



# TOPTIPS

## SOCIAL NETWORKS

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**By Rachel Collinson**

Did you know that nearly 18 million people in the UK have a Facebook account? That's almost a quarter of the population. Of those 18 million people, 2.5 million are over 40 years old and 9.4 million are female. Only 64,000 have said on their profile that they like reading the Bible. This represents an amazing opportunity for churches in the UK.

### **WHY USE FACEBOOK?**

- It's "home turf" - people are there already - many of them logging in multiple times each day. It is the modern equivalent of the New Testament marketplace where people would meet to discuss ideas, news and gossip.
- It's easier and cheaper to reach people through Facebook than by building a website and trying to get it into Google's search listings for the right keywords.
- People are more accountable for their actions on Facebook, where their friends can see everything they actively do on the website.

### **WHAT TO BE AWARE OF**

- Use care when moderating comments that people add to your page, group or profile. There is a fine balance between kindness to your readers and heavy-handed censorship. Far better to be seen to respond thoughtfully to an enraged comment than to delete it straight away.
- People behave differently online than they would in person. They may share more information about themselves. Sometimes this is a great thing, as you can get to talking about the issues that matter more quickly than you would in person (no more conversations about the weather, and more real issues like who is depressed or why does God allow Robert Mugabe to be president of Zimbabwe). Sometimes you may have to allow people to make mistakes. Misunderstandings can occur, so don't take everything at face value.

### **HOW BEST TO ENGAGE?**

#### **1. Get into Facebook**

Visit [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com), make an account and play around. Read people's profiles carefully, look at their News Feeds - see how they use it. When you're ready, try uploading some photos, or commenting on your friends' status updates. You may find this is a useful tool for knowing how to pray for them, as people often say things in status updates that they wouldn't necessarily tell you at a church meeting.

#### **2. Think about the needs that you want to address**

Do you want to use Facebook as a way to let people know about church events or as a way to get local people thinking about God?

#### **3. Create a 'group' for your church**

Pros:

Groups are limited to 5,000 members so are more than adequate for most local churches. Any message you send to

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the members of your group will go directly into their Facebook inbox, so they are more visible among the Facebook clutter. Groups are useful for straightforward things like notifying members of events, adding photos and taking part in online discussions.

Cons:  
There is not much you can do to edit your group's home page. Groups are limited by numbers - 5,000 is the maximum number you can have.

#### 4 . **Create a fan page for your church**

Pros:  
Fan pages are more flexible - you can add different things to them, like a podcast of sermons or videos or a form to sign up to your church's email list. Fan Pages can have unlimited users, so a church like Holy Trinity Brompton may find they are more suitable. Fan Pages attract more 'fans' more quickly, because when they become a fan, other users are more likely to see this, and it takes less clicks to become a fan than it does to join a group.

Cons:  
You can only send an 'update' to your Fans, which doesn't go into their inbox, and may be seen less. Fan pages are also public to the outside world, which could be a pro or a con depending on how you see it! It's possible that a Fan page could replace your entire website, if you were happy to be seen to be using Facebook.

There's certainly nothing wrong with having a Group and a Fan Page as well.

Some people ask: why should I be on Facebook?

I find this is the same as asking: why should I use the telephone? With such vast numbers regularly logging on to make friends, deepen relationships, reconnect with old acquaintances, churches should be there, just as they are with any other technology that people use to form and maintain relationships.

*Rachel Collinson is Managing Director of Rechord. For the last 10 years, Rechord have produced social networking websites, web applications and other online productions for major UK charities such as Greenpeace, Oxfam, Christian Aid, Sense, Scope, the Church of England and CAFOD.*

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