

Church Leaders Event Keynote, February 25, 2017

“Theological Foundations for Church Communications”

Last October, our Conference Minister, Charles Buck, extended a very flattering invitation to me. Having first asked me to provide a workshop about the Church and communication at today’s event, he followed that by asking me to deliver one of the two keynote addresses.

Well, I’ve only been in Hawai’i since last April, having come from seventeen years doing communication work for the Connecticut Conference. As an official new-kid-on-the-block, the invitation was doubly flattering. How could I say no?

He did go on to suggest a direction for me, that I not duplicate my workshop material, with these words: “Perhaps something that might talk about the gospel, our call to share the good news, and how we communicate that?”

That sounded good, so this address is formally titled, “Theological Foundations for Church Communications.”

And... A bunch of people started checking their phones to see if they could catch an earlier flight back home.

Well, I hope that that’s a scarier and duller title than this presentation turns out to be.

So, does the Bible have anything to say which might provide a foundation for engaging in modern communication on behalf of the Church. Yes, it certainly does.

There’s Matthew 28:19-20, the Great Commission: [Jesus said,] “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Which would include... now. Wouldn’t it?

Then there’s Mark 16:15, which is part of that puzzling longer ending of Mark, but which has resonated with me so deeply that I asked to have these words of Jesus sung at my ordination twenty-eight years ago:

“And [Jesus] said unto them, ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.’”

And in Luke 24:46-47, Jesus said to his disciples:

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Well, it did begin in Jerusalem, but I don’t think we’re finished yet, not here in Hawai’i, or anywhere else around the globe.

It's tempting to stop right here, drop the microphone, and go on to questions. Because of all the ministries of the Church, the case for the ministry of proclamation, of witness, of gospel – of Good News – is the easiest to make. The Church's evangelical mission is simply impossible without communication. The Church's ministries of person-to-person comfort, of corporate worship, of individual encouragement in the faith, and of prayer itself are each and every one of them ministries of communication.

So we're not really talking about a Theological Foundation. We're talking about a theological framework for new communication media. How can they serve the Gospel as we enter the twenty-first century since Jesus?

And so, let's turn to the Apostle Paul. There he is in a painting by Valentin de Boulogne (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Paul_of_Tarsus#/media/File:File%22-Saint_Paul_Writing_His_Epistles%22_by_Valentin_de_Boulogne.jpg). We know Paul for his personal history, which included active persecution of the emerging Christian communities before a life-shattering conversion experience turned him into one of the Church's most active messengers.

That would be enough for us to remember him. Today, however, I'd like to remember him as a communicator who used all of the media available to him in his day, two millennia ago.

Like Jesus, Paul stood in the public square and addressed the people. Here he is preaching in Berea, in Greece (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Mosaics_of_Saint_Paul#/media/File:St-Paul-in-Beroia.jpg). Lest you think he had an easy time of it, there are a few things to observe about those on the benches. First of all, there's this guy with the helmet, and he's also holding a spear. That would intimidate most preachers. You've got this fellow who's talking to his neighbor rather than listening to Paul, and even worse, his neighbor appears to be yawning.

Finally, you've got this fellow with the pen and the scroll over here. What's he doing?

Well, he's texting.

The thing about public speaking is that if you're not content to address the same group of people all the time – that's something of a problem for most pastors, isn't it? – if you want to speak to new people, you probably need to move around. In the first century, that was a challenge. To get around on land, you pretty much had the option of using your own two legs, or using the four legs of some other creature.

That's the Apostle Paul on the ground (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Conversion_of_Saint_Paul_by_Caravaggio#/media/File:Conversione_di_san_Paolo_September_2015-1a.jpg).

In fairness to Paul, the image is Caravaggio's painting of the "Conversion of Saint Paul," so he's been knocked off his horse by a vision of the risen Jesus, which is more than understandable. Nevertheless, we get an idea here of some of the discomforts and risks of land travel in the first century.

Paul was not content with reaching those he could reach by land, however. His world was one ruled by water, the waves of the Mediterranean Sea. So the Apostle Paul regularly embarked on boats.

And... here's how that turned out

(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Saint_Paul_in_Malta#/media/File:Plate_20_of_22_for_the_Macklin_Bible_after_Loutherbourg._Bowyer_Bible._Shipwreck_of_Paul_on_Malta.gif).

This particular illustration from the Bowyer Bible shows the storm that left Paul and his companions tossed up on Malta, on their way to Rome. Which seems like more than enough in one apostle's life, but in Second Corinthians, written before that trip, Paul reports that he's been shipwrecked three times, including one episode which left him adrift at sea for a day.

So I can hardly blame him for using another communication technique of the first century: he sent surrogates. That's Timothy, Titus, and Onesimus on the slide, all of whom visited other people on behalf of the Apostle Paul. It wasn't just to avoid the rigors of travel. Sometimes he sent somebody to get the message to two places instead of one. Sometimes it was because he wasn't certain what reception he'd receive, and he wanted to test the waters, so to speak, before he embarked on them.

So there are the communications media of the first century, and he used them all.

Oh, wait. There's one more. Can anyone guess what it might be?

That's right. It's his letters, some of which have survived to become part of our Scriptures. Most of the letters we have were written to people he already knew, but then there's Romans, written to introduce himself and his faith to a church he planned to visit.

In Paul's day, those were the options: Speeches and conversations in public and in private, spread more widely by land and sea travel; communication by representatives, and also via the letter. In our day, we have a much larger toolkit of techniques and appliances. Most of those have arisen in just the last two centuries.

When the first Christian missionaries arrived in the Hawaiian Islands, human ingenuity had added really only one new technology to the mix since Paul's day: printing with movable type, first developed in China and rapidly adopted by Europeans. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions valued it so highly that they sent printer Elisha Loomis with the very first missionary company in 1820, and the first printing press was active here within two years.

But since then, the technologies have been stacking up:

- Photography,
- The telegraph,
- The telephone,
- The phonograph (and other methods of recording sound),
- Broadcast radio,
- The cinema,

- Broadcast television, and here at the end because I can't think of where else to put it,
- Amplified live sound.

The Church has adopted pretty well all of them at some time and at some level.

Toward the end of the last century, digital media galloped onto the scene, but for the most part it provided a new hosting mechanism for established forms of communication. That is, it offered a new location for familiar types of media.

- The letter and the office memo found a new home in email.
- Printed publications emerged as websites.
- The library card catalog became an online database.
- The telephone first became instant transmission of text, through services like AOL Instant Messenger, and those services rapidly added a live audio capability.
- Television found a new home on YouTube and other video hosting services.

What's really new is the emergence of live video conversation services, which did exist before the Internet but were so cumbersome and expensive as to be used only by businesses with cash on hand. One-to-one services like Skype and Apple Facetime quickly expanded to multi-point live teleconferencing, joined by Zoom and Google Hangouts and I don't even know how many others.

The point I stress here is that, for the most part, these media are not new or unfamiliar. We *know* how to watch television. We *know* how to talk to people at a distance. We *know* how to create a written message for someone to read.

What we're learning is how to navigate the new neighborhoods in which these familiar media now exist. That is not a trivial task, but the good news is, you've got half of it already accomplished.

There's another change that may be more far-reaching than the addition of digital forms of familiar media, and that's the shift to mobile media. In one sense, this is not new. A good deal of the point of communication technology is, in fact, to make information portable. From the Apostle Paul's point of view, his letters would have been useless if they'd simply stayed with him. He wanted his words to journey to other people.

Sixty years after the introduction of the portable radio receiver, the smart phone contains a wealth of communication technologies, and like the transistor radio, has been received with similar suspicion. We worry that young people will no longer be able to interact with others in the real world, but will rely entirely on communications technologies.

Well, here's what the New York City subways looked like before the arrival of smartphones (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NYC_subway_riders_with_their_newspapers.jpg). They're all focused on their communications technology.

What the smart phone did was to steadily put other digital communications media literally in your pocket, and frequently to make those technologies succeed where they'd failed in a non-digital format.

Portable battery-powered televisions were rare, but every day countless people watch YouTube videos on their phones. They're sending words back and forth to each other, they're transmitting photographs, they're broadcasting their thoughts and opinions to audiences far larger than their immediate circle of friends, they're looking up information (and finding both facts and inaccuracies), they're speaking with each other without considering the distance to the other person, and they're doing it everywhere.

They're also connecting disparate communities in new ways.

When social media appeared, it mirrored the circles of real-world community. Many of us live our lives with our own set of different social groups. There's the high school friends, and maybe the college friends, and the professional circle, and the family circle – maybe more than one family circle. Ordinarily, they have no relationship with each other, and don't communicate with each other.

Think about it graphically. Imagine some different social groups, and draw circles around them which are their spheres of connections. Some of them already intersect, but mostly they don't.

They are all connected, however, through me, though they didn't know it. Thanks to social media, I now have high school friends talking with college friends talking with other pastors talking with local church members all through the connection they share with me.

The communities have outgrown the circles.

Still. Why should we care about social media? The value of cat videos, old jokes, and pictures of your friends' dinner plates may have high value to some, but not to all. Why should the Church care about social media?

On Facebook alone, there are 1.86 billion reasons. That's the number of people who log into the service at least once a month around the world.

1.23 billion people check the service every day.

1.15 billion people check using a mobile device every day.

That's 16% of the world's population using a single service every single day that didn't even exist twelve years ago.

If you're sighing with relief that 16% isn't that high, wait. The proportion of American citizens using Facebook is much higher.

68% of US adults use Facebook according to Pew Research.

As for Hawai'i, I couldn't find current usage figures, but in March 2011, 52% of Hawaii's residents had a Facebook account, up from 45% the year before. It went up seven points in a year, five years ago. That suggests that by now it's pretty close to the American average.

Facebook use also gets higher the younger the group. This graph shows the percentage of online adults using Facebook in the United States, separated out by age. Nearly ninety percent of those between 18

and 29 use the service if they're online – and they probably are (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016/>).

There's a fellow named Erik Qualman who's been telling this story to businesses for years now, and here's how he's telling people what world we live in:

<https://youtu.be/PWa8-43kE-Q>

All right. We're called to communicate. The world has developed a raft of new tools with which we can communicate. What can we do with them?

Well, we can build up the body of Christ.

I need to emphasize that, for the most part, new media are not great tools for evangelism, for initial outreach toward acquainting people with the love of God revealed in the Good News of Jesus Christ. They're oriented toward person-to-person rather than broadcast communication.

It is, however, a great medium for Church members, for Christians, to let their friends know what they think, and believe, and value about their Church, and their faith, and their spiritual lives.

In other words, it's not a great tool for me to use as a pastor to say to the residents of Hilo, "Come to Church of the Holy Cross and you will be blessed!"

But it is a great tool for church members to use to say, "I feel blessed as part of the Church of the Holy Cross. Would you like to experience that? Here's where you can see and hear some of what we do in this congregation.

"Now, would you like to come and see?"

A church with a Facebook presence has put up a signpost, one that its members and friends can use to share its activities, its missions, its activities, and its blessings with those who are not already in the circle.

I mentioned that I communicate with college and high school friends on social media. Among those friends, I'm sure it won't surprise you too much, are people who have had bad experiences with religion in general and Christianity in particular. To those people, this cartoon rings all too real:

<http://weknowmemes.com/2012/01/you-were-a-believer-yes-but-you-skipped-the-not-being-a-jerk-about-it-part/>

The best evangelism work I've done in my life has been to be an obvious committed Christian in public – and not to be a jerk about it. Well, as best I can. A seminary education and Church authorization processes aren't needed for that work. Any Christian can do it. Every Christian *should* do it.

A recent Pew study suggests that Americans are feeling better about religious institutions (<http://www.pewforum.org/2017/02/15/americans-express-increasingly-warm-feelings-toward-religious-groups/>), and that might partly be because of effective witness on social media.

There's more promise to these technologies in their use within the existing church community, particularly for people who use them as their primary or preferred means of communication. They offer the possibility for starting your Bible Study discussion earlier in the week, by floating a couple of ideas with the group in a Facebook group or a blog post or a YouTube video. A discussion board or group chat could then continue the conversation days after the people have left the church and gone home.

This story comes from the Connecticut Conference, where I was working at this time just last year. The Conference operates a summer camp called Silver Lake Conference Center, and it serves as a venue for retreats during fall, winter, and spring. As a church site, most of the retreat activity happens on the weekend, so the camp hires people to come in and work the weekends. They cook, and set up equipment, and may even run a program or two.

Who are these weekend workers? They're nearly all college students who've worked at the camp during the summer. It's not actually hard to get them interested. They love the camp, they love the work, and a little extra income doesn't hurt.

But a few years back, the camp began having a lot of trouble finding people to work on the weekends. The business manager would call and leave messages that weren't returned. She'd send emails and they'd go unanswered. Unanswered, that is, for a couple of weeks or more, when an anguished reply would arrive saying, "Oh, no! I would have loved to work that weekend, but I only opened this email today!"

Then she started to use Facebook's messaging feature. And she'd get responses in minutes. Sometimes seconds. Because she'd starting using a communications method that the potential workers were using.

The moral of this story is, "Know your people." Know not just their names and what they do, but how they communicate in this new world. Do they prefer print on paper? Plenty do. The church newsletter has life to it yet. Do they read email? Are they attracted by a video? How much time will they give to a piece of text, or a photo, or a film clip?

Are you communicating with everyone in your congregation using a medium that serves them? That they will notice, and read, or view? Do they have access to a way to respond?

It's not enough, however, to know your people. You also need to know your neighbors. For one thing, that's your mission field. Just over half of the people in this state are recorded on the membership lists of no church, no temple, no synagogue, no mosque. What are their needs, physical and spiritual? How will they know those needs have been met? And how best to communicate with them to let them know they can meet their needs in the Church?

Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said, "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." Well, I can think of other groups who exist to serve others – but we dare not forget in the Church that *we do not exist for ourselves*. We exist so that others may have life and have it abundantly.

Are we speaking through media that our neighbors will use to hear us?

The Internet has a reputation for incivility, for rough language, for harsh criticisms, and even for cruelty. It's deserved. Studies show that some of the social filters we use by habit in the real world don't work as well in the virtual world.

That gives us the opportunity to change the character of the conversation, not by controlling what others say, but by demonstrating the alternative to which we were summoned by Jesus Christ. As a newcomer to Hawai'i, I can testify that the dedication to aloha in word and deed *is* distinct from customs on the mainland. Which means, because these media reach so far, that we have the opportunity to demonstrate, to manifest, and to bestow aloha to those mainland societies. What a profoundly powerful gift that would be.

We can change the conversation by raising topics as well as tone. I participate in Thursdays in Black, an effort that seeks to raise awareness of sexual assault with the goal of preventing it. It's really simple. Every Thursday, I wear something black. I take a picture of myself, and I post it to social media with a short message and the hashtag (which refers to the hash mark, or pound symbol, that precedes it) "#ThursdaysInBlack."

Very simple. It has surprised me how widely these photos get seen and responded to. The World Council of Churches office in Switzerland follows me on Twitter, and I'm not that interesting. But they are about that message.

How effective is it? Well, sexual assaults haven't stopped yet. We'll just have to see how awareness affects behavior over time.

We can also change the conversation by introducing our joy in faith. This probably unreadable screenshot shows just part of an exchange between myself and the Rev. Rachel Hackenberg, a UCC minister with the Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization Team at the national office, and one of the most talented faith poets I know. Over the course of a day just this past week, we wrote tiny prayers in poetry on Twitter, so that no single poem was longer than about twenty-five words.

If I were hope,
I'd plant myself in every heart
just waiting for the day
when I would be
Your harvest of justice.

If I were an ocean,
I would embrace Your creatures
And Your shorelines
With a passion
As fierce as the grave.

If I were the dawn,
I wouldn't wait for the appointed hour to greet You

but I'd rush through the eastern sky
to see You smile.

(<https://twitter.com/RHackenberg/status/834012153787084800>)

A day filled with prayer, prayed in public, for the world to see, if they choose.

That was a way for me to testify. You will find ways of your own to use these new communications media to witness to your faith.

There are four tools which are as essential today as the telephone in the church office became decades ago.

First: Every church needs a website, an active, honest website. People don't find you in the telephone book any more. They find you on the Internet, and they want to learn more about your church than its address.

Second: Every church needs a Facebook Page, not so that we can evangelize through it, but so that our members can link back to it as they do the work of the evangelist.

Third: Every pastor needs a Facebook account of their own. We're heading toward three quarters of the population using this service. We've got to be there to communicate in it.

Fourth: Every pastor needs a smart phone, to have the best chance of being able to communicate with people in a medium they're comfortable with. These last two will make pastors uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as the Apostle Paul was floating on the Mediterranean Sea.

Use them because the Good News needs to be shared.

Use them because there are new vehicles for the Good News to travel.

Use them because your neighbors sure are.

Use them because some of your friends and neighbors hear better with these new media than they will with the old.

Use them.

Use them to testify to our hope.

Use them to testify to our source of strength.

Use them to testify to our aloha.

Use them to testify to aloha ke akua.