

Is Facebook a Trojan Horse or Truly a Gift?

In 2012, Facebook redesigned what was known as a Profile page and named it Timeline. All users had Profiles, which housed basic personal information, such as interests, beliefs, education, work history, and other details. It's central to the Facebook experience because the information is the basis for nourishing and encouraging new friendships. Facebook users spend a lot of time updating their Profiles. Friends visit your profiles to send each other messages. All of these benefits continue with Timeline.

It's important to understand the significance of Facebook as the standard setter for social networking. Teens think all networks operate the way Facebook does. To some extent they do but there are differences between them. Meanwhile, most UU congregations that have a presence online, have a Facebook page. In addition, UUs worldwide are connecting through groups they've created to help each other. [For more information, see the [Overview of Facebook Standard Setters.](#)]

The original intent of Facebook was to enrich lives through interaction with friends, family and fellow citizens. The dynamics fueling all aspects of the Facebook experience sprang from those in human relationships.

Timeline, however, represents a paradigm shift away from this relational culture. It manifests a culture that is determined by consumers and businesses. It personifies businesses. You develop "relationships" with companies within the intimate space of your Facebook friend world. Businesses love this change.

To be sure, non-profits and liberal political movements benefit from relationships with Facebook users. When users are angry with politicians, celebrities, government agencies, and companies, their targets take immediate steps to rectify the situation.

Nonetheless, is the Facebook experience conducive to support right relationships that align to our UU principles and values?

I have doubts. Facebook manipulates us. We in turn manipulate friends, whether consciously or not. Manipulation is not a devotional practice for right relationships and UU values. We're human, though, and our desires inherently manipulate outcomes. The question is to what purpose and degree does this manipulation serve? Seems to me that as an alternative culture, UU congregations aren't about consumerism.

Here's a great example of how we manipulate and are manipulated by Facebook. Cracker Barrel, the restaurant chain, offers a free game application on Facebook as part of a marketing campaign. A UU Facebook friend of mine accepts the app because the company incented her to do so with a coupon or a contest offer. All she had to do was "like" the application. By doing so, the "like" enabled Cracker Barrel to win exponentially more exposure, more brand awareness, for free from the 1,000+ Facebook contacts my life-long UU friend has.

Many of her Facebook friends are UUs and religious professionals. When she "liked" the game, notice of her behavior flowed through the News Feeds of most of those friends.

"Liking" on Facebook is understood to be both a recommendation to look at something and also as a stamp of approval – of appreciation – for the individual who did the "liking."

Cracker Barrel is named repeatedly as one of the worst workplace discriminators, according to the Human Rights Campaign Fund. The company doesn't prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender. It doesn't provide partner benefits, or require diversity training that includes sexual orientation, according to HRC.

Nonetheless, its game on Facebook is popular. And when a UU "likes" it, "something this way rotten comes" to potentially 1,000+ liberal religious folk. She entered into a customer relationship with Cracker Barrel that invites its poison into my personal online space and potentially my private information.

She's entitled to play whatever she wants on Facebook. But would she want other UUs to know and be drawn into it?

We should pay as much attention to the environment in which we practice faith online as we do offline. If we want to be the change we dream of, the use of Facebook should be limited and used judiciously. It is not an alternative culture.

It's hard to perceive the depth and breadth of the paradigm shift in Timeline to bolster consumerism. Facebook markets it as a vehicle for telling life stories. The pitch rings hollow because there's literally no way to string together a coherent presentation of whatever "story" you want to tell through text, sound, videos, and photos. We're more like DJs when we post content to our Timelines. Each piece of content or each status update we write is like an mp3.

Or, perhaps connected life encourages us to treat people online as we do objects – with dispatch, as Sherri Turkle discusses in her book, [*Alone Together*](#).

Information on Timeline is presented in boxes that display content or clickable promotions of content. It's difficult to create context and maintain any semblance of a story line with the boxes – especially since Facebook encourages you to post all kinds of other information to your Timeline simultaneously that has nothing to do with your story.

If Facebook valued the life stories of human beings, then there'd be a search cell on each of our Timelines. Visitors would be able to search specific topics to see what we've posted about them. Presently, the only type of tool on Facebook that allows a contextual search of content like this is in its Group pages.

Just before Timeline was introduced to users, its design and functionality were launched for business and organizational use and named "Pages," not Timeline.

Here is how Facebook describes Pages: "[Facebook Pages](#) help businesses, organizations, and brands share their stories and connect with people. "Like" Pages you're interested in to get updates about their activity."

Facebook isn't about human stories, it's about marketing stories.

Chronologically organized content can show a cause and effect relationship. It demonstrates very well the marketing value of "like" and "share," which are essentially word-of-mouth recommendations. It reveals stories about user demographics and behavior that businesses "data mine" to sell products and services.

We are all marketers on Facebook and at times we unwittingly pimp entities that are in direct conflict with our UU principles. And although Facebook provides default account setting options to minimize marketing, the company makes it very difficult to understand how to use them. It unpredictably and frequently changes them. It's also impossible to understand how these changes affect other features.

Facebook is a business, and it has the right to earn revenue. The revenue has to come from somewhere if users don't pay for it. However, Facebook has become a quasi public utility. Unlike public utilities, there are very few laws that govern what it can't do. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 in the U.S.A. is one, and local laws in

some countries are others. [For related information see Facebook's legal terms and policy: <https://www.Facebook.com/legal/terms>]

For UUs and other liberal, progressive religious faiths, the agendas that determine Facebook's technology and marketing are often at odds with our beliefs.

It can be hard for us to see the extent to which the conflict exists. Does this conflict undermine what we aspire to be, and how we want to be online?

The launch of Timeline coincided with a heated national debate on corporate personhood - the legal concept that a corporation, as groups of people, may hold and exercise certain rights and protections under the common law and the U.S. Constitution. Corporations, after all, are institutions organized by, run by, and comprised of human beings.

Many argue, however, that corporations take on a life of their own. Many of us are skeptical that corporations can be responsible citizens and thus deserve to be protected by Constitutional rights. If corporations were people, then they would:

- **See themselves as members of a community**, responsible for the common good, rather than as solo economic actors responsible only for their self-enrichment
- **Consider the impact** of their actions on others
- **Formulate their mission and their purpose** in terms of serving others

Stated another way: What is the social purpose of business?

Typically, the answer from businesses and their stakeholders is: "To make and increase profits." That is what "social" means to most businesses. To wit: Facebook, the premier practitioner and innovator of social media marketing, with a market value of \$50 Billion based on its stock price at this writing in August 2012.

If the U.S. Constitution protected corporations the way it protects citizens, then why would the social purpose of business be any different than the social purpose of each and every one of us, as members of the human race?

What is our social purpose in the context of personhood? Many UUs would agree that "stewardship" is our purpose, or one of our major purposes.

Our stewardship responsibility, our calling, is to leave the world a better place than we found it. And therein lies a filter against which we should consider the following questions:

- Will where we practice digital ministry enable us to be stewards and serve our calling if a consumer relational culture shapes all that happens within that platform, that social network?
- Is Facebook an authentic gift to religious people, seeking to honor and bring people together for the common good?
- Can we aspire to live as an alternative culture if we overly rely on Facebook to solidify our UU identity and movement?

Right now, most of our congregations don't have social media components on their websites. Instead, many of them have Facebook pages as a way to practice faith online. UUs worldwide are using Facebook as a way to find each other because there is no easy alternative to gather in sympathy and faith.

The Church of the Larger Fellowship, the only all-digital church in UUism, currently focuses on worship but is starting ministries. Perhaps one of those could bring us all together in the future. But there is another option, and it is discussed later in the Strategy section of this program.

Use Facebook effectively & why you should, despite the negatives

Here's why you need to use Facebook

1. **Reach people where they are:** Facebook commands so much of so many people's time, that your members on Facebook probably rarely visit your church website. It's not that they don't want to but rather it doesn't occur to them. An official church Page can do a lot to engage these congregants. It's easy to publish to your church site and then automatically create a Facebook promotion for the update. Use Facebook code that Facebook distributes freely. The code is easy to insert into websites. And it includes a Facebook icon, , that your viewers will see. This means that visitors to your website, as well as members of the church, can share content from it with their friends on Facebook. The potential exposure for your church is enormous. Sharing on Facebook is palatable as evangelism for UUs!

- a. You can get the current code, APIs and other tools from Facebook at: <https://developers.facebook.com/>
 - b. Other developer communities such as .Net at <http://www.netmagazine.com/tutorials/discover-facebook-s-developer-tools> are good sources for code and help.
2. **Inspire dialog:** Continue conversations that start offline in worship services and church activities. Start new conversations and share content that is germane to church life. The “f” icon and variations of it have become standards that most sources of news, commentary, and multimedia offer. Meanwhile, many UU congregations are recording sermons, services, and religious education videos. The “f” icon often accompanies those on the sites of congregations. Many UUs put up faith-related videos on YouTube as well, where it is easy to share content to Facebook.
 3. **Promote and coordinate events:** Facebook has an invitation and event tool that lets you promote and track Facebook users who may attend your events.
 4. **Connect people across generations:** Youth and adults are often separated at church, which challenges our desire to be multi-generational in our faith practices. Facebook is multigenerational and offers a great way for different age groups to learn from one another and enjoy each other’s presence.
 5. **Witnessing:** Acknowledging the content and comments that fellow church members post on Facebook shows that you care about what they think and what they’re interests are.
 6. **Connecting with UUs:** Collaborating with and meeting UUs wherever they are. Many UU interest groups have formed on Facebook. Some of the most active are about social media and digital ministry. These groups are great places to get feedback, ask questions and learn from the experience of others. However, all communication is in the form of dialog. Use the search feature in a group to find content on specific topics. Members of Facebook Groups may also have uploaded helpful documents to the group. Here’s a list of some UU groups on Facebook that [talk about digital ministry](#).
 7. **Growth:** If growth is a goal of your church, your members on Facebook can play a vital role in encouraging new people to try your church. They can post and share excerpts of faith content that link back to your church website. Many of their friends likely live in the same area. Our own actions and behavior online make for the best, least intrusive marketing for UUism. Given we often have trouble making UUism understandable to others, allowing them to see how we think and what we care about will help significantly and may bring interested friends into our religious institutions. For example: The Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, VA ran several experiments to see if its UUCAVA Facebook page had a meaningful impact on traffic to www.uucava.org. Traffic generated by Facebook to its website accounted for 33% of

total visits in the months it shared content. Previously, Facebook accounted for only 4.5% of traffic.

Bottom line for your digital ministry: Use Facebook to reach people where they are. This means serving existing attendees and lay people who prefer to rely on Facebook for information and updates for various aspects of their lives.

Ministers: Facebook can be beneficial to your professional practice. But there are issues to consider, and they are discussed in [Digital Ministry Primer for Ministers](#) section of REACH. Recommendations to help you make decisions are also in Worksheet #1: [How are You Currently Practicing Digital Ministry?](#) and Worksheet #2: [How to Figure Out Your Digital Ministry Strategy.](#)