

New Media Project Mixes Technology and Theology



There's no shortage of practical advice

on how to build a better website, start a blog or manage a Twitter feed. But there are few resources to help religious leaders assess the impact of these technologies on their ministries.

The New Media Project is filling the gap, helping congregations and other ministers navigate the digital and social media landscape. Based at Christian Theological Seminary (CTS) in Indianapolis, it challenges Christian communities to articulate the gospel in fresh ways using new media in both public discourse and community proclamation.

"Today, there is barely a religious leader who doesn't acknowledge the need to use digital communication,"

says the Rev. Verity Jones, director of the New Media Project and executive vice president at CTS. "But it's not enough to know how to use these tools. We need to consider how new media affect how we understand our relationship to God and how new media influence the way we share and practice our faith and traditions."

Founded in 2010, the

New Media Project encourages religious leaders to consider how their beliefs, traditions and practices affect their use of new forms of communication. Through its website (www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia) and national conferences, the New Media Project shares case studies, online theological essays and, yes, some practical advice. Along the way, clergy, theologians and others are learning how digital communication influences society and the church.



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The Rev. Verity Jones (above) directs the New Media Project, which tracks how the latest media technology, like smartphone apps for scripture study (right), affect the way people think about and practice faith.

It is a discourse that Lilly Endowment has encouraged through three grants, including a \$332,650 grant in 2014, to build momentum for continued research and conversation.

Since the project began, there's been a noticeable uptick in interest in how technology influences church work and relationships, thanks in part to wider use of social media, according to Jones. She has witnessed the rapid shift in communication up close since making the leap from pastoral ministry to editing a national magazine for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and then to the New Media Project.

Religious leaders under the age of 40 are digital natives, and so are the people they hope to reach in the future, Jones notes. For the sake of the future of the church and the next generation of its leaders, congregations need to understand new

media and engage it thoughtfully.

That space is needed, according to Keith Anderson, pastor at Upper Dublin Lutheran Church in Ambler, Pennsylvania. He is co-author of "Click2Save: The Digital Ministry Bible" and author of the forthcoming book "The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wireless World."

Anderson, who blogs for the New Media Project website and has participated in its conferences, embraces Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram in his ministry. The social media platforms give him freedom to share the gospel with people who, for geographic reasons alone, are not likely to visit his church, he says. The New Media Project is bringing together pastors, parish workers and theologians for an elevated conversation about ministry, Anderson says, and quite literally about the future of the church.

"The New Media Project has always been ahead of the curve in discussing how these tools influence the way we think about God. They named it early on, helping people like me understand that new media tools reflect new patterns of living," he says. "These patterns

have theological implications and implications for how people come together in Christian community."

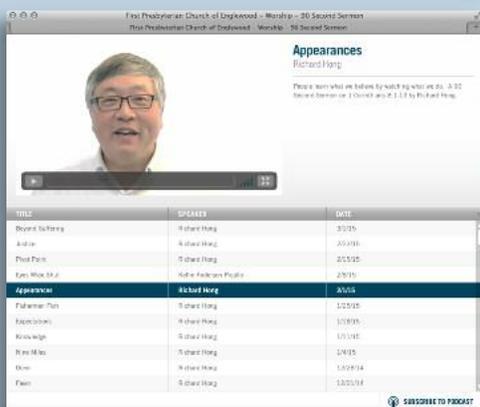
In addition to Anderson's blog, the New Media Project is tracking other innovations that include:

◀ **The "90 Second Sermon"** website of Richard Hong and Kellie Anderson-Picallo from First Presbyterian Church in Englewood, New Jersey. The sermon series is grounded in tradition but expansive in its outreach through Vimeo and Twitter.

◀ **"Lent Madness,"** part Lenten devotion, part online game about Christian saints through the ages. Inspired by college basketball's March Madness, the Rev. Tim Schenck, an Episcopal priest in Massachusetts, created the website to build a community that is "passionate about taking their faith but not themselves too seriously."

There's potential for innovation, creativity, love and care in this new media landscape, says Jones. The New Media Project will continue to encourage theological reflection at the intersection of church and digital communication.

"We want religious leaders to be thought leaders in the digital square," she says. "We want them to shape it for present and future generations in a loving, kingdom-building sort of way."



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 Innovative web-based ministries, such as "90 Second Sermon" (top) and "Lent Madness" (bottom), are new forms of outreach for congregations.