

“Meredith Gould has provided an excellent resource to those who believe that the future of mission lies in a world where networked lives and amplified humans await the proclamation of the Gospel. *The Social Media Gospel* offers a road map for those leaving the Church of the modern era behind for the adventurous missionary landscape of a social-structured world.”

—The Rt. Rev. C. Andrew Doyle,  
IX Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Texas

“For those beginning to explore new technologies, those regularly engaging with social media, or for *anyone* who wants to communicate the good news to a new generation—*The Social Media Gospel* is crucial.”

—Carol Howard Merritt,  
author of *Tribal Church* and *Reframing Hope*

“Meredith Gould has poured her training as a sociologist, experience as a magazine writer, omnivorous appetite for social media, and passion for the Gospel into a book that should appeal to just about anyone who thinks about digital ministry. *The Social Media Gospel* is a valuable contribution from one of the best known thinkers in the field.”

—Jim Naughton, founder of Episcopal Cafe  
and coauthor of *Speaking Faithfully:  
Communications as Evangelism in a Noisy World*

“For those interested in mission and ministry in the newly-discovered, heavily-peopled, land of the Internet, Meredith Gould’s book on *The Social Media Gospel* is a must-read. For those of us already active there, Meredith brings an invitation to reflect on what we are doing and ways to improve. For those new and uncertain—here is step-by-step advice from a skilled practitioner.”

—Rev. Bosco Peters, [www.liturgy.co.nz](http://www.liturgy.co.nz), @liturgy

“In the world of social media where so many proclaim themselves as ‘how to’ gurus, Meredith Gould breaks through the clutter and jargon. She uses simple language to help churches and pastors understand *why* social media is important and how to effectively use it as a tool for ministry. This book is for the beginner or those looking to go further with social media.”

—Rev. Alan Rudnick, pastor, author, blogger,  
and social media practitioner

“If your church is using social media or considering it, you need to read *The Social Media Gospel*. As a veteran sociologist, author, Twitter chat host, and lover of Christ and his church, there’s no one better qualified to serve as your guide to church social media than Meredith Gould.”

—Paul Steinbrueck, co-founder & CEO  
of OurChurch.Com

“The Word is active and alive via social media, connecting minds and hearts through shared faith. While some church leaders fear exploring the digital mission field, people like Meredith Gould write groundbreaking books like this one, fearlessly and wisely leading the way to a truly new evangelization.”

—Fran Rossi Szpylczyn, Catholic writer  
and lay minister blogging at *There Will Be Bread*

“Meredith Gould answers the questions many church leaders and ministers have about the use of social media for ministry in her new book, *The Social Media Gospel*. A ministry insider and experienced user of social media, Meredith overcomes objections and eases fears with knowledgeable insights, good humor, and excellent end-of-chapter reflection questions. *The Social Media Gospel* is a delightfully warm and welcoming invitation to share the Good News in new ways.”

—Sister Susan Wolf, SND (@srsusan),  
Founder and President of Catholic Web Solutions

# The Social Media Gospel

*Sharing the Good News  
in New Ways*

Second Edition

Meredith Gould



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*For all who boldly embrace new technologies  
to build community and deepen faith.*

Where two or three are gathered in my name,  
I am there among them.

—Matthew 18:20

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# Foreword

## ***Dear Pastor . . .***

I probably know what you're thinking, sitting there with this book in your hands. Maybe someone on your leadership team recommended it to you; perhaps you got it for yourself to learn something new. However you started reading *The Social Media Gospel*, chances are your first thought was something along the lines of "I don't have time for this."

Home visits, hospital visits, sermon preparation, small groups, meetings, judicatory responsibilities—who has time for one more thing?! As a solo pastor of a midsize congregation, I understand. Time is both precious and at a premium.

However, you can't afford to continue to ignore social media. In one form or another, social media is here to stay. Social media is part of your congregants' lives, part of your community and neighborhood, and—whether you realize it yet or not—part of your ministry.

A few words as you begin this journey of learning about social media.

First, social media is not a replacement for face-to-face, in-the-flesh pastoral care. Social media can be an extension of a pastor's personal presence but will never entirely replace it. As you think about how social media can help your ministry, avoid either/or thinking. Instead of asking, "Should we do this online instead of how we currently do it?" ask, "How can online communications enhance the ways we're currently doing this ministry?"

Second, you don't have to be the expert for your congregation. I bet there are people in your congregation who know how to use social media. Enlist their help. Encourage them to use their gifts. Support them as they bring the church's presence onto social media. Be their cheerleader and advocate, and ask them how you can best contribute to the work.

Third, pastors who are online run into the same sort of boundary and confidentiality issues that pastors always run into. The rules of confidentiality that apply in the rest of your ministry also apply online. The ultimate privacy setting is not found in the user settings of Facebook or Twitter, but in your own heart. If you would not say it in public, don't put it online. Period.

Finally, be brave, be bold. In many ways, the church is blazing new paths with social media. Now is the time to do a new thing, to proclaim God's word in new and exciting ways. It is good to read about social media; it is good to think about how you're going to move forward. Sooner or later the time will come when you just have to take the plunge. *The Social Media Gospel* will help you!

Pastor, your job—whatever your denomination—is to proclaim the Gospel and to care for your flock. Social media is a set of tools that will *exponentially* increase your ability to do these key ministerial tasks. Social media is both a stethoscope, magnifying your ability to listen to your congregation and community, and a megaphone, magnifying your ability to proclaim God's word to your community.

I have been where you are—just beginning to learn about social media and think about how I could use these new tools to improve my ministry. I have helped others begin those same explorations. One of my first recommendations to church leaders is that they find someone to help guide them through these new technologies. You could not ask for a better guide than Meredith Gould.

In fact, Meredith was my own guide when I began exploring how to use social media for my ministry. Meredith is a communications professional and sociologist who understands how

messages spread and how technologies work. But more importantly, she knows ministry. She works alongside many pastors and other professional church communicators. She understands the peculiarities of how we work and why we do this work. Like you, she is passionate about growing the kingdom and bringing the Gospel to the world.

You can easily find Meredith on social media platforms, talking about the Gospel and helping pastors and other leaders use social media effectively and well. She has earned a reputation as a go-to resource person for any of us who are trying to figure out why and how social media can help our ministries. She is also—as you will discover in these pages—a whole lot of fun.

God bless you, and your ministry, as you venture into the world of church social media!

— Rev. David L. Hansen (@Rev\_David)  
Pastor, Spirit of Joy! Lutheran Church  
The Woodlands, Texas



## Preface to the Second Edition

My big plan was to write what publishers call an “evergreen” book, so-called because the content is durable over time. A wild goal, given how swiftly and often social media platforms change. Still, I pretty much accomplished that in the first edition of *The Social Media Gospel* by focusing on the strategic and tactical uses of social media, rather than nitty-gritty “how-to” tips.

And yet here I am, two years later, with a second edition. Current reality: issues about adopting, adapting, and using digital online tools persist within the world of church, despite near-ubiquitous use by secular organizations. Additional reality: mobile technology has transformed how we receive, perceive, and process online content and conversation.

In this second edition I provide even more—and more specific—guidance about how to think through the whys and whens of using online digital tools to be church beyond the building. In new chapters and boxed content, you’ll find information about:

- crafting tactics—when and how to connect—more effectively for your audience(s);
- online community development, management, and monitoring;
- “not strictly social” platforms that, thanks to mobile technology, must be added to your ministerial toolkit;
- shifting from narrative to visual content;

- using Twitter to its—and your church’s—best advantage; and
- best practices, especially when it comes to online sharing with discretion, honesty, and authenticity.

Based on reader feedback and questions that have come my way online as well as during workshops and talks, I’ve added these appendices:

- *DIY Digital Audit*: While hiring an outside auditor is still best, here’s a checklist to complete a Do-It-Yourself Digital Audit.
- *Some Boilerplate to Use or Tweak*: Feel free to use it to establish parameters for social media use.
- *Church Social Media Positions*: Even if you don’t have the resources to hire someone, these are the abilities, skills, competencies, and experiences needed by anyone responsible for managing social media presence.

I’ve also added more footnotes in this second edition. Many are links to online resources with staying power. In others, you’ll find me muttering to myself—and to you, if you read them.

To learn more about why I initially wrote and structured this book, please revisit my original preface . . . or read it for the first time. Like the first edition, this second one has been inspired and enhanced by community, something that becomes more blessedly real with every tweet, post, text, and online chat. And the best hashtag for this is: *#grateful*.

Easter Monday, 2015

# Preface to the First Edition

In my world of ministry, these two verses from Scripture are always bumping up against one another:

There is nothing new under the sun. (Eccl 1:9)

See, I am making all things new. (Rev 21:5)

Such is the practical reality of being called to the ministry of church communications in general and digital ministry in particular. As Christians, we are always called to share the Good News. Online technologies are simply the latest and greatest means available, delighting some and fraying the nerves of others. In this book I invite you to consider embracing social media to enhance your ministerial efforts as well as your own participation in the Body of Christ.

Most people use the term digital ministry to describe the growing use of online tools to share the Gospel and build church beyond the building. When I hear the term, I also think about ministering to those who reject digital technology because they think it's complicated, alienating, and otherwise antithetical to what it means to be and do church. *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways* is my contribution to conversations that include but are not limited to addressing these questions:

- Why should ministers of the church, lay or ordained and regardless of ministerial call, bother with digital technology?

- If we believe God is everywhere and in all things, how can digital technology help us seek and find God?
- How can I persuade my sisters and brothers in Christ, especially those in positions of leadership, to use social media?

This is a book about why anyone in ministry ought to welcome digital tools to build community and deepen faith. It's absolutely *not* a guide to setting up social media accounts. You can easily find that information by searching Google or YouTube, if you prefer audio-visual tutorials. And I underscore the importance of going online to find current information because these platforms change constantly.

For example, in the month between turning in this book's manuscript and writing this preface, Facebook changed its timeline configuration at least three times and added structured status updates; Twitter rolled out Vine, a looping video application and sharing service; Pinterest added the option of opening business accounts, something that would work well for churches; and observers were finally getting around to writing screeds about Snapchat, a one-to-one sharing platform that transmits images that self-destruct after a user-determined time (up to ten seconds). By the time you read this book either in print or on an e-reader, new digital platforms will have emerged; familiar ones will have changed the way they look or how they work.

Ongoing, rapid change within digital platforms is, in part, what some church folk find so off-putting about social media. But while specific social media platforms change often and quickly, the basic principles guiding their usage are relatively durable. Here, in short stand-alone chapters I describe core principles for using social media strategically in the world of church:

**Section I: Frameworks for Understanding** offers ways to think more about social media within a variety of conceptual frameworks—theology, sociology, psychology, learning theory. The final chapter in this sec-

tion expands my favorite meme, “virtual community is real community.”

**Section II: Choosing Social Media** is where I explain the central importance of strategic planning and building community by generating participation; address concerns about abandoning print and bridging the digital divide; and then focus on major social media platforms in chapters descriptively titled “Why Choose. . . .”

**Section III: Making Social Media Work** includes chapters describing how to deal with what can but shouldn’t get in the way of using social media wisely and well. In this section you’ll find chapters about managing multiple platforms, online conflict, and burnout, as well as another favorite meme of mine, “church is not a building.”

Each chapter includes questions for reflection to help you think through what works, what doesn’t, and what could work better relative to using social media to build church and faith. I hope church leadership and groups—not just those involved with church communications—will use the “Thought Bytes” to grapple with whatever might be getting in the way of using these dynamic tools for twenty-first-century ministry. Those charged with strategic planning will find more specific, practical, and actionable suggestions in these appendixes: Strategic Choices; Yes, You Need a Social Media Policy; and The Communications Audit.

I’m also hoping you’ll rejoice in the relative lack of footnotes. Although I have oodles of scholarly training, this is not an academic book. While clearly and inescapably informed by my training as a sociologist, everything I write about here is anchored in two major arenas of learning: (1) direct, in-the-trenches experience with every major social media platform and providing consulting services to local congregations as well as church judicatories across denominations; and (2) wisdom culled from interacting with participants in the weekly church social media

(#chsocm) chat on Twitter, an ecumenical chat I claim unholy bragging rights to having started in July 2011. Yea verily, social media has transformed my life and work.

After nearly six years of active, near-daily social media engagement in some form or another, I can honestly say that almost all of my closest friends, dearest colleagues, and most valued partners in ministry are in my life at this point thanks to digital technology. This is equally true in the secular world of healthcare communications, where my active digital involvement resulted in an invitation to serve on the External Advisory Board of Mayo Clinic's Center for Social Media (wonderful people of faith encountered there too!). Only a small percentage of these folks have I actually met face-to-face, but that hasn't prevented a shared sense of purpose from emerging and relationships from maturing. Come, Holy Spirit.

What you've probably already figured out and will discover in more detail is that I'm a passionate advocate for using social media tools for building community and deepening faith. Social media has made that possible for me. My prayerful hope is that social media becomes that for you and those you serve for the glory of God and Christ Jesus.

Shrove Tuesday, 2013

## Acknowledgments

Digital technology has made it possible for me to receive almost daily counsel, encouragement, and inspiration from dozens, if not hundreds, of people, many of whom I may never meet in person. And so I happily broadcast global thanks to participants in these Twitter-based communities: church social media (#chsocm), chaplains on social media (#socmedchap), healthcare social media (#hscsm), and Mayo Clinic Center for Social Media (#mccsm).

For sanity-restoring laughter when ministry—digital and otherwise—gets frustrating, I've come to rely on @UnvirtuousAbbey and @JesusOfNaz316.

More specifically, I've been supported by a gaggle of guardian angels before, during, and after writing *The Social Media Gospel*. These dearly beloveds provided spiritual cheerleading as well as specific editorial input on early drafts: Rev. David Hansen (who also wrote the fine foreword), Ruth Harrigan (my steady Sherpa on three previous books), Brenda A. Keller (whose dark wit keeps me grounded), and the Rev. Joseph Smith (whose sociological imagination enhances mine).

The Rev. Canon Dan Webster (@RevWeb) aka, my husband, deserves special kudos and not just because of his emotional and spiritual generosity. Dan has always understood—and implored church leadership to understand—the value of church communications ministry. I am the grateful beneficiary of his fervent support for those of us called to this ministry as well as

his personal commitment to preach and live the Gospel message of love and justice.

When it comes to digital communications, the future is already here—in the secular world. In the world of church? Not so much, which is why I’m especially indebted to Trish Vanni for inviting me to write this book, helping me think it through, and then shepherding the approval process. For his responsiveness, enthusiasm for the subject, and terrific sense of humor, I thank Andy Edwards, managing editor. Thanks and praise to the production team that included Stephanie Lancour, Stefan Killen, Julie Surma, and Shirley Richardson.

Always and forever, thanks be to God.



## SECTION I

# **FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING**



## Chapter 1

# Defining Social Media

Thanks in part to its still-evolving nature, you'll find quite a few definitions of social media floating around cyberspace. Don't be at all surprised if you get confused while searching for one that makes sense to you. You're likely to encounter lots of technical jargon, mostly from business and industry, which, let's be honest, tends to make church folk nervous. The sectors and the jargon.

As for me and my software, we serve the Lord by keeping tech-talk and jargon to a minimum (see Chapter 26: Jargon Alert). And so it has come to pass that I've managed to develop a relatively simple and accessible definition of social media.

Like other early adopters,<sup>1</sup> my definition of social media has evolved over the years. It has changed as social media has changed. It has changed as my understanding of community and church has been transformed by using it. Here's my current common language definition of social media:

*Social media are web-based tools for interaction that, in addition to conversation, allow users to share content such as photos, videos, and links to resources.*

Hopefully you won't have to read my definition more than twice to understand social media are *digital tools* for sharing conversation and content. Please do return to this definition when more complicated ones threaten your comprehension. Or sanity. Here, for example, is a social media definition that always triggers a slight case of aphasia in tech-literate me:

*Social media are digital platforms used for engagement and content delivery.*

What might help you crack the code of complex, jargon-laden definitions of social media is knowing that these key terms can be and often are used interchangeably—sometimes in the same brain-scrambling sentence:

*web-based = online and digital  
tools = platforms and digital technologies  
interaction = engagement*

(Confession: I do tend to use the word “engagement” when I mean “interaction” or “involvement.” Forgive me my jargon trespasses.)

Moving right along.

You’ll find definitions that emphasize how to use social media tools for managing and monitoring the public perception of brand identity. These definitions will make more sense in the context of church if you think in terms of *mission*:

*Social media tools can be used to manage and monitor public perception of your congregation’s mission.*

<b>Untangling the World Wide Web</b>	
	<b><i>Online digital as a medium for . . .</i></b>
<b>Web 1.0</b>	broadcast with static, read-only content (e.g., websites, e-newsletters).
<b>Web 2.0</b>	interaction and engagement with use-generated content (e.g., social networking tools).
<b>Web 3.0</b>	portable personalized content and search functions (e.g., mobile websites, smartphone apps). We are here!

Definitions of social media tend to become murky when outcome (e.g., social action) is confused with means (e.g., tools).

Over the years, I've noticed this happening when social media is characterized as a culture in and of itself rather than a set of technological tools for catalyzing shifts in attitudes and beliefs. Attitudes and beliefs are core aspects of culture that can, when shifted, lead to social action.

Here, I'm thinking about the role Twitter played during the Iraqi election in March 2010 and the Arab Spring in November 2011. Also noteworthy, with new examples always emerging, is the role Instagram is playing in shifting public opinion by providing real-time images of events (see Chapter 19: Why Choose Instagram).<sup>2</sup>

It's easy to get caught up in relatively esoteric conversations about living, working, and ministering within a "social media" or "digital" culture. You'll find these discussions unfolding mostly on blogs, e-zines, and emerging publishing platforms for long-form (e.g., Medium) where there's more space for narrative, but also in brief bursts of conversation on Twitter among those who have been using (or observing) social media for a few years.

These conversations appeal to those of us who delight in epistemological romps. Plus, there's no denying that we now

### *Three Conceptual Barriers to Social Media Success*

By 2015, we've reached the tipping point for social media acceptance—in the secular world. There are still more-than-a-few people in active ministry who cling to these demonstrably false ideas, believing social media:

- isn't real, therefore nothing generated with or from it is authentic;
- undermines church-the-building and especially the worship experience, therefore cannot be used to inspire attendance or participation; or
- should be considered a nonessential luxury because it takes too much time to learn and use.

live in a digital culture. Social media has, for example, completely transformed the way we understand the cultural construct known as privacy (see box: “Nothing Is Concealed . . .” on p. 126). Cultural perceptions of time and timing have also been changed by social media (see box: Life Cycle of a Virtual Community, p. 31). These days everything is more immediate and faster, even for those who reject online technology. This, in turn, has changed culture-based expectations about what constitutes availability and responsiveness.<sup>3</sup>

Social media has forever changed what it means to participate. Seriously, did you ever imagine network television stations would invite viewers to join real-time online conversations about prime-time shows and news events? Social TV! Welcome to the global living room and worldwide peanut gallery.

Still, as you get started, I urge you to focus on first understanding why and how to use social media tools *before* diving into meta-level conversations at the intersection of social science and theology. Join these conversations *after* mastering the basics because social media, in some form, is here to stay. And, trust me on this, you’ll need to get comfy with Web 2.0 pretty quickly. Mobile communication (Web 3.0) already here, stimulat-

### ***Mobile Is Here Today and Here to Stay***

Even before 2015 officially arrived, digital tech observers were declaring it the “Year of Mobile.” Some went so far as to declare “social media pretty much dead” and replaced by messaging apps.<sup>4</sup> By 2015, credible research revealed 60 percent of all digital time is spent on smartphones, even while at home.

The good news: ministry isn’t confined to desktop, laptop, or tablet computers.

The challenging news: anything viewed on a mobile platform needs to become mobile friendly, especially if you want to show up in Google rankings. Google Developers provides this Mobile-Friendly Test: <http://bit.ly/1KiRmDX>.

ing another significant transformation in digital ministry. Digital ministry? I define this as using digital tools for ministry—including ministering to those who fear social media and other technological tools. Bless their hearts.



## THOUGHT BYTES

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Whether you're just now getting started with social media or have been using it for a while, begin at the beginning and ask:

- For which of the terms most commonly used to define social media do we need more clarification?
- How does defining social media help us?
- What are the practical consequences of moving forward without defining what we mean by social media?