

BOUNDARY AWARENESS ISSUES FOR CLERGY IN THE AREAS OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION INCLUDING ELECTRONIC SOCIAL NETWORKING

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Introduction: Relationships – Incarnational and Other

Electronic communication is sufficiently advanced as a medium of human connectedness that numerous programs are now available to facilitate our continuing need and desire to connect with others. While we might think immediately of e-mail, recent technologies include electronic social networking, such as My Space and Facebook, and micro-blogging, currently through Twitter.

For eons, humans related to the family we were given, the friends we developed, and the tribes with which we bonded out of common interest. Relationships and communication were incarnational – requiring that we be in one another's presence. Our understanding of what it means to be incarnational began to change as technology evolved. People sought to be incarnational to one another, asynchronously, over long distances through letters. The telephone allowed people to be present for each other in real time (synchronously), albeit only by sound. This evolution, however, was slow, which allowed norms to form in a manner that people generally understood and followed. Violators of these norms were usually socially sanctioned in one way or another (e.g. the creation of a "do not call" database to prevent unwanted phone call solicitations.)

Today, communication technology is evolving at a lightning pace. Technology today allows people to have friends they have never met and may never meet face-to-face; a practice more common than many realize. Changing communication technology has shifted the understanding of the words, concepts and metaphors of the familiar face-to-face world – words such as "friend" and "community."

The world of electronic social networking blurs these words, concepts and metaphors even further because they do not translate perfectly. Furthermore, novices are often confused when they first engage the world of electronic social networking because there is an array of new issues that have no direct analog in the incarnate world. (For example, in our face-to-face world, most of us have different groups of friends with whom we interact differently and with whom we share different pieces or amounts of personal information. We tend to live our lives in such a way that, for the most part, keeps these circles distinct; our niece and nephew don't usually run into our professor or our high school classmate. In electronic social networks, however, the boundaries between our "friends" collapse, thus giving everyone the same status and making them privy to the same information.)

Digital social networking is here to stay, offering new possibilities for building new relationships and deepening old ones. As of April 2009, 200,000,000 people are on Facebook. They are there for many reasons: curiosity, a desire or need to connect, a desire or need to relate in new ways to new and old friends alike. Because we, as clergy, are called to engage our congregants and reach out to those seeking community, we must at least understand digital social networking -- its positive potential, its issues and its risks.

The purpose of this brief reflection is to lift up some of the issues that arise as a result of electronic social networking – specifically those issues involving boundaries that may be crossed inappropriately. Juliette Powell, who runs a career consulting business and wrote a book about social networking – *33 Million People in the Room* – says that social networking is "all about establishing boundaries."¹

This reflection is only a beginning. As of now, little has been written on this topic, and new technologies are evolving every day that will raise new questions. Just as clergy must pay attention to boundaries in the face-to-face world, we must also become knowledgeable about and pay attention to boundaries in the world of electronic communication technologies.

Useful Metaphors to Understand Electronic Communication

- with gratitude to Mark Gibbs, "To Tweet or not to Tweet, that's not an option" www.computerworld.com

The core of electronic social networking is the establishment of a commons, a shared area, wherein people communicate. In contrast, normal email has no commons. Email is more like a person to person phone call. Blogs have a localized commons, and there is usually a specific focus to the hierarchical discussion in response to a blog. Thus, blogs are like lectures with follow-up questions and discussion. But you have to attend the lecture – you must navigate to the blog. Social networking involves a global commons. And the information being shared in that global commons comes to you (as well as to everyone else who is part of that commons) – directly to your home page or news feed.

¹ See New York Times, 4/26/2009, "Career Couch" column by Matt Villano.

Second, electronic communication technology spreads information rapidly and cheaply. Consider the speed with which breaking news becomes well known — news cycles have become a relic of the past.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Although we might presume that communications are private or confidential, there is no guarantee of that. The recipient of a confidential or private communication could choose to make it public, even if it is an unethical act.

E-mail, however, should force us to think carefully about what and how we communicate. E-mail users often cite the caution: “never email anything that you won’t be comfortable seeing posted on a bulletin board.” First, sending a “confidential e-mail” is a contradiction in terms. E-mail (and most forms of electronic communication) have an indefinite life span and can be shared (in the original form or in an undetectably altered form) with anyone. Email can exist on personal computers as well as on servers which are thousands of miles away long after the originator and the recipient have deleted them. The federal government also has the ability to monitor and gather your email without your knowledge and without obtaining a warrant.

The life you live in your electronic communication is an open book. (To test just one dimension of this, conduct a Google search of your name and see the results.) This truth suggests that when we make use of electronic communication, we should do so with a heightened awareness around privacy. ***However private an electronic communication may seem to be, generally, it should never be considered private or confidential.*** (Examples of what might be out there include your name on a website of an event you attended, the fact that you have accounts at Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. . .)

Is It Authentic? Can you “keep it real”?

Although photography was invented almost 200 years ago to capture images of beauty and preserve them, since the 1860’s photos have been manipulated to present as “real” something that was not (<http://www.cs.dartmouth.edu/farid/research/digitaltampering/>.) For example, the Iranian news agency recently released a digitally altered photograph of a missile launch.² In the realm of digital communication, what is real and what is fake are often indistinguishable.

Every day on Facebook, fictional profiles are created and trashed, inaccurate (sometimes provocative) status reports are posted and digitally altered photos are made available.

However fundamental the boundary between what is real and what is fiction may seem, it is fading. And this is only one of the many boundaries that digital reality calls into question. Wars could be fought, lives lost, reputations ruined, adolescents (and others) driven to suicide — all because of something that is a created fiction.

The fact that in Massachusetts (and in some other states) clergy are mandated reporters adds enormous complexity to this situation. If a clergyperson is electronically privy to a situation which s/he is mandated to report, but if the authenticity of the data is unverifiable, must the clergyperson report it? If it was “only a joke” could reporting it cause more damage than good? How would one know? (My point here is not to answer these serious questions, but to lift them up in the context of these overall considerations.)

Posting and Tagging Photos

Images on the web can be quickly copied and used for purposes other than originally intended. Students know this very well. Today, grabbing a picture from a web site to insert into a report for school is a common practice.

² Mike Nizza and Patrick J. Lyons. *In an Iranian Image, a Missile Too Many*. **The New York Times**. July 10, 2008. <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/07/10/in-an-iranian-image-a-missile-too-many/?scp=1&sq=digitally%20altered%20photo%20Iranian%20missiles&st=cse>

The ability to send images across the Internet quickly and cheaply demands that thoughtful care must be taken before posting photos. This kind of attentiveness is part of our role as Christians and as church leaders -- to build and nurture positive relationships. We must recognize that a funny photo in one context could prove to be an embarrassment (or worse) in another. Do not post any photo in which the subject is recognizable without first securing the subject's permission. Furthermore, even though "tagging" photos (identifying subjects by name) is a common practice, it is best to refrain from this. While tagging is often an expression of playfulness, and while Facebook account holders who are tagged are provided an opportunity to un-tag themselves, it remains the case that many people are hurt when their photo is posted by someone without their permission. Even when we're being playful, we need to play nicely. In addition, a photograph is the property of the photographer and as such the photographer should have control over its use. Post only photographs for which you've obtained the photographer's permission.

Cliques, Gossip³ and Bullying

As with face-to-face relationships, gossip and bullying occur in electronic communications. As pastors of people engaged in this medium, we must understand that our parishioners can be victims or aggressors or both. When a person is the victim of bullying in an electronic medium, often the only path to safety is to disconnect from all forms of digital communication or to create a new digital identity – neither of which is desirable.

Pastors must monitor how we ourselves can be pulled into these activities. Digital cliques often have more power than real life cliques. Recognizing this, youth and young adults engage in a good deal of policing – trying to keep a lid on exchanges that might otherwise escalate out of control.

On a positive note, people sometimes find that they can connect with more people who are different from themselves – people they would never connect with in real life – through electronic social networks. In real life, they may limit their contact to various cliques/groups, but electronic communication allows broader connections, including exposure to views that may not affirm our own. Of course, it's worth mentioning that such exposure is not always positive!

First Exposing, then Extending the Self

Creating a personal profile in Facebook (or the equivalent in other programs) involves a decision about how much of your "self" you want to expose. The user provides details so that his or her profile is more complete. Once completed, very few users exercise any control over who will have access to their profile because it is "pushed" to the network of "friends". The entire experience of social networking amplifies the invitation to share personal information and relegates to small print (or a privacy policy) any concerns that may arise from such sharing.

The profile can provide some personal information that can be informative to people who are in one's social network but who have a generally tenuous personal relationship. Such information gives people in the network a fuller picture of the person. At the extreme, however, one can be too generous with personal information. When combined with widespread "friending" this proliferation of shared personal information can take on a "life of its own," as the pastor no longer has control of who may ultimately see this information. This is a boundary one should consider before engaging in electronic social networking.

One way of dealing with this is to become a master of the controls Facebook makes available on its privacy settings. Nick O'Neill writes an independent "All Facebook" blog in which he has published a guide to Facebook's new privacy settings.⁴ He details ways users can organize friends into distinct lists, and choose which list sees what from the user's personal profile. He also explains how users can prevent their personal profiles from coming up in a standard Google search. But Mr. O'Neill is the first to point out that virtually no one proceeds with this kind of intentionality.

Some professionals who are sophisticated, early adopters are finding Twitter to be a more useful professional tool. It's completely open, public and searchable. No decisions about with whom one should/should not be friends. And those who "lifestream" (provide an ongoing account of what they are up to) often make sophisticated decisions concerning what they do/do not report, so that the privacy of their (real life) friends and their own privacy is protected. To someone unfamiliar with the technology, this is certainly a new way of thinking. But I am convinced that in the next few years (or more quickly) norms will

³ For further reflection, consider the following book: *Gossip: Ten Pathways to Eliminate It from Your Life and Transform Your Soul* http://www.amazon.com/Gossip-Pathways-Eliminate-Your-Transform/dp/0757300553/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1238672318&sr=1-2

⁴ Mentioned in New York Times, 4/26/2009, "Career Couch" column by Matt Villano.

evolve in this and related electronic arenas that will be widely understood and practiced.⁵

An additional, related point is that in real life, we can (more or less) walk away from our past.⁶ Often, we do this intentionally – when a tragedy occurs, we may pick up and move to a new town so as not to be always reminded of the loss. When we make a huge mistake that effects a lot of people, we may move to “get a new start” on life. We also may do this when we move to a new city to embark on a new career. In the world of electronic social networking, you are forever connected with everything you have posted, for better and for worse.⁷ Surely we have entered a world where forgiveness will play an even more essential role.

Power Dynamics: Part A – Friending

In our real life relationships, we benefit from thousands of clues about power dynamics as we relate to a single individual, or as a member of a group. Those clues are absent in an electronic social network. The digital medium flattens these real life dynamics. People, who, in real life, may be in widely divergent positions of power, find that their power differential is significantly reduced in the digital world. Thus, Wikipedia may have professors and high school students competing with one another to author an entry on a movie.

This fact can lure us into thinking that the power dynamics that inform real life are not relevant to the world of electronic social networking. Not true! Many people feel that if they receive a “Friend” request, they cannot ignore it, though Facebook provides a clear option to do so. And once they are “friends” with someone, removing that friend as a friend seems anti-social or worse. This is especially true if they are a subordinate or on the weak end of a power relationship. Because of this, a person who is in a one-up power relationship to someone else, such as a pastor in relationship to his/her parishioner, should not take the initiative by sending that person a friend request because that person might feel obliged to accept the friend request and thus reveal to the pastor aspects of his/her life that s/he would otherwise choose to keep private. In particular, neither adults or youth ministers should take the initiative by sending a youth or child a friend request. While a youth minister may choose to accept a friend request from a youth, this should not be done without some thought.

Some would say that the medium of electronic social networking is so popular that ministers, especially youth pastors, cannot ignore it (see Chris Forbes mini-book “Facebook for Pastors” available through www.ministrymarketingcoach.com.) What’s important to realize is that regardless of the medium, the pastor is the one who is responsible for maintaining boundaries. The fact that the medium of electronic social networking in no way encourages either awareness or discipline makes it all the more important for the pastor to reflect seriously on the implications of his/her engagement with the medium. Pastors who use electronic social networks should always be mindful that their activities and interests are available for every “friend” to see whether that “friend” is a colleague, social friend, family member, or parishioner.

Many pastors have had the experience of giving Facebook a try, friending a wide variety of people and later, after becoming more familiar with Facebook, reconsidering having accepted some of those “friends”. They are then faced with the delicate decision of whether or not to remove someone as a friend and the possible repercussions of that action (even though the friend who is removed is not notified that they have been removed).

Power Dynamics: Part B – Private Communication

Pastors should refrain from engaging in one-on-one electronic communication, such as e-mail, with youth or children. If a pastor has a need to send an e-mail to a youth, the pastor should copy the youth’s parents and/or a colleague of the pastor (or adult co-leader of the youth group). While it is conceivable that in very special circumstances this consideration might be temporarily waived if the youth or child is seeking confidential counseling,⁸ shifting immediately to a face-to-face meeting in a public place would be the best route. It must be said that years of work in boundary awareness teaches that it is when such rules are flexed or waived – for whatever reason – that we open ourselves to transgressing additional boundaries.

⁵ I’m grateful to Rachel Happe for her deep insight on these and related matters. Of course with all of the public records (electronic and otherwise) that are readily accessible, this is not as easy as it once was.

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⁷ Peggy Orenstein. *The Way We Live Now Growing Up on Facebook*. **The New York Times Magazine**. March 10, 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/15/magazine/15wwln-lede-t.html?scp=18&sq=Facebook&st=cse>

⁸ An example could be a teenager who chooses to disclose his/her sexual orientation to the pastor and does not want his/her parents to know. In situations like this the pastor should keep a complete hard copy record of all the communications in a confidential file.

A pastor should never text a youth or child in his/her congregation (even though youth may text each other constantly.) This is because texting is private, one-on-one communication.

Providing Clarity in the Expectations of Electronic Social Networks

If a pastor has a Facebook page and is Facebook friends with members of his/her parish, it is likely that at least some of those parishioners will develop expectations as a result of electronic posts. Consider a situation in which the parishioner posts a new status report indicating that s/he is in the hospital, or that the parishioner is feeling down today. The parishioner may think that this is a fully legitimate medium to alert his/her pastor (and other friends), and having alerted them, the parishioner may expect a response. Such a consideration suggests that if a pastor is going to have parishioners as part of his/her electronic social network, the pastor needs to be clear about expectations. (And as every pastor knows, stating our expectations clearly in no way assures that the expectations of our parishioners will align with our expectations.) Another approach would be for the pastor to state something like this on his/her status: "Going offline for the next 24 hours." (see "Sabbath and Self Care" below.)

Consider a different scenario: a pastor with a number of Facebook friends from his/her current congregation decides to leave that congregation to serve another ministry. Here, it is best if the pastor attempts to make virtual reality conform to the best practices observed in real life. The temptation to engage in inappropriate communication with former parishioners by maintaining continuity through a social network that was established when s/he was that person's pastor is huge, unless the departing pastor posts a message explaining the boundary issues, and declaring that upon leaving that parish, s/he will be removing those parishioners as Facebook friends. Otherwise, the opportunity for inappropriate communication (e.g. the parishioner begins to complain about the new pastor) is a boundary transgression waiting to happen. This illustrates how many pastors may have created profiles and extended invitations to friends without having fully examined all the implications.

Sabbath and Self Care

Some pastors wanting to make use of electronic social networking have established distinct personal and professional identities. In Facebook, this would mean having both a personal profile and a professional profile. (This requires having two emails, which most pastors have, and many use to keep personal and professional communication separate. However, creating more than one profile is technically a violation of Facebook Terms of Service.) Establishing separate identities can improve self-care by limiting the arenas in which we incur a professional obligation to pay attention.

On a broader note, it's easy to get drawn into the digital world, and once we establish a presence within the digital medium (whether this is e-mail or electronic social networks or micro-blogging or something else) its 24/7 nature makes setting limits difficult. Furthermore, even if we are capable of setting limits, acting on those limits can result in people we care about feeling ignored or worse.

Note that the preceding paragraph fully applies to those of us who have cell phones and use them in our professional role. Even if we're capable of turning our cell phone off, the fact that we have a cell phone will, for many parishioners, signal our availability 24/7.

Holding onto Sabbath amidst all of this is enormously challenging. But it is essential if we are to model the kind of life Christ calls us to.

SUMMARY OF BOUNDARY GUIDELINES AND CAUTIONS FOR ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION AND ELECTRONIC SOCIAL NETWORKING:

1. Never e-mail anything you would not want posted on a public bulletin board.
2. Do not forward an e-mail you have received without first obtaining permission from the sender.
3. Never use electronic communication to share something that is confidential.
4. Pay particular attention to the use of language in electronic communication, recognizing that inflection and tone are often indecipherable. .
5. People in a one-up power relationship should not initiate an invitation to become Facebook friends with a subordinate or a youth or a child.
6. Do not post photographs or videos of people without first securing their permission. Do not identify them by name.

7. Do not post photographs or videos of children without first securing permission from a parent or guardian and do not identify any child by name.
8. Be clear with the congregation on the appropriate communication channel/s to use in case of an emergency.