

# Friending your faith online: Ann Arbor area religious organizations turn to Facebook and other social networking sites

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Terry Johnson, Ann Arbor, checks her Facebook account on her laptop while sitting on the couch in her living room on Tuesday. Johnson spent the better part of three months on the couch while she recovered from a stem cell transplant last summer. While she was recovering, she used Facebook as a way to stay connected with her church community. **Lon Horwedel | Ann Arbor.com**

After undergoing a stem cell transplant last summer, Terry Johnson felt trapped inside her Ann Arbor home, shut off from her church, her friends and the rest of the world.

Unable to leave her house, Johnson could no longer volunteer at church, attend swim meets and spend time with people. She missed the children she had befriended as a volunteer at [St. Luke Lutheran Church](#).

A self-described people-person, Johnson turned to the Internet, where she used social networking sites and other online tools to reconnect to her faith and friends.

Johnson was able to continue contact with the children at the church as well as listen to sermons and read the latest news of the congregation. She also kept her friends online updated on her recovery from the transplant.

“For me, God’s word is very important,” Johnson said. “I draw a lot of strength from hearing God’s word, reading God’s word and talking to other people about God’s word.”

Johnson is one of many people using the Web to keep in touch with her church. As churches and temples see a decrease in attendance, St. Luke and other congregations in the area are working to maintain a relationship with parishioners online.

Keeping in contact with people in the Jewish community is the goal for Rabbi Lisa Delson at [Temple Beth Emeth](#).



Delson, director of congregational services, recently started a page on Facebook, which she updates regularly.

“I give announcements about things going on, reminders of things happening,” she said. “I remind people that we’re here. (The temple is) here, and we’re still open.”

Delson writes about what she’s doing and informal, conversational posts, such as “We’re busy today at the Temple,” on the Temple Beth Emeth’s Facebook page.

She also uses Facebook to advertise initiatives at the temple.

On Monday, for example, she posted, “The Food Gatherers food drive is up and running. Please bring bags of food or a check to the social hall at TBE.”

Delson said her target is to find people who might not come regularly to the congregation.

“Right now, we’re just reaching out to members of the community and people who have come to events at the temple who might not be members,” she said. “It’s a way to draw people in, in a more active way.”

In April, a [study by Unconventional Method \(pdf\)](#), a firm that strategizes with businesses, nonprofits and ministries, found social networking sites that focus specifically on Christianity made little headway into the church market. However, more than 51 percent of churches surveyed used Facebook.

The study also found that congregants look for specific tasks when using online tools associated with their church. These include the ability to post prayer requests or needs; to find out more about events; to find opportunities to donate or volunteer; to find phone and e-mail directories; and to find and interact with Bible study groups.

The [Vineyard Church of Ann Arbor](#) uses Facebook, Twitter and online tools to reach out to its community and recruit new members. Associate Pastor Donnell Wyche said about 28 percent of newcomers come through the Internet. The church tracks the data through welcome cards newcomers are asked to fill out.

“It allows for us to have different conversations with folks in different mediums,” he said.

Internet social networking not only spreads information about events, but it also allows people in the community to participate externally in an experience happening through the church, Wyche said.

Several people from the church went to Costa Rica, and they were explaining the extreme poverty they encountered while in the region online.

“The capability of the Internet to create a community is a powerful tool,” Wyche said. “Those people who weren’t able to go were able to experience what we were doing.”

St. Luke uses Church Post, a site that connects congregants to churches, to send out messages to its members. The site allows the church to define messages based on subject, and parishioners can choose which subjects, such as youth or missions, they want to hear about regularly. The church also posts all of its sermons online.

For Delson, the use of social networking is a way to reach a generation of people who don’t remember life without a cell phone or the Internet. The same generation is notorious for its low attendance at religious centers.

“It is a way to get younger people involved,” she said. “Any little bit helps.”