

# WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

CLAIMING AND MAINTAINING AN ONLINE MINISTERIAL IDENTITY



ERIK RESLY

HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

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## WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?

On the road to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus of Nazareth pauses to ask his followers: “Who do people say that I am?” Without hesitation, Jesus’ disciples shower him with a plethora of responses. Unsatisfied, Jesus clarifies his inquiry: “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, and, according to Mark’s account, Jesus orders silence on the subject.

This gospel episode illustrates the ambivalence of embodied identity, caught between efforts at self-presentation and the often-asymmetrical perception of others. Mark’s narrative testifies to Jesus’ uncertain and unresolved identity disclosure. At best, only a select group of individuals will match their understanding to his intentions. Loosened from its Christian setting, this incident sheds light on the indeterminacy of ministerial identity writ large. Sociologist and media theorist Zygmunt Bauman acknowledges the frustrating complexity of patching such an identity together: “one has to compare, to make choices, to make them repeatedly, to revise choices already made on another occasion, to try to reconcile contradictory and often incompatible demands” (Bauman, 2008: 11). Once predetermined and deceptively solidified, identities now ‘float in the air,’ inflated and launched by producer and consumer alike. Never fixed, they function provisionally, continually in process, the objects of unquenchable experimentation. In short, identity construction, moderation and projection are hard – so much so, that they frequently result in misunderstanding, or silence.

The recent groundswell in new technology only complicates this picture. As if identity formation in the physical world of handshakes, coffee breaks and dinner dates was not challenging enough, the introduction of an online dimension often works to diffuse self-conception indefinitely, as if refracted through a virtual prism. Users self-present in different and unique ways depending on the nature and purpose of the available technological tools. In turn, the whirlwind of social networking options unshackles ministry from its geographical locatedness – suddenly, religious authorities must adapt to new forms and speeds of communication, new audiences, new disembodied interlocutors now reduced to bits. And yet, the indispensable, if daunting, question remains: Who do people say that I am?

To date, little Unitarian Universalist ink has been spilled in reflection on this transition from fellowship hour to Facebook. The Church of the Larger Fellowship, glossed by former UUA President Bill Sinkford as Church-on-Loan, does maintain an active web presence – an increasingly popular trend among countless churches, ministers and congregants nationwide (Sinkford, 2004: 94). Unitarian Universalists are *doing religion* online (Taher, 2006: 9). But few have taken the time to think critically about the implications of, and best practices in, conducting ministry in the virtual world.

This paper serves as an initial gesture towards making sense of the onslaught of proliferating social networking opportunities. I will initially comb the theoretical literature for insights into the meaning of identity, the influx in new technologies and the imperatives and challenges of constructing online ministerial identity. Thereafter, I will transition into the realm of praxis by analyzing statistical data and case studies drawn from my research. Consequently, I will discuss the most effective models of online ministry. It is my hope that this paper will initiate a conversation in Unitarian Universalist communities around issues in online ministerial identity.

## IDENTITY IN LIQUID MODERNITY

In contrast with the Lockean vision of homogeneous and continuous biological identity (Locke, 1894), contemporary theorists privilege social constructionist accounts of identitarian fluidity. In *liquid modernity*, as Bauman denotes the contemporary post-structuralist condition of epistemological leaking, trickling and spilling, any attempt at smoothing over the “inconsistency and precariousness of the plans men and women make for their lives...would be as futile as attempting to empty the ocean with a bucket.” (Bauman, 2008: 3). Knowledge ebbs, truth flows and identity rides the crashing waves of unpredictability. No longer ‘natural,’ predetermined and non-negotiable, identity becomes fragmentary, ill-coordinated, “uncertain and transient” (Bauman, 2008: 6). Every system of meaning, including that of identity, falls short of realizing the dream of a stable totality or of a closed system of signification (Derrida, 1978). The “bunch of problems called *my identity*” has been unanchored, emancipated, set free (Bauman, 2008: 12).

This newfound identitarian freedom sends mixed blessings. It imposes the twin poles of liberation and oppression on social existence. On the one hand, individuals experience increased agency and self-determination as they reclaim their right to self-expression and individuation. On the other hand, the sheer freedom of choice proves burdensome and overwhelming. Amidst the variability, discontinuity and diversity of possible configurations, individuals wrestle with what Paul Ricoeur terms *la mêmeté*, i.e. the fragile attempt at achieving an intelligible consistency and continuity of the “identité narrative” (Thomasset, 1996: 162).

Much as an author composes narrative by weaving discrete characters and haphazard events into a “discordant concordant whole” (Kermode, 1967), so too the individual patches together an identity out of memories, experiences and aspirations, reminiscent of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *bricoleur* (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 17). Identity is to be invented rather than discovered. And yet, absolute stability proves impossible. As Bauman suggests, “identities are for wearing and showing, not for storing and keeping” (Bauman, 2008: 89). Identity-formation necessarily remains an unfulfilled, unfinished task, since it operates with a “*defective* jigsaw puzzle, in which quite a few bits (and one will never know exactly how many) are missing” (Bauman, 2008: 48). Partial and incomplete, yet always in-process, identity mirrors love, lusting not for ready-made objects, but desiring participation in and contribution to the becoming of such things.

Importantly, situations inflect the composition of identity as well (Turner et al. 1987). Reinard Nauta coins the neologism *pastoral selfconcept* to describe the nature of identity in ministerial contexts (Nauta, 1993). He insists that a pastoral selfconcept is “central to a living model of pastoral work” (Nauta, 1993: 5). Such an identity expression may be conceived as momentary or more enduring, and it “can be based to a large extent on role experiences,” i.e. memories of, as well as judgments and expectations about, the ministerial vocation (Nauta, 1993: 9). As for many who work in helping professions, there may only be slight differentiation, if any at all, between the professional role and personal identity. Hence, ministers must carefully construct their operating pastoral selfconcepts with utmost care and self-awareness.

## ONLINE IDENTITY

Electronically mediated identities require individuals to self-present “on the move” (Bauman, 2008: 26). Today, new technologies, new norms and new communities seem to sprout at a dizzying rate. Yet, these novel online worlds also serve as identitarian auxiliaries. Bauman notes: “It is because we are endlessly forced to twist and mold our identities, and are not allowed to stick to one identity even if we want to, that electronic instruments to do just that come in handy” (Bauman, 2008: 90).

Individuals construct technology much as they construct identity. That is to say, the virtual universe does not over-determine identity any more than the sublunary world does. In the words of Danah Michele Boyd: “A technology’s value is shaped by its social construction—how designers create it and how people use it, interpret it, and reconfigure it. It is not an outcome of the technology alone or its potential” (Boyd, 2008: 12). Of course, online mediums, or *networked publics*, display certain characteristics that both shape and are shaped by user engagement (Boyd, 2008: 27). These include:

1. Persistence: online activity is automatically tracked, recorded and archived.
2. Replicability: since online content derives from bits, it may be easily replicated and disseminated.
3. Scalability: online networks offer remarkable visibility potential.
4. Searchability: users may easily browse or search online content.

The aforementioned features of networked publics differ in significant and important ways from offline activity. Since information, rather than matter, composes online bodies, selves readily diffuse and replicate. A single progenitor may exhibit multiple, often incongruous, personae. Virtual audiences also have searchable access to past iterations of online bodies. Whereas offline photographs and personal journal entries congest attic storage containers, online documentation is readily available and always-at-hand. Users end up telling private stories in public places (Lee, 2006). Consequently, “our fundamental ideas about identity and privacy, the strategies that we have collectively pursued, and the technologies that we have adopted” may have to change (Cavoukian, 2008: 91).

Online, users literally *type* themselves into being. This act involves a careful dance of disclosure. To manage impressions, individuals “negotiate, express, and adjust the signals that they explicitly give and those that they implicitly give off” (Boyd, 2008: 121). On the one hand, users hold more authority and control over public self-articulation (i.e. the signals they explicitly project) than they would in the physical environment, due to the unidimensionality of online bodies. Images are flat, text is static and behavior is reduced to mouse-click. For all the information that an individual chooses to reveal, much more remains hidden from sight. On the other hand, users must consequently learn the online craft of social signaling in order to accurately and authentically communicate an identity. Individuals emanate few identity clues, so virtual reputations are hard to build up. Deceptive identities abound, making identity verification compulsory. And yet, identity recognition and confirmation are hard to come by, on account of the often shallow and short-lived interactions that take place online (Ma and Agarwal, 2007: 43). As a site not only of discourse and opinion but designed “for the formation and enactment of social identities,” the network public thus raises as many questions as it answers (Fraser, 1992).

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AS STORY TELLING**

Social networking technologies equip individuals with tools for public storytelling. The virtual *bricoleur* layers bricks of meaning through her posting of images, opinions and personal data. She determines what and how information should be released. In so doing, she clears space for online viewers to patch together their own narratives out of fragmentary slices of meaning. Individuals, thus, become online authors, *compiling* bodies into being and assembling identities for the original author herself. This process often takes the form of a playful experimentation with online expression, blurring the line between fact and fiction, authenticity and artifice. As indicated above, identity-formation, and by extension virtual storytelling, takes place at the intersection between producer and consumer – roles that, in this case, remain fluid and reversible. Sociologist Erving Goffman distinguishes between “expressions given” and “expressions given off” (1959, 4). The former category refers to explicit messages about how an individual wishes to be perceived, while the latter includes subtle, unintentional messages

communicated through action, tone and nuance. When telling and redacting an online identitarian story, both of these classes must be taken into account.

To illustrate this art of virtual storytelling, let us consider a textual fragment taken from an anonymous ministerial Facebook profile. Extracted from the profile caption (i.e. the box underneath the profile photograph that states ‘Write something about yourself’), it reads:

I love being a grandmother. I have a lot of fun playng [sic] baseball with ny [sic] oldest and saying nursery rhymes to the little one.

Here, the minister explicitly self-presents as a personable and involved family member. She begins by defining herself through the role she assumes in family life, indicative of her ready embrace of the situation into which she has been thrown. She then goes on to describe her holistic engagement with her grandchildren. In this way, the “expression given” signals openness, enthusiasm and a greater degree of intimacy than she might choose to disclose from the pulpit. The tenderness seems authentic. Conversely, the “expression given off” communicates informality, light-heartedness and a non- (not un-) professionalism. She repeatedly misspells words, suggesting either that she quickly composed this update and will change it in the coming days, or that she does not naturally concern herself with proofreading and editing. If we privilege the former interpretation, then this comment raises questions about what sparked her sudden identification as a grandmother and how malleable her self-concept is. Is she always changing faces? Which mask holds most authority? We might begin to project other information we know about her onto this identitarian fragment. At the same time, this comment might help us gain new insight into what she values in life – and in church. In contrast, if we adopt the latter explanation, the text displays a level of informality that potentially conflicts with her embodied ministerial presence. Wait a minute, is this the minister I heard preach last Sunday?

The difficulty of online identity management lies precisely in the aforementioned ambivalence. How will readers construe authorial intent? After all, the minister writes for an invisible, if not largely unknown, audience. One reader, who has known said minister for her entire life, may



decode the comment in a strikingly different way than a ministerial colleague she recently befriended. Either way, she has no way of catering her comment to the specificities of her conversationalist. Network publics, in this way, necessarily collapse contexts. While the author understands the localized context in which she composed the caption, she may not be able to discern the contexts inhabited by her audience. Further, the minister lacks substantial feedback loops or vehicles for validation. She has no access to the facial expressions or emotional responses that her self-description provokes. Unless a user explicitly references her comment in a wall post or private communication, she remains ignorant of the efficacy of her initial communicative effort altogether. In this way, social networking tools exponentially enlarge reading audiences and encourage creative storytelling, while simultaneously destabilizing the coherence and meaning of, as well as control over, those stories.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AS COMMUNITY BUILDING**

The translation of inter-personal communication into virtual discourses also reconfigures the dynamics of community building. With the rise of personal mobility over the past century, the strength and nature of human relationships have usurped the importance once placed on physical proximity. The move online radicalizes this step even further, calling into question the role of face-to-face contact in creating communal life. Howard Rheingold, one of the early pioneers of “the electronic frontier,” fondly recollects his discovery of that “cozy little world that had been flourishing without me, hidden within the walls of my house; an entire cast of characters welcomed me to the troupe with great merriment as soon as I found the secret door” (Rheingold, 1993: 1-2). But does the “secret door” lead to community, or merely the “illusion of intimacy and pretense of community” (Bauman, 2008: 25)?

Undoubtedly, social media sites outfit users with novel instruments for coming-together. Online groups and forums cater to niche interests and gather individuals with shared passions, allowing seekers to explore issues in greater depth than they might if forced to converse offline with largely disinterested or ignorant audiences. Communication is inexpensive, instant and archived, meaning recent arrivals have access to vast repositories of past dialogue. Since users log in to virtual accounts from their home or work computers, social networking sites do not require

extensive travel or tedious planning as a prerequisite for interaction. Some web-enthusiasts thus maintain that “we really can have something similar to ‘f2f’ [i.e. face to face] relationships fostered via cyberspace” (Knight, 2002).

Conversely, skeptics point to the pettiness of online commitments as evidence that such “cloakroom communities are patched together for the duration of the spectacle and promptly dismantled again once the spectators collect their coats from the hooks in the cloakroom” (Bauman, 2008: 31). Evangelical Christian churches, in particular, are increasingly using online networking tools and, as a result, coming up against the contours and limitations of the technology. Many speak of the transition online as a form of *reverse incarnation*, where the flesh becomes word. As such, these virtual worlds represent “extensions of our own physical world,” as opposed to wholly Other or transcendent ambits of human inhabitation (Knight, 2002). Nevertheless, the growing consensus among these voices submits that “it’s dangerous to use the word community to describe what [online interaction] is” (One True Media). Pastor Shane Hipps clarifies this position in an interview at the 2009 National Pastor’s Convention in San Diego, CA. On his view, meaningful (Christian) community obliges:

1. Shared history, in order to promote a sense of identity and belonging.
2. Permanence, which makes shared history possible in the first place.
3. Proximity, so that individuals can spend time being with one another.
4. Shared imagination of the future, or the belief that all members are moving in the same direction.

According to Hipps, in offline, unmediated human communities, the first three traits take hold relatively quickly. Individuals therefore invest significant time wrestling with one another to agree on the fourth. In contrast, online communities frequently mobilize around the fourth ingredient, but appear anemic in the former three. Hipps opines: “What you get [online] is a shared sense of the future, and that’s a good thing. Enjoy it. But don’t call it community, because it isn’t” (One True Media).

Hipps’ polemic against the thinness of online community reverberates in the voices of countless other doubters. For example, ‘über-blogger’ Anne Jackson responds to Hipps with the tempering

clarification: “I believe what happens online is *connection* - not *community*” (2009). There are clearly dimensions of fellowship that materialize online, she goes on to admit, but “when we spend more time staring at a glowing monitor than we do into the eyes of those we love, or need to love, it might be time to shut off the computer” (Jackson, 2009). Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith similarly endorse the view that online communities “are not a pale, artificial substitute for more traditional forms of community,” even though they markedly alter the economies of inter-subjective exchange and organization (1999: 17).

Respondents to the survey on ‘online ministerial identity’ that I disseminated to thirty Unitarian Universalist clergy and seminarians mostly upheld the aforementioned distinction between connection and community. “Online is for information exchange,” one person wrote. Another individual chimed in: “My online connection is not a community, just a hobby of observing fun facts about the people I know and trying to correct my poor ability to maintain long distance relationships.” Social media, most participants agreed, function as an advantageous tool for “communicating within community.” Users employ the technology to re-affirm offline community in the online world, as well as to extend invitations to new faces to join in embodied interaction. Nevertheless, a handful of individuals contended that social networking is “still in process” and they hold out the hope that technological invention may one day close the gap between physical and virtual reality.

In the meantime, social networking can help individuals publicize events, mobilize campaigns and share new ideas in exciting ways, as the 2008 Presidential Election demonstrated (Pew Research Center, 2008). In this way, it gestures towards a globalization in solidarity that may not replace but rather supplement the raw messiness of building offline community. Feminist intercultural theorist Maria Pilar Aquino appropriates the term *convivencia* to describe a “conscious way of life in which an ethical position in favor of living together...with differences takes form” (2007, 15). Online webs of inter-connectivity increasingly unite difference across borders in common purpose, setting the foundations for a virtual *convivencia* that denotes “one aspect of authentic community” (La Grou, 2009).

## TOOLS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

Of the thirty religious leaders polled, twenty-three reported regular use of social networking technologies (76.6%). Respondents cited Facebook as the most common virtual format (95.7%), classifying it as the “most effective” networking venue as well (100%). Thirteen participants reportedly maintain a blog (56.5%), seven a Twitter account (30.4%) and six a Linked In profile (21.6%). In contrast, the seven respondents who do not regularly engage social media preferred the “lovely ebb and flow of real conversation” to the “cryptic and often misleading” experience of electronic communication. These contributors simply found “no time, no need, no interest, and no perceived benefit.”

The empirical split between the ‘old fashionists’ and ‘new media enthusiasts’ reflects the ambivalent nature of social networking tools. Even when individuals have the requisite training in using these technologies, they quickly stumble upon the many gray zones that mark online landscapes. Much of the disillusionment with these tools derives from that ambiguity. Thus, in the sections that follow, I hope to equip users with constructive ideas for navigating these virtual labyrinths. In particular, I will focus on best practices in maintaining an online ministerial identity.

## FACEBOOK

As mentioned, most respondents are at least familiar with Mark Zuckerberg’s global social networking brainchild Facebook. What began as an elite Ivy League network has since ballooned into a global phenomenon boasting over 300 million users (Facebook, 2009). From a ministerial perspective, Facebook has many benefits:

- Easy interaction: Facebook allows users to lounge around in their pajamas at any time of the day or night and interact with friends, family and congregants from the comfort of their own home. One minister elucidated: “asynchronous communications tools are a Godsend to ministers. Before the widespread use of email, I used to spend hours making phone calls, trying to reach people when they are in, worrying about whether I was interrupting dinner or a meeting.”

- Keeping in touch: Facebook connects individuals in a relatively unthreatening and disengaged way, allowing users to maintain relationships at the appropriate and desired level of intimacy.
- Promoting your cause: Facebook's *pages* application rallies supporters around a common cause or organization, which additionally helps congregants stay connected to one another outside of coffee hour.
- Publicizing your event: Facebook's *events* application allows users to painlessly and promptly publicize upcoming events.
- Ministering to youth: Increasingly, Facebook serves as the primary venue for youth interaction. A DRE I interviewed explained that her decision to open a Facebook account derived from her desire "to stay in touch with youth because that's where they are." Another pastor with whom I spoke recalled her ability to minister to the grieving friends of a young parishioner who passed away, describing Facebook as a "site where people leave their memories."
- Telling your story: Facebook helps ministers share sides of their personality that they may not get a chance to from the pulpit (e.g. the grandmother example above). This increasingly holistic perspective on a minister's character renders them more humane and, consequently, more approachable.

#### GROWING SUPPORT

The Facebook *Pages* application empowers users to gather and grow support for their business or organization. Since a member's support for a page features prominently under their Info tab, reputations spread quickly via virtual 'word of mouth.' For example, about a year ago, I created a page for a popular Mexican restaurant in El Paso, Texas. Today, the page has 13,710 fans. Think how churches might benefit from this technology.

In short, Facebook opens clearings for congregants to interact, express support for the church and gain new insight into a minister's personal life. Even though the online church community may not foster the deep relationships characteristic of the physical world, it will help people connect and stay connected. At the same time, with this heightened interaction and transparency comes increased risk:

- Oversharing: Ministers must avoid over-sharing sensitive information given the collapsed contexts and inability to police reaction and interpretation.

- Undersharing: Often overlooked, the danger of undersharing must also be avoided in a technological world that expects frequent revisions (i.e. weekly updates) and considerable information-sharing. Ministers may run the risk of appearing cold, detached and out-of-touch if too few details are provided.
- Reductionism: Ministers appreciate and grapple with nuance better than most. In an effort to express the complexity of their own personality, however, ministers may find themselves constrained to pithy, reductionist assertions when fitting themselves into Facebook's "set of predetermined boxes and lists of tastes" (Boyd, 2008: 142-143).
- False Intimacy: While Facebook users may learn more about an individual's habits and preferences than they would offline, their increased knowledge may not map neatly onto closer lived relationships.
- Dizzying speed of information-dissemination: The word may get out too fast. As one minister noted: "There is person-to-person communication that has to happen" before, during and after making sensitive community announcements (e.g. a member's death).

The dangers of Facebook, thus, center on issues of maintaining appropriate boundaries and controlling vulnerable information. Taken as a whole, Facebook empowers ministers to share of themselves in novel and exciting ways. And yet, as one respondent wrote: "There's a tightrope to walk."

Although Facebook's features undergo annual facelifts and technological updates, it is still worthwhile to consider the significant issues in online ministerial identity that arise from different aspects of the Facebook profile as it stands today.

*Profile Picture:* If the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" still holds true, ministers should take seriously the responsibility of choosing an appropriate profile picture. This decision, above all others, sets the tone for the entire profile page. Also, the picture shows up when anonymous users search for your profile, marking it as public in the broadest sense. Having scanned twenty randomly selected ministerial profile pictures, I identified the following five categories:

<b>Photo Category</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Expression Given Off</b>
Professional Mugshot	Close-up, business attire	I'm still in the pulpit.
Relaxed Mugshot	Close-up, barbecue attire	See, I can be normal too!
Family Group Photo	Minister with spouse and/or children	I care for my own family like I care for my church family.
Silly Photo	Minister in an unusual setting or with humorous props	I can let my hair down in an appropriate way, right?
Missing Photo	Generic Facebook picture	I couldn't figure out how to upload a file.

At least half of the profile pictures analyzed fell into the second category (i.e. relaxed mugshot). This seems to be the least risky choice. Disturbingly, a significant number of ministers also sported the generic Facebook placeholder picture. While some individuals may simply be in-between profile photos, it is quite likely that ministers choosing this option either do not have time (read: interest) to upload a file, or desire the anonymity of the generic 'missing' picture. This decision not only makes it difficult for users to find and befriend the minister, but also sends mixed messages about the minister's intentions for using Facebook in the first place. When selecting a profile picture, ministers should ask themselves: Why am I using Facebook and how will this picture further that purpose? What message does this photo communicate and does that message supplement or contradict other information on my profile?

*Profile Caption:* In a sentence or two, the profile caption allows users to tell the viewer what impression she should take away from the profile page. One minister used this space to promote his church: "Visit the Unitarian Universalist Church in X's Facebook page!" When asked about how he viewed his online ministerial presence, his selfconcept confirmed the 'expression given off' by this caption: "I am trying to present myself as a minister," he explained, even if Facebook mirrors "a conversation with a congregant at the grocery store" more than it does a sermon. In contrast, my own profile caption cites Charles Sanders Peirce's profession: "I willingly confess to having some tincture of sentimentalism in me, God be thanked!" I felt this quote was apt given my interest in pragmatist philosophy and my desire to construct a Facebook identity that caters to both college fraternity brothers and future Unitarian Universalist ministerial colleagues. Many

ministers, however, chose not to provide a profile caption. If and when selecting a profile caption, ministers should ask themselves: Do I need to clarify my profile picture? Does my profile caption bring coherence or confusion to my profile as a whole?

*Wall:* Like it or not, users encounter an individual's Facebook wall before they view her personal

#### POSTING ETIQUETTE

Online social venues call for appropriate and respectful behavior much in the same way as offline gatherings rely on normative social scripts. Facebook users, in particular, must exercise responsible information sharing and demonstrate proper etiquette. Before posting comments or personal information, users should consider the following criteria:

1. Will I feel uncomfortable if this information gets into the hands of a family member, friend, congregant or unknown person?
2. Are any of my comments so situation-dependent that their use out of context could endanger myself or someone else?
3. Do the activities I post or groups I create contain sensitive information?
4. Am I putting anyone else at risk by mentioning their name, posting their picture or making a comment on their profile page?

and professional information. In this way, other users (i.e. those people generating the wall graffiti) define a minister's online identity before she can herself. The implicit danger of such a loss of control leads some ministers to block wall communication altogether. This decision, however, seriously undercuts the communicative benefit of Facebook in the first place. Most ministers do allow wall comments. This carries risks, as one minister testified: a colleague of hers reportedly had to disable his Facebook account after congregants began gossiping about inappropriate wall

posts on his profile page that implied deviant sexual behavior. Another respondent lifted up her role as an ambassador of liberal religion: "I'm friends with conservative Christians and I work hard to present my liberal faith as something that is meaningful and important." Suggestive or overly politicized wall comments would threaten that effort, she added. If and when allowing wall posts, ministers should ask themselves: Am I willing to spend the requisite time vigilantly monitoring my wall? After deleting inappropriate posts, how will I approach the person posting such comments? Does my wall contain any offensive or unwanted material that militates against the rest of my profile?



*Status Updates:* Facebook offers a Twitter-esque micro-blog option known as the status update, which allows individuals to post a message of their choosing on their own wall. Many ministers use this function to promote church activities or publicize useful links. For example, a colleague of mine recently posted a link to a video of her ordination. Another colleague announced an op-ed piece she wrote for a church blog. One respondent felt strongly that such “reminders and posts have resulted in a number of my local friends attending our church and recommending it to others.” In effect, these types of status updates help weave the autonomous profile page back into the wider world. At the same time, most respondents agreed that ministers should be careful to maintain a professional persona even in this shorthand update format. Specifically, the tendency to bemoan sermonizing (e.g. “I’d prefer to be napping than writing”) or indulge viewers in private vocational matters (e.g. “My computer just started working again after dying. That means I have to go back to work. Sigh.”) must be avoided at all costs. When posting status updates, ministers should ask themselves: How much will I disclose about how I spend my time online? How can I strategically and effectively use status updates to garner church-related enthusiasm and support? Could any of my comments be interpreted as unprofessional?

*Pictures:* Whereas individuals intentionally choose their own profile pictures, they often have less control over other users’ photographs in which they are tagged. Hence, many ministers carefully regulate their privacy settings and disallow congregants or other ministerial colleagues from viewing photos of them. Aside from noticeably unsuitable pictures that are morally compromising, photos of a minister attending a congregant’s private function or lounging in a bathing suite on vacation may also raise red flags. The same holds true for pictures that ministers have snapped of other individuals. If a photo is ever in question, seek permission prior to posting. When allowing pictures, ministers should ask themselves: Do I have the time to vigilantly monitor pictures in which I appear? Am I posting pictures that would make others feel uncomfortable? How much will I disclose about how I spend my time offline?

*Info:* The Info page comprises: “basic information” about relationship status, political commitments and religious affiliations; “personal information” addressing activities, interests and a multitude of ‘favorites;’ an “about me” section; “contact information;” “education and work;” as well as groups and pages supported by the user. In negotiating questions of disclosure,

ministers are advised to personalize but not self-promote or over-share. At the same time, excessively sparse pages signal a desire to withhold information and often feel sterile and unwelcoming. Further, the contact information section offers ministers an opportunity to provide direct communication lines to friends and (potentially) congregants without posting them on the public church website. Frequently, the level of information-sharing a minister allows on his info page will reflect his motivation for using Facebook in the first place. For example, one minister only displays basic information, contact information and his education and work history. This limited exposé mirrors his professional mugshot profile picture and decision to fill in the profile caption with the title of his current ministerial position. When composing the info section, ministers should ask themselves: What do I want others to know about me and how might this venue offer me an opportunity to share personal information in a professional way? How much will I disclose about how I think, act and play?

Even if contentious, Facebook remains the most popular and most effective social networking tool for the ministers I interviewed and polled. Most respondents indicated that “a wide variety of people use Facebook to connect with our church.” Yet, given the significant variance in their use of such technology, many ministers noted a considerable gulf between offline and online pastoral selfconcepts. Conceptually inspired by Reinard Nauta’s analysis of Dutch clergy (1993) and John E. Johnson’s paradigmatic offices for pastoral identity (1995), my statistical data supports this finding. In the embodied world, over 90% of all respondents cited teacher, counselor and shepherd as the offices closest aligned to their ministerial identity. Only slightly over half saw themselves as a friend. In contrast, 84.6% of all respondents selected the friend office for their online ministerial identity. The three popular offline offices gained less than 50% support in the virtual world. While it might be tempting to consequently dismiss the online ministerial presence as “much more superficial,” as did one respondent, Nauta’s findings challenge ministers to reconsider the utility of Facebook in constructing a holistic ministerial selfconcept. After all, according to Nauta’s data, “pastors want to be a counsellor, helper, while persons prefer the pastor to be a friend” (1993: 25).

## TWITTER

I once attended worship at the First Church in Belmont, MA, Unitarian Universalist, when minister emeritus Rev. Victor Carpenter was preaching. Hard of hearing, he shuffled into the pulpit with tremendous grace, clinging to the lectern for support. When he opened his mouth, I could hardly believe my ears: Unitarian Universalism is a tweeting faith, he insisted. In contrast with blogging, which allows individuals to conduct extensive propositional monologues centering on belief-systems, Twitter encourages users to let the world know what an individual is doing, not just thinking. The image of this elderly sage, his face framed by a white-haired mane and large-rimmed glasses, exhorting twenty-somethings to take up the spiritual discipline of tweeting, will stay with me for a while!

Of the ministers I polled, only 30.4% regularly use the social networking and micro-blogging service. Dubbed the “SMS of the internet” for its text-based posts of up to 140 characters, Twitter enables users to send tweets and follow other users’ updates via subscription (D’Monte, 2009). Sectors of the evangelical Christian community, in particular, have embraced the technology as a means of integrating “text-messaging into their relationship with God” (Rochman, 2009). A May 2009 *Time* article followed Westwinds Community Church pastors John Voelz and David McDonald as they trained congregants in social networking systems. In turn, parishioners composed tweets during morning service, which the staff then projected on three large video screens. Amidst the usual banter (e.g. ‘Nice shirt JVo’), some congregants shared meaningful messages: “The more I press in to Him, the more He presses me out to be useful” (Rochman, 2009).

The sheer popularity of Twitter within such Christian circles has similarly produced thoughtful reflection on the advantages and limitations of the medium. Most commentators praise Twitter as the new global commons, connecting strangers with the reigning gossip of the global village. For the church community, this means instant updates about congregational activities and the lives of fellow parishioners. This holds true for pastors as well. One minister observes: “I like to think of myself as the ‘pastor’ of this twitter parish. In the course of a day’s passings (‘postings’) on the village commons, I try to find ways to encourage my ‘parishioners’ (Barnabas blasts, I call

them), and be a positive, healing energy in their lives” (Sweet, 2009). Sweet goes on to lift up the ‘followership’ paradigm that Twitter promotes, which he then maps onto the spiritual discipline of Christian discipleship: “In my ongoing battle with self-transcendence over self-absorption, twitter has helped me become more others-focused” (Sweet, 2009).

The major criticism leveled against the ‘twitterverse’ is its often numbing banality paired with a healthy dose of narcissism. Many users chronicle the ultra-mundane: “I’m not sure what I want for lunch” or “Just purchased a hard drive. I really hope it’s the correct one!” For Leonard Sweet, though, this apparent shallowness has its benefits as well. He argues: “life is not just about the depths. Life is also about the surfaces.” In this vein, he regards Twitter as a constant reminder “to be grateful for the little things and to celebrate the little and the simple” (Sweet, 2009). Drawing on Clive Thompson’s notion of “ambient awareness,” Steven Johnson admits that the abbreviated status reports saturating Twitter’s bandwidth give users “a strangely satisfying glimpse of their daily routines” (2009). Such updates can be “moving, witty, observant, subversive” (Johnson, 2009). Skeptics, however, point to the condensed and, by extension, overly simplistic form of theological reflection that Twitter endorses. Likened to theological fast food, tweets showcase catch phrases and one-liners that essentialize complex religious truths: “God looves takin da hopeless & makin em da DOPEST!” Commenting on this phenomenon, ‘theological scribbler’ Robin Parry opines: “You cannot even develop an argument on twitter beyond the most truncated kind of soundbiteism. I am seriously worried that Christian reflection is becoming more and mote bite-sized in this online era” (2009).

Ministers are advised to take both sides of the debate into account. On the one hand, Twitter affords ministers an intimate and sustained window into the lives of their parishioners. They learn about what their congregants are doing, as opposed to merely thinking or saying. This could, as one interviewee suggested, “key me into [pastoral] issues” and concerns. Other ministers employ the technology to “send out a quick heads-up” about upcoming church events. For example, the Auction Committee of the Nantucket Unitarian Universalist Church recently disseminated the following reminder: “Nantucket Unitarian Church’s ‘Second Chance’ Auction: Great buys on wonderful gifts; a chance to do good and shop - <http://bit.ly/ACKAuction>.” Additionally, some ministers tweet daily ‘mini-reflections’ to “stay in touch” and maintain a

spiritual connection with their parishioners. Rev. Marilyn Sewell, for example, shares brief reflections and shocking statistics with her 117 followers on a regular basis: “I believe each of us has a destiny, or a holy calling--awake, open, we look for signs that draw us there,” she’ll write. In this way, as Leonard Sweet expounds, “if you can’t say it in less than 140 characters, you can’t say it in a way that can connect with a Google world” (2009).

On the other hand, ministers should heed warnings similar to those associated with the Facebook profile update tool: avoid over-sharing and self-absorption. Also, as one minister emphatically cautioned, ministers must steer clear of negativity. Rather, tweets should boost enthusiasm and mobilize support for church communities by describing a “glowing and idealized congregational life.” Ministers thereby set the tone for church-related discussion. With any luck, ministers may encounter parishioners ‘selling’ the church for them: “I go2the best church ever!Pastor Joel's cool, but his bro, sis & Pastor Marcos are awesome too!Our praise&worship rocks.”

## BLOGS

In practice, Unitarian Universalism appears to be more of a blogger’s faith than a tweeter’s religion. Whereas under a third of the ministers polled held Twitter accounts, over one half reportedly use a blog (56.5%). What is more, 61.5% of blogging ministers update their online diaries at least once a week. The influx of Unitarian Universalist web logs over the past few years has generated a *UU World* “blog roundup” feature that highlights popular conversations within the blogging community, as well as the *UUupdates* news aggregator for syndicated Unitarian Universalist sites. Since discontinued, the UU Blog Awards acknowledged outstanding entries in a multiplicity of categories, ranging from best cultural commentary to best seminarian writing.

In speaking with five prominent Unitarian Universalist bloggers about the imperatives and dangers of the social networking format, I frequently heard the refrain: blogs offer parishioners “more knowledge of and intimacy with their minister [so that they may] get to know more of what he's thinking and feeling about matters of importance.” Interestingly, two separate groups of bloggers emerged: pre- and post-boom. The former category rode the early waves of

blogging-hype “just for fun,” without the explicit intention of ministerial blogging. Consequently, they soon had to decide whether they would merge their blogging persona with their ministerial identity, or whether they would continue to bifurcate their selfconcept. One respondent, who resolved to maintain a divided identity, cited his parishioners’ “jealousy” of his blogging popularity as a major factor contributing to his negotiated resignation. Conversely, the post-boom camp began blogging as an extension of their ministry. Many joined the online world in an effort to reach a wider audience, as well as to offer their own congregation digitalized daily bread. One minister expressed gratitude and amazement for the 400 subscribers and 2000 hits that her weekly column elicits.

The primary motivation fueling these widely read, prolific Unitarian Universalist bloggers was the desire to “get my voice out to more people.” As one respondent attested: “Unitarians and Universalists have, historically, respected ministers who publish, and this continues that expectation.” Just as the audience of a publication differs from that of a sermon, so too most bloggers viewed their blogging traffic as an occasionally overlapping, yet largely discrete, reading community: “I do consider my online readers to be another sort of congregation, so my topics are generally the kind of thing that is part of a minister's daily life.” In other words, they include themes ranging from grief and theology to current events and personal anecdotes, so long as “I think [my readers] will find meaning in [them].” The “Beauty Tips for Ministers” blog, created by Blogger extraordinaire Rev. Victoria Weinstein (aka PeaceBang), has received national attention for its “cheeky [dispensation] of irreverent wisdom about fashion and beauty for women of the cloth” (Paulson, 2007). According to a Boston Globe article, Rev. Susan Olson, director of career services at Yale Divinity School, not only reads the blog, but she also recommends it to her students. This is but one example of what one respondent intuited: “It appears to me that [my blog] is read more by colleagues and UU's from elsewhere than in my own congregation.”

Blogging can both enhance and endanger ministerial self-presentation. The format provides ministers with a forum for narrating identitarian stories and, unlike Facebook or Twitter, receiving high quantities of commentarial reaction and response. Blogs encourage feedback and interaction. And yet, many ministers end up switching off the comment option due to its abuse.

As one minister confessed, she simply couldn't "handle the deluge." Within the past year, Rev. James Ford stopped accepting comments on his "Monkey Mind" blog, yet he continues to encourage "thoughts, corrections and objections" via e-mail. Ministers must also be careful of their own posts. In a May 2009 reflection, Rev. Ford describes the first time he removed an entry because he felt, in retrospect, that it "lack[ed] sensitivity to people mourning their loss" (2009). He writes: "I'm reluctant to apologize for the post, I said nothing that doesn't seem true to me a year later. But sometimes being right isn't enough..." (Ford, 2009). Other risks include the collapsing of context and, by extension, authority. The so-called democratizing, or at least equalizing, forces in online communities may strip the minister of her role and render her, as one respondent feared, "just one of the boys." Establishing a reputation, gaining the trust of reading audiences and maintaining a dynamic and current presence all contribute to a healthy blogging identity.

## MODELS OF ONLINE MINISTERIAL IDENTITY

In a world of complex interactions that take place in real-time, there is no perfect model for how to be a minister online. Individuals must learn to balance confidentiality, privacy and integrity with openness, honesty and accountability. They must navigate issues of consistency and reliability, while protecting free and creative self-expression. They must maintain security, while optimizing accessibility. In short, the act of creating and maintaining an online ministerial identity requires a series of compromises and trade-offs that are largely determined by authorial intent and the inscribed audience. As one minister alleged: "Social media use is as serious a use of thought and language as any other."

The bad news is that the *ideal* model of constructing an online ministerial identity does not exist. The good news is that *pretty good* models do. In my research, I was able to identify three different approaches to building a virtual selfconcept, which I will group into the following three categories.

*The Transparent Model:* Ministers conforming to the transparent model privilege free and full disclosure over limited communication. While they continue to self-censor to some degree,

avoiding blatant violations of online etiquette, by and large they do not allow the move online to alter the way they do ministry. If anything, advocates of the transparent model encourage the use of technology to break down offline barriers, in hopes of eclipsing the “false leveling” that they believe takes place in the physical world, i.e. the minister’s personal mystique. Online, they can demonstrate their humanity, commitment, passion and personal struggle with faith – a perspective decidedly different from the offline image of “haughty removed boys in colors and girls in vestments.” On Facebook, they will accept Friend invitations from parishioners, even if they choose to discretely ‘unfriend’ them later. They likely tweet on a regular basis, sending congregational announcements or “just playing a little bit.” Their blog may feature a challenging, provocative and edgy voice, unsuitable to and rougher than their pulpit persona. In general, transparent online ministers insist that privacy is an illusion. Anyone can dig up anything they want to, and “if they want to do damage, they’re gonna.” Thus, this type of minister does not second-guess every post, knowing that “somebody will always think something.” The transparent model refuses to artificially bifurcate the ministerial identity. After all, “who cares! Your record always speaks louder.”

*The Translucent Model:* Most ministers with whom I spoke adopted the translucent model of online ministry. In general, practitioners of this model agreed that “to avoid using [social networking] technology in ministry would be to willfully move into further irrelevance in the American religious landscape.” At the same time, these ministers are intensely aware of the fact that online interactions remain unquestionably public. Boundaries are critical. One minister distinguished between the public, the personal and the confidential. She limits all online engagement to the public aspect of her identity, which includes “all that I would share in sermons, answer questions about, mention at a church dinner or at coffee hour.” In contrast, she reserves personal information for support and covenant groups, rarely, if ever, sharing that which she deems confidential. For the translucent online minister, Facebook, Twitter and Blogs remain expressions of the professional, Sunday-morning identity. As one minister stated: “I bemoan not feeling well [or] brag about my kid...but I don't complain about my marriage or my church, discuss the state of my parent's health in detail, or say anything about diets.” This model of ministry steers clear, if possible, of befriending parishioners online. Yet, even for ministers who do accept friend requests, there is little concern about over-sharing or playing favorites, since the



profile remains professional. Nevertheless, unlike the last model of online ministry, the translucent approach does allow ministers to share more of themselves with the public than they might get to in the pulpit – again, not a difference in kind or quality, but an increased quantity. Importantly, this model allows ministers to maintain a carefully policed online presence for “watching for pastoral concerns, new babies, dying parents, etc.” The dominant mantra for this model can be glossed: “Since I have no control over who sees that public life or what they, in their health or lack thereof, do with it, I’m careful.”

*The Opaque Model:* Ministers employing the opaque model use social networking sparingly and with rigid boundaries. They will either divide their online presence into a personal and professional profile or avoid the personal altogether. Their professional persona features contact information, as well as education and work details, while frequently restricting Facebook wall use and the display of photographs. Profile pictures are almost always professional mugshots. Ministers whose only virtual account is professional rarely befriend congregants, since “it’s just blurring a boundary.” Thus, they use the profile to connect with ministerial colleagues, friends and family members. For those ministers carrying two online passports, the professional account is reserved for youth group members or adult congregants and it overtly specifies that “I’m a professional here.” Even on their personal pages, however, they may “block pictures and [be] mindful of my comments.” A DRE with whom I spoke viewed social networking tools as the “next great connector,” supplementing her own selfconcept as a minister who connects individuals “with each other, with ideas, with God, with nature.” Some opaque practitioners may even aspire to positively influence online communities, believing that “without a caring presence [they] can kind of go to a Lord of the Flies.” In this way, they carefully engineer their own online identity to model appropriate behavior. They rarely tweet or blog. Members of this camp also insist that any online connection must involve offline face-to-face contact as well.

Like any conceptual apparatus, these three models do not sufficiently account for the many liminal positions that slip between the cracks. For example, one minister I interviewed maintains a professional website alongside his Facebook profile, thereby bisecting his identity in an opaque manner. And yet, whereas the former features his “professional credentials,” he uses the latter in an almost transparent way, befriending congregants and berating “a movie I hated.” After all, he

does not consider Facebook to be a “professional tool.” While not totalizing, then, these three models of online ministerial identity do provide a helpful heuristic for ministers who must not only navigate the fluidity of identity in liquid modernity, but may also find their motivations for using social networking tools shift over time. It is worth noting that the vast majority of contemporary Unitarian Universalist ministers favor the translucent model.

## **WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?**

Much as Jesus received diverse responses to his identitarian inquiry on the road to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, so too ministers must be prepared to alter and tweak their own ministerial identity in a digital world of collapsed contexts and rapid-fire communication. Striking the perfect balance of privacy and disclosure, self-projection and external perception, may prove just as difficult online as it was for the Jesus of Mark’s gospel. Nevertheless, as one respondent noted, “we’re living on the computer now.” Ministers must eventually learn to climb the steep technological mountain to transfiguration.

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

1. Thou shalt not post personal information, opinions or media that compromise your ministerial integrity or the wellbeing of others.
2. Thou shalt not speak pejoratively of, or mention conflicts with, family members, friends or congregants.
3. Thou shalt not use language inappropriate for fellowship hour.
4. Thou shalt not disclose intimate information that would make readers feel uncomfortable.
5. Thou shalt not substitute electronic communication for face-to-face interaction.
6. Thou shalt exercise discretion and maintain professional boundaries.
7. Thou shalt uphold offline confidentiality practices.
8. Thou shalt regularly update and maintain your online presence.
9. Thou shalt be honest and authentic without over-sharing.
10. Thou shalt enjoy the benefits and playfulness of social networking.



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