

Power to the (lay) people

By [K. M. Camper](#)

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It's become a historical cliché that without the printing press, the Protestant Reformation would likely not have gotten off the ground. It's not that the printing press caused the Reformation. Rather, the printing press not only allowed for the spread of Protestant ideas, but also allowed for a shift in power, from entrenched Church leadership to the layperson. The printing press fostered the restructuring of authority championed by the Reformers in real and material ways.

In this post, I'd like to suggest that an analogous shift predicated on technological innovation may be underway. (Whether it's on the same scale or will have the same historical significance remains to be seen.)

I'd like to draw your attention to [Shop My Church](#). On the face of it, Shop My Church, which went live on July 22nd, is like any other [online church directory](#). On the website, you will find a growing [list](#) of churches (at the publishing of this post there are 9) with basic information like physical address, contact number, denomination, and service times.

What makes Shop My Church different from other online church directories is that the site is *social*. According to Jason Stambaugh of Westminster, MD, creator of the site and founder of Wevival, one of the partner companies, along with Trinity Education Group, that produces the site, Shop My Church is the world's *first* online *social* church directory.

What makes Shop My Church "social?" In the first place, Shop My Church's directory is built by individual people not by Shop My Church. Any user, as long as they have a Facebook account, may list a church on the site. Second, the site focuses on "stories," users' individual accounts of their experiences of a church. Users who attend listed churches are encouraged to add "stories" or testimonials about how their churches are "making a difference" in their lives and in "the lives of those in [their] community." Third, Shop My Church's directory is integrated with Facebook

Connect so that users can only list churches and post testimonials with their Facebook account. According to Mr. Stambaugh, this integration is in place, in part, to achieve authenticity and accountability. Finally, Shop My Church seeks to help Christians find churches not based on mission statements, doctrinal beliefs, services times, or worship styles, but on the very people who make up a church.

Herein lies the potential shift in how believers organize themselves into faith communities and view their relationships to their churches. While the Church has never been a collection of people with homogenous beliefs or people wholly loyal to or supportive of the current authority, doctrine and authority have often been two of the major organizing principles in the Church's history (besides factors like location or compulsion). In Protestantism in particular, believers can organize around very specific points of doctrine, authority structures, and even specific leaders' personalities.

Shop My Church offers, and consciously so, a new organizing principle: personal affinities. While individual churches or church movements may have attempted this before (non-denominational churches, the emerging church, the house church movement), and while personal ties are certainly an important aspect of anyone's church experience, Shop My Church suggests that this is a viable organizing principle for all denominations because it invites churches of all stripes to participate on its site.

That Shop My Church de-emphasizes denominational boundaries, even though church listings must indicate a denominational affiliation, is reflected in the language and affordances of the site. For example, listings must indicate a church's "leader," rather than a label that might be more denominationally specific like priest, pastor, minister, elder, etc. Mr. Stambaugh says this (rhetorical) move was a conscious effort to cater to all Christian denominations. This move represents a larger attempt to structure the site around the lowest common denominators of Christian religion.

More profoundly, Shop My Church, as a social media tool, shifts power away from the officially sanctioned leaders of the church to the laity to not only promote their churches but also to represent them. Lay people have always had an important role in spreading the word about their churches, but in the past they've had limited access to methods of mass public broadcasting. But today, anyone can have a Facebook, Twitter, or WordPress account, giving them the potential to reach a large

number of people. Savvy church leaders are looking to these new media tools to help grow their churches, but they can't do it alone. It's doubtful, however, that congregants will allow themselves to be the mouthpieces of their leaders, and leaders should take notice. The ordinary churchgoer now has the power to promote their church to an audience of potentially millions—for better or for worse.

Will social media further decentralize authority in the Church? Will it reshape how believers organize themselves into communities?

I'll leave the answers to those questions to the history books.

(Disclosure: I've known Mr. Stambaugh personally since 2004 and my own faith community is listed on his site.)

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