Closet Outreach, and Evangelistic Bible Studies back to the congregation not only online, but in sermons and through the church bulletin, greatly increasing the participation in these ministries and others.<sup>36</sup> These stories, of course, reinforce missional concepts for the participants in the site as well. In addition, the groups of the site help to create an even more relational aspect to help with this reinforcement, due to their smaller size and specific interest; however, because these groups are almost all open to others, they still benefit from the participation of the rest of the network.<sup>37</sup>

Numerous “problems” have also been solved and resources shared during this time, not only through blogs, but through the forty groups on the site. Members have found evangelistic Bible studies, campus ministry organizations, technological solutions for video applications, people to serve at the homeless shelter, and much more. Helping in this problem solving has been the great diversity of participants on the site, with “solutions” coming from surprising sources. For instance, one of our members who is in her seventies started a prayer

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<sup>35</sup> Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 250-254. See also the discussion of “missional imagination” in Alan J. Roxburgh, Fred Romanuk, and Leadership Network, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 146-152.

<sup>36</sup> See Appendix 1 for an example of the stories from each of these groups.

<sup>37</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, 1st ed. (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2002), 172-173. Gladwell explains how John Wesley used group power to catalyze the Methodist movement, which grew from 20,000 to 90,000 adherents in five to six years. “Wesley realized that if you wanted to bring about a fundamental change in people’s belief and behavior, a change that would persist and serve as an example to others, you needed to create a community around them, where those new beliefs could be practiced and expressed and nurtured.”

group to pray for our outreach efforts and for people with whom we are studying.<sup>38</sup> Overall, the benefits of the site have been substantial and should only increase. In fact, sites such as the Missional Outreach Network, Shapevine, and other missional sites have the potential to catalyze a worldwide missional movement.

## II. Evangelistic Engagement through Social Networking

### *Facebook*

Sites like the Missional Outreach Network can be great sites for collaboration and resource sharing for mission; however, how can Christians and churches directly engage non-Christians through social networking? One approach would be to create a “seeker site” and invite non-Christians to join the site. While this might possibly have some value, it is analogous to opening a “Christian” coffee shop. A more missional approach is to go into coffee shops that are already frequented by non-Christians. A “go to the customer” type of approach for companies is also advocated by the authors of *Groundswell*, who say that “if your customers already have communities . . . then it’s best to participate in those communities rather than build your own.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, to be fully missional, individual Christians and churches must “go out” to online, interactive sites that non-Christians use and engage them there.

While there are numerous interactive sites on the web, any missional online strategy must include the powerhouse of online social networking sites, Facebook. In fact, this site

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<sup>38</sup> See Appendix 2 for a list of the groups and number of members in the groups on the site.

<sup>39</sup> Li and Bernoff, *Groundswell*, 149.

has become so mainstream that now anyone *not* using Facebook is making a statement.<sup>40</sup> So at High Pointe we have launched a High Pointe Facebook page, and we have embedded a link to Facebook in our website. While this may seem like a small step, for those who use Facebook this shows that a church is current and relevant. We are also feeding our sermon messages, videos, pictures, Twitter posts, and blog posts all onto our High Pointe page and onto my personal Facebook account. This content can then spread “virally” to both Christians and their non-Christian, online “friends.”<sup>41</sup>

A strategy of increasing awareness of a church or a biblical message through encouraging Christians to “Facebook friend” their nonchurched friends could be viewed simply as advertising or marketing.<sup>42</sup> Traditional advertising has been a mixed blessing, with

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<sup>40</sup> While MySpace has been a phenomenon, it was surpassed by Facebook in 2008 in number of unique visitors, and it is becoming mainly a platform for young people and music fans. This is why High Pointe has chosen to concentrate on using Facebook instead of MySpace in its evangelistic efforts. See Farhad Manjoo, “You Have No Friends: Everyone Else Is on Facebook. Why Aren't You?” (2009), <http://www.slate.com/id/2208678/> (accessed 5-17-09). Facebook was begun by Mark Zimmerman, who dropped out of Harvard to create the site. At first Facebook merely connected college students. By 2009, however, Facebook has surpassed 300 million members and is used by both the old and the young alike. Many businesses are beginning to understand the power of Facebook in reaching new “customers.” See Don Tapscott, *Grown up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 59. The year 2009 is the year that the White House added Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter accounts, showing that these social networking sites are now mainstream. Patrick Cooper, “White House Joins Facebook, Myspace, Twitter,” (2009), <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/theoval/post/2009/05/66258543/1> (accessed 5-26-09).

<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that the use of the term “friend” on Facebook is quite generous. In the real world, anyone claiming to have three hundred, seven hundred, or thousands of friends (as is often found on Facebook) would obviously have a definition of friendship that is different from the norm. Sociologists have theorized that people can have some type of relationship with up to perhaps one hundred fifty people (called Dunbar’s number). Fraser and Dutta, *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom*, 48. Most of these friends are what Ray Anderson would call “distant neighbors” whom we are called to love as much as our “near neighbors.” Ray Sherman Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2006), 154.

<sup>42</sup> Brad Adare, founder of “Church Marketing Sucks,” points out that all churches market whether they know it or not, and that most do it poorly. He says “good church marketing is being authentic and telling your story well.” Bailey, Storch, and Leadership Network, *The Blogging Church: Sharing the Story of Your Church through Blogs*, 75. See also Steven Holzner, *Facebook Marketing: Leverage Social Media to Grow Your Business* (Indianapolis, IN: Que, 2009).

recent studies showing that it may alienate as much as draw in outsiders;<sup>43</sup> however, Web 2.0 “advertising” has the potential to do several things. First, the interaction of Christians online can provide a public witness for the Church, demonstrating the truth of the gospel. Bryan Stone, in *Evangelism after Christendom*, states that “evangelism requires as a condition of its very possibility the presence in the world of a visible people, a new society, into which persons may be invited and formed.” Thus, to truly be “evangelistic,” online interactions must do much more than advertise church events. Churches and individuals must interact in such a way that they demonstrate that which makes the church distinctive—the love and faith of the Christian community and the “*confession of [Jesus’] lordship in baptism, worship, discipline, and obedience.*”<sup>44</sup> This is the type of “content” that needs to be added to the website pages of churches and individual Christians, and this is the life into which non-Christians should be invited to share in and experience. Through this sharing, non-Christians can know what to expect at worship or other types of gatherings—something that is particularly needed for the growing number who have little to no church experience.<sup>45</sup>

Second, the presence of the Christian community online has the potential to breakdown negative stereotypes of Christians—stereotypes that are particularly present in younger Americans, who also happen to be avid online users. Kinnaman’s research of non-

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<sup>43</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 71. This research shows that this advertising often “creates three to ten times as much negative response as positive.”

<sup>44</sup> Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 194-95. One of the twelve strategies Brian McLaren gives for reaching postmoderns is to talk about faith. He says that faith was an “embarrassment” in the modern world, but it is a “way of life” for postmoderns. Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 175.

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of how worship and evangelism are related in postmodern culture, see David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 95-150.

Christian young adults shows that they view Christians to be hypocritical, judgmental, and anti-homosexual, which at the least poses a major public relations problem for the Church.<sup>46</sup>

While Christians should hold to their convictions on truth, righteousness, and sexuality, they should discuss such issues with love, making sure that their conversation is “seasoned with grace,” and that these issues are not overemphasized. Online users have a tendency to be less civil in discussions online than in person. Christians must resist all such temptations.

Third, by placing Christian pictures and video online, the Christian message can be experienced, appealing to today’s right-brained, image driven culture. Leonard Sweet uses the “E.P.I.C.” metaphor for postmodern culture, and the “I” stands for “image-driven.” Sweet rightly invites the Church to visually present the gospel, explaining that “we are a print-saturated, word-based church in the midst of visual technologies that are creating a whole new visual culture.”<sup>47</sup> The emotion that is evoked by these images is powerful, and can be even more effective than reason in reaching postmoderns, who are skeptical of logic and arguments as a means to truth. The Church needs to recover the power of images, symbols, and stories—virtually eliminated in modern presentations of the gospel—to effectively communicate the gospel today.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*. See also Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 136-162.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard I. Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 91-95. Shane Hipps explains how the shift to a print based culture through the printing press contributed highly to modernism, leading to individualism, the myth of objectivity, and linear, rational thinking. See Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2006), 53-61.

<sup>48</sup> Heath White states that “emotion and the vehicles that produce it, like pictures, films, stories, plays, and poems, are not necessarily any less reliable, and are possibly more powerful, than logic and its vehicles.” See Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 82. Robert Webber contends that the “primary way of communicating faith is through a combination of oral, visual, and print forms of participatory immersed communication.” See Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 65. Writers like

Thus, High Pointe is encouraging its members to become “Facebook friends” with non-Christians and is seeking to give its members good content to share. While most online friends are more acquaintances than close friends, the potential for these connections to reach people should not be underestimated. When a non-Christian does have a crisis of faith, he or she may activate his or her “network”—which now is largely through Facebook—and seek out a Christian “friend.”<sup>49</sup>

### *Blogging*

“Your competitors are probably blogging or thinking about blogging,” state the authors of *Groundswell*.<sup>50</sup> The primary “competitors” for churches, of course, are not other churches, but Satan and the forces of triviality, banality, cynicism, materialism, paganism, and nonbelief. Blogs are a specific type of interactive communication that can be used for multimedia content; however, their distinctive contribution comes from giving thoughts and insights from a person with a particular point of view. With the phenomenon of

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Brian McLaren have sought to convey truth on complex, philosophical matters in story form. See Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). Neil Livingstone’s work is devoted to showing the presence and power of gospel images in the Scriptures. Neil Livingstone, *Picturing the Gospel: Tapping the Power of the Bible’s Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> For instance, contrary to popular thought, most jobs are not obtained by direct connections, but by friends of friends (also referred to as “weak ties” or one’s “extended network”). Furthermore, 83 percent of online users trust the online recommendations of friends and acquaintances, and more than half trust the recommendations of strangers. Li and Bernoff, *Groundswell*, 102. It should also be noted that younger generations do not view these extended relationships as “shallow” or “inauthentic.” Fraser and Dutta, *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom*, 56.

<sup>50</sup> Li and Bernoff, *Groundswell*, 114.

microblogging, blogs are becoming the method of communication for when a person really has something to say.<sup>51</sup>

While certainly there is value in blogging for Christians in all places of life, it is particularly important for church leaders—especially the preaching minister or visionary of the congregation—to blog.<sup>52</sup> By exhibiting kindness, humility, and cultural awareness, ministers can help dispel some of the concerns that non-Christians have about Christians. Also, by mixing in appropriate personal disclosure, moments of doubt, global concerns, and help with spiritual matters, ministers can make themselves (and therefore their churches) approachable and relevant.<sup>53</sup> Blogging can make a large church more intimate, and it can help a minister spread a vision for outreach on a personal level. In my role as minister at High Pointe, I have blogged since beginning this ministry in 2008. In the new website design for High Pointe, my blog was even worked directly into the website.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, many of the blogs and discussions from the Missional Outreach Network are fed into my personal Twitter and Facebook accounts and the church’s accounts, expanding the reach of these

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<sup>51</sup> For general tips on blogging and blogging services, see Steve Weber, *Plug Your Business* (Falls Church, VA: Weber Books, 2007), 51-79. Also see David Meerman Scott, *The New Rules of Marketing and PR: How to Use News Releases, Blogs, Podcasting, Viral Marketing, and Online Media to Reach Your Buyers Directly* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), 43-68. Paul Gillin, *The New Influencers: A Marketer's Guide to the New Social Media* (Sanger, CA: Quill Driver Books/Word Dancer Press, 2007), 63-78.

<sup>52</sup> “The ultimate responsibility for this plan should rest with an executive who reports up quite high in the organization.” See Li and Bernoff, *Groundswell*, 72.

<sup>53</sup> Rob Bell writes of the importance of doubt both biblically and culturally. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29-34. See also James Smith’s discussion of “Redeeming dogma: A More Persistent Postmodernism” in James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, *The Church and Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 116-27. Donald Miller’s “confession booth,” is a good example of the type of humility and transparency that resonates today with non-Christians. See Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003). George Barna writes that the Internet has increased the desire of people to be part of a global faith with local application. See George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 44-45.

<sup>54</sup> See James Nored, "James' Random, Stimulating, Missional, Spiritual Thoughts," <http://jamesnored.blogspot.com> (accessed 5-20-09). This blog was begun in 2005.

posts. This has helped High Pointe members grow in their understanding of, support of, and participation in their outreach efforts, and quite a number of visitors have read one or more of these blogs prior to deciding to worship at High Pointe.<sup>55</sup>

### *Microblogging*

Microblogging is exactly what the word implies: blogging with very short posts, usually limited to 140 to 160 characters. While many microblogging technologies exist, the one which at the current time has gained tremendous popularity and that High Pointe is using is Twitter. Twitter, as with other microblogging technologies, allows for posts to be made from one's cell phone, and it is being used by cutting edge, postmodern churches such as Mars Hill in Seattle.<sup>56</sup> As of April 2009, this microblogging technology had grown to 17 million registered users, up an incredible 3000% in one year.<sup>57</sup>

Many of the same benefits from blogging can be realized through microblogging, such as giving insight into a church or minister; however, the convenience and mobility in posting that the cell phone allows increases the frequency of communication that can be

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<sup>55</sup> For vision-casting and reaching out through blogs, see Bailey, Storch, and Leadership Network, *The Blogging Church: Sharing the Story of Your Church through Blogs*, 35-51. These visitor reports are based upon conversations that I and other members have had with our visitors.

<sup>56</sup> See Amy Green, "The Gospel According to Twitter," [http://www.sltrib.com/faith/ci\\_12429547](http://www.sltrib.com/faith/ci_12429547) (accessed 5-20-09).

<sup>57</sup> Jon Swartz, "Twitter Has Millions Tweeting in Public Communication Service," (2009), [http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/technology/2009-05-25-twitter-founders-social-networking\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/technology/2009-05-25-twitter-founders-social-networking_N.htm) (accessed 5-26-09). Twitter's retention rate, however, is just 40 percent, as compared to a retention rate of over 60 percent for Facebook and MySpace. In addition to network effects, the growth of Twitter in 2009 was aided by publicity from celebrity exposure and endorsement. Actor Ashton Kutcher had a public race with Larry King to see who could be the first to have 1 million Twitter followers—a contest which he won. Five weeks later, his followers had nearly doubled. One week after talk show host Oprah Winfrey signed up for Twitter, traffic to the Twitter site increased 43 percent. Douglass MacMillan, "Social Media: The Ashton Kutcher Effect," *BusinessWeek* (2009), [http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/may2009/tc2009053\\_934757.htm?chan=top+news\\_top+news+index+++temp\\_news+%2B+analysis](http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/may2009/tc2009053_934757.htm?chan=top+news_top+news+index+++temp_news+%2B+analysis) (accessed 5-26-09). These effects very much follow Gladwell's research, which says that social "epidemics" are "driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people—"connectors," such as Kutcher and Oprah. Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, 21.

made by a person. High Pointe is developing a team of “Twitterers” who post spiritual messages on the church’s Twitter account. In addition, High Pointe is planning on encouraging its members to “follow” non-Christians, who often reciprocate. Twitter can also receive RSS feeds, which then can be fed into various websites. High Pointe feeds RSS feeds of its sermons, videos, my blog, church announcements, and several groups on the Missional Outreach Network into Facebook. This amplifies the power of Facebook, allowing non-Christians to “overhear” the gospel. Twitter can also help members to have real live meetings with people, which will be discussed in the next section.<sup>58</sup>

### III. Face to Face Meetings through Social Networking

Online interaction can help people overhear the gospel and breakdown stereotypes and misconceptions about churches and Christians, and it also opens up doors of opportunities to reach non-Christians. The online world is not a perfect world. At its worst, people can use the Internet to create the illusion of intimacy, while masking one’s true identity. On Facebook, services like FriendFlood can post fake, attractive “friends” on a person’s profile to make him or her look popular.<sup>59</sup> The collection of online friends can be an exercise in narcissism, and social networking sites can be extremely addictive.<sup>60</sup> Despite these challenges, online social networks are in fact often viewed to be authentic communities. A 2007 study reported that nearly one-half of those who joined online

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<sup>58</sup> For ideas of how Twitter can be used to promote an organization, see Julio Ojeda-Zapata, *Twitter Means Business: How Microblogging Can Help or Hurt Your Company* (Cupertino, CA: Habbyabout.info, 2008). See also Anthony Coppedge, “Twitter for Churches,” <http://twitterforchurches.com/> (accessed 5-20-09).

<sup>59</sup> Fraser and Dutta, *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom*, 39.

<sup>60</sup> “In the virtual culture of narcissism, the composition of our ‘friends’ network has become a key identity signature. It’s a social barometer that validates self-esteem, confers status and measures social capital.” *Ibid.*, 41.

communities “say they ‘feel as strongly’ about their virtual community as they do about their real-world communities.”<sup>61</sup>

Both for humanity in general and for evangelism in particular, however, online social networking cannot be the end goal, for participation in (real) Christian community is necessary for conversion.<sup>62</sup> The process of conversion in the “real” world is beyond the scope of this paper; however, there are several ways that online social networking can help lead to these in-person encounters.<sup>63</sup> Most obviously, Christians can make personal invitations online to their virtual friends to get together for coffee, conversation, Bible study, service, or worship.

There are also social networking applications that can directly help people online to get together and meet other online users, including people that they have never met before. For example, the Twitter site “Nearby Tweets” allows Twitter to find Twitter users in a certain city who “tweet” certain keywords.<sup>64</sup> I have used this to search and follow people in McKinney who use the word “missional,” helping me to meet (in person) locals who have

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<sup>61</sup> Nicholas G. Carr, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), 124.

<sup>62</sup> Shane Higgs, author of *Flickering Pixels*, states that online social networking is not a neutral aid for community, and charges that online social networking “inoculates people against the desire to be *physically present* with others in real social networks—networks like a church or a meal at someone’s home.” See Shane Higgs, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 116. Leonard Sweet, on the other hand, contends that “the new cyberfriends and connections one finds in e-life will only stir up the hunger for face-to-face community.” Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 115. See also Manjoo, “You Have No Friends: Everyone Else Is on Facebook. Why Aren’t You?” Manjoo asserts that Facebook actually increases the desire for face-to-face contact and leads to deeper conversations, with “status” updates providing conversation topics. See also Clive Thompson’s article that explains “ambient awareness”; Clive Thompson, “Brave New World of Digital Intimacy,” (2008), [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all) (accessed 5-20-09). Undoubtedly, both assertions are true at different times for different people.

<sup>63</sup> For a model of how community is an integral part of conversion, see George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West-- Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 47-75.

<sup>64</sup> Brian Cray, “Nearby Tweets,” <http://nearbytweets.com/> (accessed 5-20-09). See also WebProNews, “Twellowhood,” <http://www.twellow.com/twellowhood/> (accessed 5-22-09).

served at the Samaritan Inn, a local homeless shelter. Other keywords that can be searched for are “God,” “Jesus,” “spiritual,” “faith,” “lonely,” “sad,” “depressed”—anything that might point towards a person who might be interested in or in need of human contact or spiritual direction. Christians and ministers can also search for keywords on hobbies or common points of interest, such as “Texas Rangers,” “scrapbooking,” “politics” and the like. By “following” these users and interacting with them, natural points of connection can be made, leading to an invitation for coffee or some other type of in-person meeting. Meetup.com is another site that can be used to form groups of similar interest for the purpose of meeting in person. Part of Meetup.com’s “manifesto” is “Let’s use the Internet to get people off the Internet” and “When people get together, amazing things happen.”<sup>65</sup> The tools are there to move people from online community to real world community, where they can be shaped by the gospel as it is told and lived out by God’s people.

### **Conclusion**

There is much more that that can be done to use social networking for outreach at High Pointe, such as learning how to use video tools such as YouTube to share the gospel in creative ways, increasing the percentage of members using social networking, and finding ways to measure the effectiveness of various approaches; however, significant progress has been made to these efforts through the creation of the Missional Outreach Network and the use of Facebook, Twitter, videos, and blogs.<sup>66</sup> Some outward measures of the success of these efforts perhaps can be seen in our Harvest Sunday giving, which goes to outreach, and

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<sup>65</sup> First Heifermann and Scott Heifermann, "Meetup About Page" <http://www.meetup.com/about/> (accessed 5-21-09). For a list of the different types of Meetup groups in McKinney, see Appendix 3.

<sup>66</sup> Hui Ying, *Youtube: Making Money by Video Sharing and Advertising Your Business for Free* (Kitchener, ON: Self Help Publishers, 2007).

has increased from \$126,000 in 2007 to pledges of \$222,000 in 2009; the number of new outreach groups and ministries that have begun; and the tremendous number of people who are being fed, clothed, prayed for, and studied with in the community that surrounds High Pointe. God is at work.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> McNeal suggests that churches need to track “missional markers,” and High Pointe has begun to do this. For instance, High Pointe publishes in its bulletin each week the number of people fed and clothed, the number of baptisms, the number who have attended recovery group meetings, and the number of community groups that have used its building. See McNeal and Leadership Network, *Missional Renaissance*, 67-87.

## Appendix 1 - Stories from Missional Outreach Network

### *Story from the Clothes Closet Group:*

“We had a record breaking two days at the Clothes Closet, I believe, with 154 customers, not counting children! Needless to say, the great abundance of donations received from the JBF [Just Between Friends] sale, are all gone! We gave out 6 Spanish bibles on Thursday, two of those people were excited to learn of the Hispanic church in Plano, and plan on attending! Thank you, to those who donated clothes this week. The children’s clothes were wonderful, and the men’s clothes were greatly needed. In fact, a very tall slender man walked in just as I had put out size 30x36 jeans. He couldn’t believe we had his size and was delighted!”<sup>1</sup>

### *Story from the Evangelistic Bible Study Group:*

“Deneen, Linda and I are studying with Kristie (this week was our 3rd week). It is amazing the changes that are occurring in her life. She is starting to reconnect with family, getting trained to help out in the office where her husband works and overall has a great outlook on her reconnection with God. She is studying the Redemption Story by James N. She works with her husband on the weekends but is enjoying the sermons thru High Pointe’s web site. This is a great tool for those that are not able to come to a service. I also sent her an invite to this website. Kristie offered to volunteer at the church so I am picking her up on Tuesday to help with the Angel Trees. We will continue this story every time we meet with her. She has truly touched all our hearts and we are so thankful for this opportunity. Please keep Kristie in your prayers.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Story from the Food Pantry Group:*

“Ramona came into the church office on Monday. I recognized her and wondered why she was coming for food on Monday instead of our normal food pantry days of Wednesday and Thursday. Maybe she was going to ask for assistance to pay a bill like so many other people who stop by. Ramona walked to my desk and said the most unusual thing. She said ‘thank you.’ Week after week at High Pointe we feed and clothe those in need and pray they are blessed by our efforts. Sometimes our regulars quit coming and we hope that means they have found employment and can support their families on their own. We are thankful that God has allowed us to bless them during a difficult situation and we don’t expect anything in return. But it’s such a blessing to us when someone comes back to share good news. Ramona had good news. She got a job! I remembered her telling me last week that she was going for a second interview and I told her I would pray for her. She took me at my word and had no doubt that it was God who answered her prayers. As this quiet, shy woman looked me in the eyes she handed me an envelope. On the front of the envelope the word ‘tithes’ was written. As she placed it in my hands, tears started flowing from her eyes as she told me how thankful she was to God for

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<sup>1</sup> Dalana Squires, “Weekly Share April 22-23,” [http://www.missionaloutreachnetwork.com/group/hcoc\\_clothescloset/forum/topics/weekly-share-april-2223](http://www.missionaloutreachnetwork.com/group/hcoc_clothescloset/forum/topics/weekly-share-april-2223) (accessed 5-13-09).

<sup>2</sup> Teresa Riley, “Story of Redemption - Bible Study with Russell,” <http://www.missionaloutreachnetwork.com/group/highpointeevangelisticbiblestudies/forum/topics/story-of-redemption-bible-1> (accessed 5-21-09).

answering our prayers and she wanted to give something back to Him out of her first paycheck.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Hardin, “Food Pantry Outreach,” <http://www.missionaloutreachnetwork.com/group/highpointefoodpantryteam> (accessed 5-13-09).

Appendix 2 - Groups, Members, and Group Descriptions  
on the Missional Outreach Network

*BLESS - 9 members*

This is a dialogical chronicling of Clay Neighborhood's implementation of Five Discipleship Disciplines. We use the acronym BLESS to describe our attempt at reshaping our lifestyles in light of our Teacher Jesus Christ.

*Africans Claiming Africa for Christ - 2 members*

The focus of this group is the spiritual transformation of Africa by Africans in partnership with other concerned followers of Jesus Christ.

*Evangelistic Bible Studies - 38 members*

This is a workgroup for sharing stories, ideas, resources, and current and upcoming evangelistic Bible study opportunities.

*Missional Spiritual Formation - 36 members*

This group explores the relationship between Christian spiritual formation and missional theology.

*Technology and Outreach - 64 members*

The goal of this group is to brainstorm and share ideas on how to leverage the use of technology to evangelize and serve.

*Women's Book Talk Outreach - 13 members*

This group shares thoughts, ideas, and information about book talk gatherings. The group reads/discusses spiritually themed books and gathers together.

*Preparing for Short Term Missions - 8 members*

Many of us are preparing to participate or lead a short-term mission trip in the near future. Please share any resources that will benefit others in this group.

*Scripture and the People of God - 20 members*

This group is the place to discuss how to help people and churches read the Bible missionally.

*Genesis Alliance-Planting Latino Churches - 12 members*

Genesis Alliance is dedicated to planting Latino churches in the Dallas-Ft. Worth Metroplex and throughout America.

*Sharing Faith through Spiritual Conversations - 37 members*

This is a group for all who are interested in sharing faith with people by engaging them in spiritual conversations. The group shares stories, ideas, and resources for these efforts.

*Let's Start Talking/Centurion Project - 8 members*

Let's Start Talking is an organization that reaches out to non-English proficient people to help them improve their English skills by reading the Gospel of Luke, Acts and John.

*Fuller Theological Seminary (D.Min.) - 4 members*

This is a support group for those who are DMin students at Fuller. Ask & answer questions, encourage one another, finish final DMin papers!

*Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix - 44 members*

This group was created to share ideas, resources, and dialogue for those who want to understand postmodern culture and its implications for doing ministry. Includes discussions of "emerging church.

*Missional Group Life - 38 members*

An ongoing conversation on the place and role of group life in nurturing a missional impulse.

*Clothes Closet Outreach - 16 members*

This workgroup shares information, ideas, and stories about current and upcoming Clothes Closet events.

*World Radio - 21 members*

This group is for those interested in sharing the gospel through radio broadcasting in native tongues.

*Coffee Talk on Higher Grounds - 43 members*

Coffee, Fellowship, and Missions. One of these can lead to the next. When people meet to talk it is usually over a cup of coffee. Use this to help one's faith reach higher ground. This is a place to share success stories and ideas.

*Prayer - 29 members*

This group is designed for those who desire to spend time daily in prayer for the ministries in missional outreach.

*Church Planting - 28 members*

This is a group for individuals or organizations that are interested in or involved in church planting as a means to reaching people for Christ.

Appendix 3 – Categories and Number of Groups  
on Meetup.com for McKinney, Texas<sup>1</sup>

Arts & Entertainment – 66 Groups  
Cultures & Languages – 24 Groups  
Hobbies – 90 Groups  
Pets & Animals – 34 Groups  
Science – 4 Groups  
Business & Career – 150 Groups  
Education – 1 Group  
Internet & Technology – 18 Groups  
Politics & Activism – 18 Groups  
Social – 58 Groups  
Communities & Lifestyles – 22 Groups  
Health & Support – 87 Groups  
Parenting & Family – 60 Groups  
Religion & Beliefs – 49 Groups  
Sports & Recreation – 55 Groups

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<sup>1</sup> First Heifermann and Scott Heifermann, “Groups in Mckinney, TX,” on “Meetup.com”,  
<http://www.meetup.com/cities/us/tx/mckinney/groups/religion/?radius=25.0> (accessed 5-26-09).

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