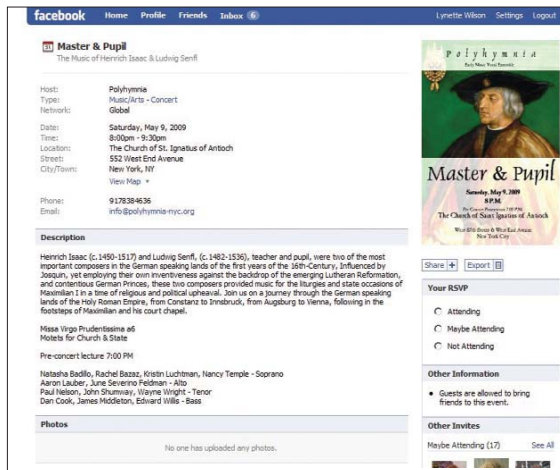


# Technology

## Facebook for Priests?

Connect with parishioners, friends and family

By the Rev. Dr Andrew C. Blume



St. Ignatius of Antioch uses its Facebook group to promote events such as the event captured in this screen shot. Here invitees can RSVP, as well as leave comments.

life, I cannot count the number of lunches and coffees I have had with people whom I have rediscovered on Facebook. I have made a group for alumni of my grade-school class and searched for classmates. This effort has resulted in a plan for a number of us to get together to see one of our group in an off-Broadway play. Professionally, I have maintained connections with former colleagues and established new ones. As soon as I got to Saint Ignatius, I founded a group for members and friends that now has about forty-five members and has been a platform from which we have invited people to services and concerts. I am certain, in fact, that our Facebook events have generated higher attendance on these occasions. You can even see photos on the group page of a flaming thurible in action at our recent joint celebration of

who are not my “Friends.” Also, I have made fairly firm rules about not “friending” former parishioners or people who are under eighteen or people who I don’t really know. I am careful about what I post and say, remembering that old adage that one should not write anything in an email that you do not want to see on the front page of tomorrow’s *New York Times*. Observing boundaries and respecting privacy are not just good ways to stay out of trouble, but are very important in modelling good boundaries, modelling how we maintain relationships that are appropriate and respectful.

A public presence on Facebook is quite a responsibility. Used well, creatively and in conjunction with a good parish website, it is an excellent way to create energy and excitement about what is happening in a parish and to invite people into relationship with each other and, ultimately, with God in Christ. Wherever the Gospel is preached, God in Christ is present and that includes the Internet!

*Blume is rector of St. Ignatius of Antioch in Manhattan.*

I have been reflecting for some time on how I use Facebook in my ministry and how it crosses the boundaries of my personal and professional life. Among my Facebook “friends” are many current and former parishioners. I am also friends with grade-school, high-school, college and graduate-school classmates. I am “married to” my wife, am friends with a couple of ex-girlfriends, a smattering of random acquaintances, my son’s former and current babysitters, as well as clergy and academic colleagues. The list goes on and on. Indeed, although I am not one of those people with over a thousand “friends,” my real-life friends tease me about the large number of people with whom I have “connected” on Facebook.

I have been on Facebook for about two years, joining rather late in the game, and since then Facebook has grown exponentially. It has become ubiquitous and, according to a recent article in *Time* magazine (February 12, 2009), much less cool, something for “old fogies”—like me (I’m 42). While it may not be cool or new—and no, I have not become a Twitter priest—it is still a very fun and useful tool for making and maintaining connections. Indeed, far from being a substitute for real relationships, it has provided a way to share information and communicate effectively, creating space for more “real world” engagement. In my personal

the Annunciation with Saint Luke-in-the-Fields. This photo, which was not really appropriate for our website, was perfect for Facebook and generated some great buzz and much mirth.

Of course all this raises important questions about privacy and boundaries. My own profile is available to anyone on the New York City network and the networks of my college and graduate school. I want people to find me and to find Saint Ignatius. At the same time, photographs (of me and of my family) as well as “Wall Posts” with comments and results of things like the “Anglican Identity Quiz” I took (I am “High Church,” BTW) cannot be viewed by people



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