

Facebook tsunami

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue



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I think of social media as a tsunami. And I'm a guy in a beach chair writing postcards.

For many years I've used the web pages of the churches and seminaries I served to communicate our ministry. I text often and have three different integrated e-mail accounts. I own a desktop, laptop, iPad and iPhone that are connected through a mysterious cloud—as if that doesn't beg for a sermon. But I could never bring myself to join Facebook.

For a while I used all of the typical excuses: "I'm too busy to monitor another stream of communications." "After Facebook I'd have to sign on to Twitter, LinkedIn and whatever is inevitably next." "Would Jesus have a Facebook page?" But I've always known these are just worn-out clichés.

I don't really know why I've dug in my heels. But when a tsunami hits it doesn't really matter what you do with your heels.

Facebook has over a billion active users, and over half of them use the site every day. Twitter offers "up-to-the-second information" in almost every country in the world. LinkedIn has 2 million professional profiles in South Africa alone.

The significance of these statistics is that social media is changing the way we tell our stories and strategize “personal development.” Our identity is increasingly less determined by the mothers who watched us play games in the street in front of our homes, or by those who live and work beside us and roll their eyes when we do that “so like you” thing. The church’s claim that all identity questions are all resolved on the day we’re baptized is an increasingly hard sell. Now we are who we’re perceived to be online, which means that human identity has become a virtual reality. This has to be dangerous to the soul.

More than one social commentator has warned that if you don’t manage your profile through social media, someone else will do it for you. I recently had an experience that proved that point.

When I was elected to be the president of the seminary I just began serving, the congregation that I was leaving knew nothing about the confidential process. Hoping that the seminary trustees would vote for my nomination, I wrote tender letters that would announce this excruciatingly difficult decision to the members of the church. The first-class letters were stacked in long trays on a shelf in the office of my assistant, who was waiting for my call before mailing them. I thought I was on top of the communication strategy. This is how I did it ten years ago when I left a previous church, and the process worked perfectly. But ten years ago is a world away.

Within 30 minutes of the seminary trustees’ vote, the news raged like wildfire to my congregation through Facebook connections. A couple of hours later the seminary put the news on its web page; the local newspaper soon followed. Tweets were flying. There sat all my lovely letters, while congregation members expressed deep hurt that they hadn’t heard about my leaving from me.

I get it now. I have to use social media or it will use me. I wave a white flag in front of its power and know that I can never make such a mistake again. I will become a part of the zillion people involved in Facebook and whatever else the seminary communications department tells me I need to join, and I’ll allow it all to form my thinking about how to tell our story.

But it’s still important for me to think of myself as one who never enlisted in this campaign. I was drafted. Even as I fill out the enrollment pages of Facebook my soul keeps nagging me with a whispered “Caution.”

I yearn for more nights of hanging out with my friends, laughing or crying together, hugging and watching Jesus turn our water into wine. I want to hear the phone ring in the middle of the night as someone pleads for me to rush over to the emergency room. I need the time to focus on the people around me whose dandruff I can see or whose perfume is too strong—some of whom I adore, while others are a pain in the neck. And I have to show up with all of my warts in front of them. This is the gathering of two or three together in Jesus' name where he has promised to be present. So they should be the ones to tell my story—not LinkedIn.

My soul is already weary of virtual relationships and constructed identities. All that social media can give me is “up-to-the-second information” about people. This is helpful. But what I really want is to know them and be known. From the day the word became flesh and dwelled among us it has been clear to Christians that this requires physical presence.

Maybe when I get to the bottom of my resistance I'll discover that social media is just a more sophisticated way of sending postcards from a distant place.