Twitter

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Along with Facebook, Twitter has been a buzzword that has infiltrated our everyday speech and has experienced incredible growth. The service launched just over five years ago. It took just over 3 years for Twitter users to send the first billion Tweets. Today, a billion Tweets are sent every week! Nearly half a million people join Twitter for the first time every day. These are massive numbers. Obviously, there's something there.

Churches are also using Twitter. A quick Google search for "church twitter" brings up a bunch of links to church Twitter feeds, along with a link to an eBook titled "The Reason Your Church Must Twitter." (There's also a counter-point blog post titled "The Reason Your Church Must NOT Twitter.")

So, why have I never written about Twitter? For a simple reason – I've never really used it. I know that's a stunning confession from a self-professed technology geek (especially one focused on mobility), but it's true. Sure, I have a Twitter account and Twitter tells me that I've Tweeted a couple of times (both of those were responses to other's Tweets). I even have 29 followers (3 of whom I'd consider friends, and maybe a handful

of others that are work acquaintances. The rest I don't know.)

What is Twitter?
Although Twitter is self-described as a "real-time information network," it is most often referred to as a "micro-blogging" site, and I think that's a more helpful description.

Twitter is a "blogging" site in that it provides a way for individuals (and companies and churches) to express themselves in a public way. Like blogs, Twitter can be used to report on news, to share opinions, and to engage in dialog. Like blogs, Twitter feeds can have loyal readers (this is facilitated by what Twitter calls "followers" who receive automatic updates), but can also have casual
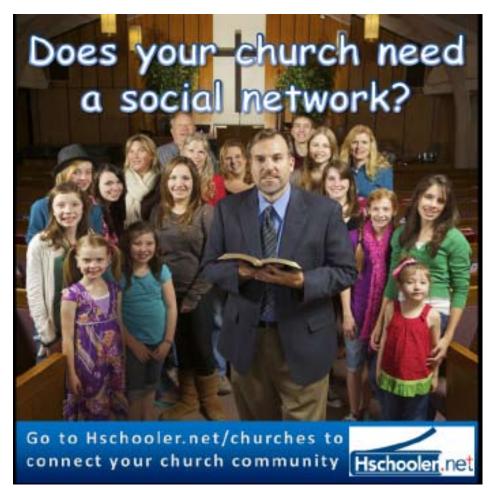
readers (anyone can go to anyone else's Twitter feed page).

Twitter is a "micro-blogging" site because all Twitter posts (called "Tweets") are limited to 140 characters. (Maybe that's why I don't Tweet – brevity has never been a strength of mine.) Tweets, by their very nature, are very simple – although additional tools (like TwitPic and link shortening tools) have enabled Tweets to be enhanced beyond the 140 character simplicity. Tweets tend to be quick thoughts rather than deep ruminations.

Since Twitter's 140 character limit matches up well with the length limits for cellphone text messages, many active Twitter users receive updates via their cellphones, and use Twitter apps to Tweet wherever they go. Twitter calls their service a "real-time information network" because not everyone who Tweets is a human, and because Twitter provides easy ways for software to read Tweets. For example, Siemens has written a program so that a tree can send Tweets about what it's sensing around it. Twitter envisions their service becoming a way that information can flow freely between machines, as well as humans.

How would a church use Twitter?

A few years ago, a youth pastor asked me if there was an easy way to send a text message to a bunch of people at the same time. He had found that the youth in his church rarely checked their e-mail, but were very responsive to text messages. I pointed him to a couple of different for-fee text distribution services and then said "or you could just use Twitter." Once

he understood Twitter, that was the route he chose. He set up a Twitter account, told all the youth and their parents to subscribe to it, and then whenever he needed to get information out about ministry events, even at the last minute, he could Tweet it and have confidence that the youth would see it.

Sounds great, so, where's the danger?

One of my initial concerns with Twitter was that it was a wide open service. As indicated by my underused account, anyone can choose to follow you. And anything you Tweet can be found in a Twitter or Google search. What you Tweet can be Re-Tweeted by any of your followers to their followers – to folks you don't even know their Twitter IDs.

All of that is true for the default Twitter account setting, but the company has actually done a good job of addressing privacy concerns. Fairly early on they introduce "protected" Twitter feeds. If you set your feed as "protected," then you get to approve any followers. Only those approved followers can see your Tweets and they can't Re-Tweet them. Your Tweets also won't show up in search results.

That means that you need to be intentional in deciding whether your feed will be protected or open. The best answer may be to use both. You might have one open Twitter account for broadcasting information about your church, and (imagine that) sharing the good news of the gospel. You might have one or more protected accounts for privately communicating with smaller groups in the church (as

my youth pastor friend has done).

Recently Twitter also became the first major social web service to support the [Federal Trade Commission's Do Not Track initiative](), further indicating their respect for user privacy.

However, the biggest issue with Twitter is with its lack of broad adoption. Even with hundreds of millions of active Twitter accounts, not everyone is using the service.

Our son's basketball coach recently set up a Twitter feed to update families about team-related issues (game time changes, what color of jersey to wear, etc.) Unfortunately, most team parents didn't yet have a Twitter account and had to establish one solely to be able to follow the team's feed (and receive updates via text). That can be intimidating for many. Twitter may be a great tool for a group (like youth) who are already active on the service, but may not be a good choice for other communities within your church.

Bottom line, Twitter may be a great technology to add to your toolbox, but don't throw out the rest of your tools.

Paul once wrote "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23 ESV)

Let us likewise use the right tools to serve each group we are called to serve and in so doing honor God.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (http://hschooler.net), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by six homeschooled students under Russ' direction.