

Churches Increasingly Fans of Social Media

Churches are turning increasingly to social networking tools as ministry aids and Facebook is by far the most popular tool, according to a new study by LifeWay Research.

The survey of 1,003 Protestant congregations was conducted in September and sponsored by LifeWay's Digital Church partner, Fellowship Technologies. It found that 47 percent of churches actively use Facebook.

The second most popular way of networking is through the tools included in church management software packages, actively used by 20 percent of congregations. Three percent use MySpace, 2 percent a church-specific package like Cobblestone, Unifyer or The City, and 1 percent use Ning.

However, a full 40 percent of churches do not use any social networking tools.

"Churches are natural places of interaction," LifeWay Research Director Scott McConnell says. "Congregations are rapidly adopting social networking, not only to speed their own communication, but also to interact with people outside their church."

Large churches use Facebook far more than small ones. Eighty-one percent of congregations with 500 or more in average worship attendance use Facebook, compared to 27 percent of churches with one to 49 attendees. Forty-three percent of churches with 50 to 99 attendees use Facebook, as do 46 percent of churches with 100 to 199 attendees and 56 percent of churches with 200 to 499 attendees.

Large-city and suburban churches are more likely than their small-city and rural counterparts to use Facebook. While 57

percent of suburban and 54 percent of large-city churches use it, only 46 percent of small-city congregations and 39 percent of rural churches are on Facebook.

Among churches that utilize social networking tools, 73 percent use them for interacting with the congregation, 70 percent for distributing news and information in an “outbound only” manner, 52 percent for fostering member-to-member interaction and 41 percent for managing the church’s group ministry.

A majority (62 percent) of churches that utilize social networking tools use them to interact with individuals outside the congregation.

“Social networking tools have become an integral part of most people’s daily lives and relationships,” says Curtis Simmons, vice president for marketing and community at Fellowship Technologies. “If churches desire to connect with their congregation and community in meaningful ways, then they need to establish a strategy for actively engaging in the social media conversation. Thousands of individuals are sharing support and encouragement through these tools. The church needs to be an active participant in these conversations and connections.”

A separate LifeWay Research survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors in October 2010 found that many pastors are personally using social media to interact with their congregations. Nearly half (46 percent) of pastors personally use Facebook, 16 percent blog and 6 percent use Twitter. In addition, 84 percent send email to groups.

“Biblical community requires feet and faces, not only retweets and fan pages,” cautions McConnell. “But clearly social networking is a helpful tool to build and maintain community.”