Building Disciples Through Engagement

Best Practices for Online Communication and Community

SOLUTION GUIDE

The ministry ideas, how to's, tips, and advice you need to build disciples.
PLUS... how our software, Realm® can help you achieve this ministry goal.

Table of Contents

The Real Power
of Social Technologies

From faster, more effective communication to deeper, more engaged community, the promise of online connection can seem almost too good to be true. While it's true that technology itself isn't the answer, churches around the world are leveraging the power of social technologies to better connect, engage, equip, and mobilize their congregations for the work of the Gospel.

We're not talking virtual, we're talking real life impact.

This is about people moving from isolation into the embrace of Christian community and from the sidelines to the heart of ministry activity. We're talking about technology being used to build relationships, equip disciples of Jesus, and help them to move together in one direction, living as the light of Christ in a darkened world.

This ministry guide will examine how digital tools can help your church communicate more effectively and build a deeply connected, mission-focused community. After we explore opportunities, we'll feature best practices that can help you make the jump from aspiration to reality.

This is all good news for you and your church, so let's get started!

It's Not Magic. Keep Leading.

With all of the marketing hype that surrounds technology, it can be tempting to think there's a singular product out there that will magically improve communication and build community in your church. It's just not true.

No matter what technology you choose, you need to think clearly. Think about the specific context of your church and remember effective communication and meaningful community require vision, leadership, and sustained effort.

Churches that want to communicate more effectively should focus on building and reinforcing real-world relationships.

Remember that different types of relationships require different communication methods.

Good communication is relational.

Within the Church, communication isn't about control, it's about partnership. However, some methods and tools for communication can be very impersonal. Even with the right heart, ineffective communication can make people feel as though they're unimportant or, even worse, as if they're just a means to an end.

Tools such as church websites or Facebook pages can be great informational tools for people interested in getting to know a little about your church prior to visiting. These pages have finite effectiveness in connecting people into the real, dynamic life of your community. As a result, many churches are seeing the necessity of a more private, community-oriented social network to enable truly effective, high-value communication.

Relational Communication:

- ✓ Builds real-life relationships
- ✓ Enables people to know and be known
- ✓ Provides opportunites to take action
- ✓ Moves people from the margins to the center

Connection undermines consumerism

The result of this improved communication is the transformation of your audience into a very engaged community of individuals, all with names, faces, and the ability to make meaningful contributions.

As people become more engaged through your interactive communication, they find themselves building meaningful relationships. They no longer simply attend your church; they belong to it. They have moved from the outside to the center and are now fully engaged members of your church community.

Information and relationships lead to purposeful action.

As exciting as it is, an informed and connected community isn't the goal of your church. This is a community that has a purpose beyond itself. When you share with your church the tools that help keep your community engaged and connected, you're enabling exponential impact. While the way people grow in their faith varies, the call from the Lord remains the same; Go and make disciples.

Your people are more ready than you may think.

At this point you might be thinking, "Sure this sounds great, but I'm not sure my church is ready for this." Do not make this assumption.

The acceptance of digital technologies is growing exponentially within the Church. The growth has been especially dramatic within the baby boomer generation with an 88% increase in usage of social networks through 2010 (Pew Research Center). Frankly, the tipping point has been reached and you can expect usage of digital technologies to expand beyond the current point.

Finding the right tool:

Realm
Great for building real relationships, in-depth discussions, planning and managing events, and connecting information and ideas to action.

Twitter
Great for broadcasting links to interesting content.

Facebook
Great for extending the reach of evangelistic content and events.

Blog/Website
Great for short evangelistic articles or videos.

Best Practices for
Digital Communication

Good communication is good communication no matter how you slice it. So don't be intimidated by the word digital. The things that make you an effective communicator elsewhere are still valued. There are some unique challenges and opportunities in the digital world. Follow these few best practices to help you avoid common pitfalls and enable you to make the most of your communication efforts.

1. Focus on the mission.

Don't put the focus on methods, because they are disposable. Get to the heart of the matter. Jesus has given your church an eternally meaningful mission. Be sure to explain why your church needs a private communication platform and keep the focus on how it will help your church accomplish its mission.

2. Never think your communication done.

If you've been a leader for long, you probably understand this point far too well. You can't say something once and expect it to stick with everyone. You've got to continually remind people of what's important. Thankfully, digital tools make effective communication very inexpensive and also make it easy to mobilize other people to distribute your communications for you. There's no need to do all the work yourself. Usually you just need to ask people to help you accomplish the set goals.

3. Invite people to interact

Interaction is no longer an option; it's a necessity. The digital tools available today give you an amazing opportunity to invite people to join a conversation. While it initially might seem like more work, the return is far greater than the investment. Your interaction and sincere listening will help create an engaged community, discover gifts and abilities you didn't realize people had, and learn from others along the way.

4. Cultivate meaningful relationships.

The speed and simplicity of digital communication can sometimes lead to over use and misuse. It's your job to lead the way and help people understand the compelling "why" behind the methods. By asking good questions, intently listening, and steering conversations toward real relationships you'll lead by example. Ask other leaders to do the same. Together, you'll build a community of well-connected and meaningful relationships.

5. Provide opportunities for meaningful action.

A church social network makes it easier for you to delegate responsibility without sacrificing accountability. So, rather than feeding the impulse of consumerism, give people opportunities to get involved. It can be as simple as sharing stories of the everyday, informal ministry happening within your church or inviting people to get involved in the opportunities around them. Remember, you're building a culture and cultures celebrate what they value. If you value the active engagement of your whole church in ministry work, celebrate it!

Make it real!

Four practical steps to transform the way your church communicates online.

Examples:

Goal
Evangelical outreach

Method
Create evangelistic content (short articles or videos) to be shared with a broad audience.

Tools
Blog, Facebook, Twitter

Goal
Build maturity

Method
Create opportunities to interact with members of the congregation by asking and answering questions.

Tools
Realm

1. Define your mission.

This shouldn't be abstract. Identify the specific goals God is calling your church to work toward; then identify specific ways online communication can help you reach those goals. This will help you determine which tools you should use.

3. Make a plan with concrete goals.

Define a communication plan to accomplish specific goals and assign work to your communication team members. Remember to make sure your goals are S.M.A.R.T. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely.

2. Build a communication team.

Who are the key leaders of the various ministry areas within your church? Invite them to form a communication team that will work together to make and implement communication plans guided by the mission you've defined. Whether it's you or someone else, be sure to appoint a project manager who can coordinate the team and ensure that the plans you make will be implemented.

4. Implement your plan.

Once you've made your plan, assign responsibilities to team members, set a timeline, and get to work! The project manager is responsible for keeping everyone on task and will make sure any obstacles are identified and resolved.

How to Create
a Communication Plan:

**Before you communicate anything,
make sure you define these four critical components:**

Audience

With whom are you trying to communicate? Be specific. Is it people inside your church
or people in the broader community? Christians or people who don't yet follow Jesus?
Committed volunteers or disconnected consumers?

Purpose

What are you trying to accomplish? Communicate a message? Generate a lively
discussion? Invite people to an event? Motivate people to get involved in a ministry
activity?

Venue

This will always depend on who your audience is and what your purpose is.
As a general rule, the more relational the purpose, the more intimate the venue.
For some communications, you may need to use multiple venues.

Frequency

Is this a one-time communication or something you'll want to reinforce multiple times or in
multiple ways? If you're inviting people to interact, be sure to stay tuned and participate in the
conversation.

Best Practices for Building
a Stronger Community

At first glance, it may seem like a stretch to say that online tools can help you build community in your church. After all, aren't social networks all about celebrating the individual? They certainly can be, and often are. But churches that follow some best practices have seen incredible growth in the depth and effectiveness of community within their church.

1. Lead by example.

No mystery here. You can't expect people to do something you're unwilling to do yourself. This means you need to define a clear value and purpose for your use of technology, then communicate it and demonstrate it. As a leader, you have a unique opportunity to hear and spread stories of how you or others are using technology to enable and enhance real life community.

2. Equip and empower others.

It's not all up to you, and you shouldn't try to carry the torch alone. You can help others understand the value of building their network of relationships and how technology can make that simpler. Give them ideas for engaging their friends in meaningful ways and you'll empower them to help you build a culture that values deep relationships.

3. Be zealous about connection.

You have an amazing opportunity to get beyond painful and ineffective modes of connecting people into your church. You can build a world-class connection ministry simply by inviting people to join your church's social network. From here, you can start a conversation and get to know them. It's more personal than standard email, especially if they can see a profile picture and put a face with your name. And when it's time to connect them to someone else, it's easy to include them in your ongoing conversation thread to create a warm hand-off.

4. Cultivate a welcoming community.

Don't let your well-connected and actively engaged community become an exclusive club! Make a point to equip everyone in your church to welcome newcomers online in the same way you would encourage them to say hello if they see someone new at church. Hold a class to teach people how to write a friendly welcome note to get to know someone new and train them to make warm introductions when connecting a newcomer to someone else.

5. Keep the focus on the mission.

Remember that building community online isn't your mission. People need to continually hear and remember why before they think about what or how. So don't put the emphasis on the technology. Put the emphasis on what you're trying to accomplish by using the technology. Do this, and there's a great chance your church will be so engaged in ministry they won't even think about the technology that helps enable it!

Throughout this guide, you have seen several ways that Realm helps churches reach new people and manage the life and operations of a church. We're excited to share more about our revolutionary ministry tool, Realm.

Realm provides solutions that will make your ministry and life way easier. It is cutting-edge church management software that combines administration, accounting, and community into one system. It also connects your entire church and personalizes each person's involvement in your ministry.

We'd encourage you to explore all that Realm makes possible by taking a demo, walking through a self-guided tour, or speaking with an associate today!
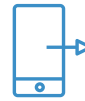
Take a Self-Guided Tour
acstechnologies.com/
products/realm/demo

Sign Up for Live Webinar
acstechnologies.com/
products/realm/demo/tour

Call an Associate
1-800-736-7425

Our Mission:
To help you have *real* ministry impact

ACS Technologies has provided over four decades of services and software to churches of all sizes throughout the world. During that time we have accumulated data, gained vital insight, and received thousands of first-hand testimonials on best practices and methods that most effectively help ministries.

Our years of service have allowed us to become the world's largest provider of ministry solutions to churches of all sizes. It is our mission to furnish advice, examples, tips, and information to help you turn your ideas into real ministry impact.

Powered by the people of **ACS**Technologies.

Family owned
for over 40 years

#1 rated
in service

Nearly 50,000
churches served

Over 400 staff
ready to serve

Best place
to work

www.acstechnologies.com
1-800-736-7425

0119 Copyright © ACS Technologies Group, Inc.