

# Ministry Meets Social Networking

## Connecting with the Digital Natives

*Jonathan Y. Tan*

Social networking has to become part of pastoral ministry, or the church will find itself increasingly marginalized in the lives of digital natives. Pastoral ministers are called to engage today's technology and recognize and foster mutuality, interdependence, empathy, solidarity, and collaboration with digital natives.

This article seeks to identify the challenges and explore the possibilities of doing pastoral ministry with young adults in the United States. First, it introduces the term “digital natives,” which many educators and sociologists use to explain the online behavior of these young adults. Second, it surveys social networking sites and other contemporary web resources that are frequented by these digital natives. Third, it discusses the reasons that pastoral ministers have to engage digital natives on their social networking turf. Finally, it reflects on the theological and pastoral implications of such an engagement.

### *Digital Natives*

Today's young adults, also known as “Generation Y” or the “Millennials” are very different from their predecessors. They are well known for being techno-

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logically adept, having grown up in a world that is marked by rapid digital and online growth. Many of them are able to multitask with ease, e.g., chatting away on cellphones and instant messaging on their computers while trying to read a book. Not surprisingly, many of their parents, teachers, and employers find such behavior either amusing or annoying at best, or disconcerting at worst.

In a seminal paper entitled “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” Marc Prensky (2001a) thinks that today’s young adults “have not just changed incrementally from those of the past, nor simply changed their slang, clothes, body adornments, or styles, as has happened between generations previously.” Instead, he argues that a “really big *discontinuity* has taken place,” i.e., a “singularity” that “changes things so fundamentally that there is no absolute going back.” He identifies this singularity as “the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century.” Drawing upon the latest research in neurobiology, social psychology, and from studies done with children using games for learning in a subsequent paper, Prensky (2001b) concludes that the brains of young adults have physically changed as a result of growing up in a world of constant exposure to digital media.

In particular, Prensky makes a distinction between “digital immigrants” and “digital natives,” arguing that digital immigrants and digital natives often talk past one another because they are using different modes of communicating and relating. Shaped and socialized by a pre-digital world, digital immigrants find themselves adapting to new developments in digital technology. By contrast, having grown up immersed in a digital world, digital natives have a completely different mindset compared to digital immigrants, using cellphones, e-mail, messaging, texting, as well as social networking tools like MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter as natural means of communicating and relating with each other.

Prensky’s insights are supported by two important studies conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, i.e., *Teens and Technology* (2005) and *Teens and Social Media* (2007). The first of these two studies, *Teens and Technology* concluded that American teens are enveloped by communication technologies, with the Internet and cellphones playing a central role in defining and shaping their lives. Among other things, *Teens and Technology* noted that 87 percent of teens ages 12 and 17 are online and observed a significant growth in the number of teens who do most of their daily routine (e.g., playing games, reading the news, shopping, getting health information) online. Going one step further, *Teens and Social Media* observed that 64 percent of online teens are engaged in online content

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creation (e.g., blogging, posting photos and videos online, etc). This study found that girls dominate in the area of content creation (35 percent of all teen girls blog compared to 20 percent of boys), while boys dominate in the area of posting video content online (19 percent of boys vs. 10 percent of girls). In addition, this study also found that teens often go beyond merely creating and sharing online content to participating in conversations fueled by such creating and sharing. For example, 89 percent of teens who post photos say that people post comments on their photos.

### *Social Networking Technology*

What is noteworthy in the findings by Prensky and the Pew Internet and American Life Project is the centrality of social networking communities such as Facebook and MySpace in the lives of digital natives. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace are part of a wider so-called Web 2.0 revolution that also includes other developments such as blogging (e.g., Blogger and WordPress), microblogging (e.g., Twitter), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia and MedPedia), and other forms of creative content creation (e.g., Flickr and YouTube). These Web 2.0 applications are also classified as “new media,” to differentiate it from the older Web 1.0 applications such as static webpages.

The term “Web 2.0” was first introduced by Darcy DiNucci (1999): “The Web we know now, which loads into a browser window in essentially static screenfuls, is only an embryo of the Web to come. The first glimmerings of Web 2.0 are beginning to appear, and we are just starting to see how that embryo might develop. . . . The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the *ether through which interactivity happens*” (emphasis added). DiNucci’s definition highlights the fundamental defining characteristic of Web 2.0, i.e., the *interactivity* of its dynamic user-generated content, in contrast to the static pages of Web 1.0. If the Web 1.0 of the 1990s was characterized by the centralized, static, unidirectional, and “read-only” personal webpages hosted on Geocities, Tripod, and Angelfire, the Web 2.0 of the 2000s is characterized by the dynamic participation and interactivity in blogs, wikis, and social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, where visitors are able to comment and participate in ongoing mutual conversations. In the case of wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), visitors are also able to collaborate in editing a site’s contents, resulting in a site with dynamic user-generated and moderated contents.

The dynamic and interactive aspect of Web 2.0 is exemplified by blogs. Unlike the static websites of Web 1.0, blogs comprise regular web postings that may include commentaries, reviews, reports, discussions, photos, images, as well as audio and video clips that are posted in reverse chronological order. Typically, blogs allow visitors to leave comments and engage in interactive conversation

with other visitors or the bloggers who maintain the blog. Twitter is an example of a microblogging phenomenon that allows their users to send text-based posts called “tweets” that are limited to 140 characters, which in turn are broadcast to their followers. Twitterers could choose to allow their tweets to be read by everyone or restrict their tweets to their followers. In turn, their followers could retweet the messages or reply by posting their thoughts and comments in 140 characters or less. Other examples of Web 2.0’s creative and dynamic user-generated content include audio and video podcasts, photos that are posted to sites such as Flickr and Photobucket, as well as user-generated video clips that are posted to sites such as YouTube and Vimeo.

The two principal social networking sites of Web 2.0 are Facebook and MySpace. MySpace is a social networking website that enables users to post personal profiles, music and videos, photos, blogs, and wall posts, inviting comments and feedback from friends and visitors. It is especially popular with teenagers and musicians who often use MySpace to promote their bands and new releases. From 2006–2009, MySpace was the most popular social networking site, until it was surpassed by its principal competitor, Facebook, in May 2009. Facebook is a social networking site that was created by Mark Zuckerberg with his friends Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes while they were undergraduates at Harvard. It has since evolved into a premier global social networking site that enables users to join networks that are organized by school, workplace, or city. Users can add friends, invite others to accept them as friends, interact with their friends through wall posts, status updates, profile updates, quizzes, posting photos, video or music clips, etc.

More importantly, because digital natives spend most of their time online in general, and in social networking communities in particular, pastoral ministers would increasingly find themselves having little to no impact and influence on the lives of digital natives if they continue to avoid social networking sites. One reason that is often given by pastoral ministers for avoiding social networking sites is their uncritical presumption that these sites are “impersonal,” i.e., all interactions are virtual rather than physical. On the one hand, it is often said that the impersonal dimension of online interactions is antithetical to the essence of pastoral ministry that emphasizes the personal dimension of relationships. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that the “impersonal”

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aspect of online interactions could be its very strength, affording digital natives the opportunity to share their deepest secrets and struggles without the anxiety, shame, or embarrassment of face-to-face contact.

Another reason that pastoral ministers often give to explain their reluctance to engage with digital natives in their social networking communities is their unfamiliarity with this new online landscape and their fear of not being able to take charge and control the messy, complicated, and often antinomian atmosphere of many social networking communities. This is not surprising, in view of the fact that pastoral ministers have been trained to serve in a world that they grew up in, rather than in the Web 2.0 world of the digital natives. As a result, many pastoral ministers are most comfortable in the traditional aspects of doing ministry, e.g.,

face-to-face meetings, either individually or in groups, once or twice a week, with an hour or two of interaction time in either formal programs or informal sessions.

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Although face-to-face sessions are important, they constitute only a small portion of the lives of digital natives. Once digital natives leave those face-to-face sessions, pastoral ministers are no longer privy to the ups and downs, successes and struggles, achievements and challenges of digital natives in their daily lives. Digital natives often share deeply on social networking sites about their struggles with difficult issues, e.g., alcoholism, family problems, depression, etc. Frequently, they are not ready for in-person outreach. Instead, they are usually more comfortable relating online. Therefore, social networking sites can open up new lines of communications between pastoral ministers and digital natives, allowing digital natives to seek help or someone to chat to in a neutral environment. By being present in social networking sites, pastoral ministers not only appear to be less aloof but also more readily accessible to respond with empathy and encouragement.

In view of the foregoing, pastoral ministers who insist that they can minister effectively through face-to-face contact might want to ask themselves, "Where else are we going to see the messy and chaotic lives of digital natives up close? Where are we going to bump into and interact with those digital natives who have stopped coming to church and would not return our phone calls or e-mails?" If pastoral ministers want to have more influence and impact on the lives of young adults, they have to embrace the social networking world of the digital natives. In doing so, pastoral ministers are able to influence digital natives more effectively than they ever could if they chose to avoid online interactions completely.

By being present and interacting in social networking communities, pastoral ministers are able to see people as they really are, letting their guard down and being themselves, without the masks that they wear in front of their families and church leaders. They could witness firsthand all aspects of their daily lives as revealed through their music, photos, pictures, quotes, and movies that they post or comment online. On the one hand, pastoral ministers could see all the amazing things that digital natives do in their social networking communities and be inspired by their active involvement in issues of social justice, poverty, racism, migration, etc. On the other hand, pastoral ministers can understand the murky reality of the daily life struggles of digital natives up close. Moreover, it is often easier for pastoral ministers to enter into social networking communities and befriend the digital natives, rather than persuade the digital natives to leave their social networking worlds. Pastoral ministers also have a responsibility to minister to digital natives within their world.

### *Engaging Social Networking Communities*

Pastoral ministers should not be afraid to take advantage of new technologies of their time. There is precedent for this, as evidenced by the examples of the apostle Paul and the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther. In the New Testament, we see how Paul kept in touch with the communities he founded through circular letters, which were subsequently reproduced and passed on in viral fashion among other communities as sources of teaching and spiritual inspiration. Martin Luther was able to capitalize on printing, which was the new technology of his day, to spread his views across a broad audience, who in turn circulated his tracts among their friends and neighbors in a manner akin to retweeting tweets on Twitter or sharing posts on Facebook. In a similar vein, pastoral ministers would do well to follow the footsteps of Paul and Luther to make full use of today's communication technology, i.e., social networking tools.

One could also look at the other side of the coin and ask why digital natives are drawn toward social networking sites. Social networking communities are often egalitarian in orientation without rigidly defined structures of leadership and authority. Such egalitarianism appeals to many digital natives, who find this environment to be empowering and nourishing. Specifically, this egalitarian orientation of social networking often encourages grassroots activities, empowering even the most lowly and ordinary to voice their thoughts, participate, and even take the lead in organizing various activities. Indeed, the grassroots activism of the Obama campaign, as inspired by the campaign's social networking site MyBarackObama.com, is testimony to the power of social networking in challenging and changing the status quo in society. As a result, digital natives find themselves able to be creative and contribute content, voice their thoughts, as well as

figure out who they are, what they want to be, and how they relate to others without the critical and judgmental comments of elders.

However, this egalitarianism often frightens clergy and pastoral ministers who fear that they are unable to control the discourse that goes on in social networking sites. Indeed, digital natives can often bypass the centralized ecclesial bureaucracy where everything must be approved by the pastor or pastoral minister by going online, creating a Facebook group on their own, texting invitations to their friends to join and post content, and having an active group up and running within 24 hours. Nonetheless, what is so scary to pastors and pastoral ministers, i.e., the lack of control over direction and activities in online communities, is these communities' greatest strength and asset, giving digital natives a sense of belonging, achievement, and self-worth.

As a result, social networking has to become part of pastoral ministries, or the church will find itself increasingly marginalized in the lives of these digital natives. Pastoral ministers have to go where digital natives are, be willing to walk in solidarity with them in the virtual world, just as Jesus hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes within their social milieu. By entering into the digital natives' online communities and walking in solidarity with them in their social networking communities, pastoral ministers demonstrate their willingness to be open to the ambiguities and accept not only the beautiful and good but also the ugly and bad that are displayed in the chaotic messiness that often define these social networking communities.

### *A New Missiological Paradigm*

From a theological perspective, pastoral ministers are called to reflect critically on their mission to digital natives and create a new missiological paradigm for their endeavors. Accepting the reality that the social networking landscape is not a challenge to be confronted and overcome, but rather constitutive of the digital natives' world, pastoral ministers can seek non-confrontational ways of relating to the immense complexities that underline the social networking landscape, with an emphasis on mutuality, solidarity, and collaboration with the digital natives. In addition, pastoral ministers have to realize that their ministry to digital natives is not a one-way activity, i.e., they are bringing the Gospel to an environment where God is absent. Instead, they have to discern the presence of God in social networking communities and be sensitive to the workings of the Spirit in these communities that precede their arrival.

More importantly, the mission of pastoral ministers in social networking communities begins not from above or from the center, but from below and from the periphery. Nor is it a one-way, unidirectional street from minister to recipient. Rather, it takes as its starting point the daily experiences of digital natives as they

struggle with life's curveballs. Hence, there is a need for pastoral ministers to *immerse* themselves in the contemporary realities of digital natives, sharing with them the joys and sufferings, blessings and misfortunes of daily living, as well as engaging and interacting dialogically with them.

This means that pastoral ministers must be able to transcend an uncritical paternalism that gives rise to the presumption that they are in charge and have full knowledge of the contemporary world, while digital natives are merely recipients of that knowledge. Instead of hierarchy and dependence, pastoral ministers are called to recognize and foster mutuality, interdependence, empathy, solidarity, and collaboration between ministers and digital natives, eschewing the dichotomy between the ministers and digital natives who are seen as "objects" or recipients of ministry. In today's global, interconnected world that is rooted in interdependence and solidarity, pastoral ministers and digital natives are both ministers and recipients of ministry at the same time, engaging in mutual witness and collaboration to promote the liberative and life-giving Good News of Jesus Christ.

More fundamentally, the call of pastoral ministers to solidarity, empathy, sharing, and mutual collaboration with the digital natives in their social networking communities is grounded in Jesus' own empathy and solidarity with all of humanity, i.e., Jesus came to this world to share in the life of ordinary people, to experience their daily struggle for survival, to empathize with their happiness and pain, thereby engaging fully in all the ambiguities and complexities of daily human living. By immersing themselves in social networking communities, pastoral ministers share in and serve life in empathy and solidarity with digital natives, just as Jesus had done in his earthly life.

If this is the case, then pastoral ministers cannot really fulfill their mission until they are able to experience the lives of digital natives within their social networking communities, just as Jesus experienced the lives of the poor, dispossessed, and marginalized. This sharing in the lives of the people they minister with is not a preliminary or preparatory step, but lies at the very foundation of the mission of pastoral ministers. By engaging in empathy, solidarity, and sharing, pastoral ministers are able to listen to what digital natives are sharing and receive what they have to offer, before responding efficaciously to their needs.

On the one hand, it is true that the virtual world of social networking cannot replace personal pastoral relationships. There will be occasions when pastoral ministers have to be able to look people in the eye, offer them a hug, and listen to them in a genuine one-to-one conversation. On the other hand, social networking tools can extend and enhance a pastoral minister's outreach, especially among those people who prefer the safe distance of virtual communication rather than face-to-face meeting. There are folks who would avoid making appointments with pastoral ministers, but who would open up with their struggles, pains, and hurts online. Sometimes, online meetings could lead to physical meetings. At other times, the online interactions are sufficient for healing and transformation. Whatever the

case may be, online interactions enable pastoral ministers to reach out to people who may otherwise avoid them in person, thereby allowing them to expand their outreach.

### *Imagining New Possibilities*

In the final analysis, pastoral ministers have to consider carefully the actual context of their ministries, their own calling, gifts, and talents, as well as discover the extent to which they can synthesize their own gifts and talents with social networking tools. Social networking may not always be the right strategy for all pastoral ministers. However, if pastoral ministers want to work with digital natives, they will find social networking an invaluable outreach tool to communicate with digital natives in new ways. Building online communities and deepening bonds are antidotes to an uncritical ghetto mentality that sees a world of sin and depravity beyond the physical church community. Ultimately, the possibility for ministry in social networks is limited only by one's imagination and trust that the Spirit will lead to do great wonders for God's people.

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