

around with pride at being able to be closer to the imam during the service

Fasting is rarely, if at all, expected of Muslim children before the age of puberty. Sometimes children of practicing parents are eager to show their own piety, however, and during the month of Ramadan they try as hard as their parents will allow to observe the rule of not eating from sun up to sun down. One young mother said to me that even though her children, ages 8 and 10, refuse to eat at school during Ramadan, she conscientiously packs their lunchboxes every day so that the teachers will have no grounds for charges of child neglect. Mosques and Islamic centers are increasingly providing the kind of fast-breaking meals, as well as feasts for the major Islamic holidays, which are the responsibility of extended families in traditional societies. Muslim children who attend these festivities love the food, the fellowship, and the opportunity to be part of an inclusive community in which the presence of youth is cherished.

As I listen to Muslim parents talk, I realize that they face many concerns raising children in America. For instance, should they allow their children to listen to so-called Islamic music, a fairly new phenomenon in which performers offer rap music with religious rather than violent lyrics? “Don’t know about you, I know about me. I’m proud because I’m rolling Islamically,” sings the group Native Deen. Listening to music like this, as well as wearing headscarves or other forms of Islamic dress from trendy designers, help teenagers be part of “cool Islam” while at the same time affirming traditional Muslim values. Some parents object, while others hope that such activities will help their children avoid the culture of drugs and easy sex that seems to them rampant among American youth. Other parents fear that becoming too involved in affirming Islam in such outward ways may make their children more susceptible to the radical interpretation of Islam preached by some extremist groups.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that most observant American Muslim families face is keeping their adolescents from being beguiled by the consumerism and materialism of American culture, and persuading them that the tenets and values of Islam are still relevant for them. As the 12-year-old son of a Muslim friend of mine said to his parents,

“I’m old enough now to think for myself. Why do I have to follow all the rules set by old guys centuries ago? I can be a good person without all that.” Activities for youth in Islamic centers, such as basketball and other sports, supervised social gatherings, summer camps, and service organizations may help mitigate concerns like the ones this boy expresses. But parents still worry.

It is common knowledge among the Muslims I know that since September 11, 2001, “Islamophobia” has grown. Children are far from immune to this reality, and they suffer greatly when acts of extremism hit the news and their classmates call Muslims “terrorists” and “bomb throwers.” Some children have seen relatives and family friends who lack the proper papers deported simply for being Muslim. For the last eight years, resources have been made increasingly available through counselors and internet sites to help parents talk to their children about anti-Islamic responses in the United States and how they can understand and communicate that theirs is really a religion of peace.

The Muslim youth of America today seem to be taking lead roles in helping articulate what an “American Islam” might look like. It is this generation’s children who will carry the responsibility for determining what it means to be Muslim in America. Boys and girls well short of the voting age are already busy at that task ■

## Churches Embrace New Social Media

BY PAUL LAMB

**I**N A WORLD GONE ONLINE, ALWAYS on, and viral, what are the implications for communities of faith? Do Facebook, Twitter, and iPhone Apps represent fantastic new communication and evangelizing opportunities for the church? Faith-based communities are beginning to ask this very question.

Larger “celebration” churches, in particular, are experimenting with live streaming video, public Twitter broadcasts during services, and even services in virtual worlds like

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Second Life. Last I checked, there were over 11,000 Facebook groups with a religious theme—over half of which were Christian in origin. The Roman Catholic prelate of Ireland has even called for Catholics to use Twitter, email, and social networking as prayer tools. “God bloggers” abound, and a group of German Protestants are attempting to Twitter the entire Bible line by line.

In a statement to the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, a Catholic bishop from Arizona suggested the great communications challenge today is capturing and holding the interest of people who have so many places to turn.

He is right. The ability to understand and leverage the use of social media tools like blogs, social networks, and interactive media presents a clear communications challenge during the age of the one-minute attention span. But the view that the new media is simply a new form of communication to be adapted by mainline churches is deeply flawed and represents a fundamental lack of understanding of underlying cultural shifts.

On the whole, social media and Web 2.0 signal a sea change in how people interact, and how they have come to view institutions in general. While traditional religious bodies have enforced a top-down strategy of organizing and engaging church audiences, Web 2.0 thrives on a bottom-up approach. For example, Wikipedia has created the largest repository of information in history—and arguably one of the most reliable—all by putting creative and organizing powers in the hands of end users themselves. No group of experts was called in to make Wikipedia happen, and it was not the result of an act of Congress or a papal edict.

While yesterday’s worshipers might rely on the church for an understanding of the Bible in their hands, tomorrow’s worshipers might take their cues from a “Wikibible” representing the cumulative knowledge and insights of millions of believers and nonbelievers worldwide. Aggregated and disparate views might generate ongoing online and offline discussions about what makes sense to local communities of faith in the twenty-first century—something traditional churches are far from achieving.

In short, engaging and enlarging church communities in the digital era is not about inventing a better bullhorn. It’s about see-

ing the new medium as a way of reinventing the church and spiritual practice altogether.

It is critical to understand, for better or worse, that today’s youth want a personalized religious experience. They want to have their say, be listened to, and engage each other directly—beyond the physical walls and formal dictates of the church. Just as the TV generation demanded an “edutainment” experience, the millennials are demanding a two-way interactive experience. They want to participate in a conversation *with* their religion and their religious leaders, and not be lectured to.

So, given the new reality, and understanding that social media is moving the message far beyond the medium, what will “Church 2.0” look like?

Trend watchers suggest the latest fad is the emergence of “micro-churches.” With over 10,000 identified religions worldwide, and two or three new ones being introduced every day, the religious future is looking more and more like a community fruit basket and less like an orchard growing red-only apples. Technology will play a key role in the localization and miniaturization of religion, because it puts organizing and communications tools directly into the hands of people themselves. Why go to the church on the corner, which may not speak to you directly, when you can organize your own church of like-minded individuals in your neighborhood? These micro-communities will likely gain guidance from online mini-gatherings from around the globe.

This is not to say that the mainstream churches will disappear any time soon, but if they view social media and technology change as purely a communications challenge, they risk being left standing on the docks watching the future sail away.

Social media and whatever comes after it are just tools. But, like the printing press before them, these tools can play a significant role in cultural transformations. After all, Jesus himself used the communication tools of his time to shake things up and to call for revolutionary change.

In response to the standard, “What are you doing?” that Twitter poses to all of its users, I think Jesus might say “I’m learning how to remind churches that the people are their foundation, and not the other way around”—in 140 characters or less. ■