

7 Advices for Online Gospel Ministry

(Kathleen Wooten, published in Friends Journal, November 2016)

Be patterns, be examples in all countries; places; Facebook groups; websites; chat groups; wherever you post, tweet, and share that your carriage and life and posts may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, both in person and in digital spaces, answering that of God in everyone you meet, and follow, and “friend.”

—George Fox (1656), adapted by Kathleen Wooten (2016)

We are asked to be obedient to the Light within, to embrace and honor that of God in others. In my recent experiences with social media platforms as a Friend, I have been encouraged and challenged to honor this call in ways that seem new at times but are nevertheless in alignment with the testimony of Friends. I am coming to learn that there is a gospel order, a deep sense of faithfulness and witness, that can be supported in these new platforms of communication as well as in all the other ways we have traditionally been faithful in Friends communities.

I am not alone in this discovery. Many members of the wider church are using social media channels to encourage and support connections, open new ways of learning, and share news more widely and effectively than ever before. There are many statistics that now say newcomers are more likely to find a church or meeting through an Internet search than any other way. Conversations on Twitter and Facebook and photos with the hashtag “#Quaker” on Instagram all serve to bring our message to an audience that might not otherwise seek out the Quaker way. The media and technology we use are important, but even more crucial is our tender holding and intentional publishing of our experience as Friends with integrity, grounded in love. Justin Wise makes this point in his book *The Social Church: A Theology of Digital Communication: The underlying power in social media is not the technology. It's the power that comes from human beings connecting all around the globe. If the gospel message (or any message, for that matter) is transmitted along relational lines, [meetings] can confidently head in the direction of social because of the volume of relationships it can facilitate.*

In this time I have developed some informal “advices” for my work among Friends in digital spaces. My oversight committee has helped me to hear more clearly the spiritual aspects of this work as I move into it. Here, in no particular order, I share what we have learned thus far:

1 Social media is social first and media second. It is not a one-way conversation. You should expect as an administrator to get questions and comments, and be willing to respond prayerfully and with intention. Sometimes those conversations can turn into arguments. Do you strive to always hear the love behind the words? Are you honoring that of God in the person with whom you disagree? Are you modeling the most respectful debate you can? Are you able to guide a Friend to another more appropriate outlet (e.g. their meeting or a support committee) to help carry their concern more fully than can be done in posts?

2 Have multiple administrators (three or four) for each platform. You can check each other's work. You may see your colleagues' challenges and insights and encourage them in their postings and conversations.

3 Know the differences between social media platforms. Who is your audience? How would your message and sharing be best communicated? Are you better served by a closed group or a fully open Facebook page? Will others be allowed to post or comment on your site without supervision? Twitter is better for multiple short posts and sharing. Facebook followers may unfollow you for the same number of posts. Instagram is designed to work well with strategic hashtags and visual content.

4 Give credit where credit is due. For NEYM graphic posts, we use public quotations (attributed) and original artwork or photography shared under a Creative Commons license that stipulates no attribution is needed. Honor copyright and ownership with Quakerly integrity.

5 Know how the overall vision and message is supported by everything you post. You cannot take every post or tweet to a committee for approval. Much as a minister with a travel minute is encouraged to speak without each individual message being tested, your posts may be seen as the same. My support committee cares for this work as ministry. We test in prayer and conversation the appropriateness of my posts, as we would any other interaction or message in worship.

6 Do not substitute social media engagement for other platforms and forms of communication and building of community. Some of our meeting members do not have Internet access. Some are eager to use social media but need to learn how. We at NEYM always provide printed text for those who request it. Though some cannot engage in this medium and so we do not share crucial news and announcements solely online, we still consider it worthwhile to use this technology. For example, I use a digital device to keep track of Quaker business agendas and documents. I find the ability to increase text size and take digital notes (I have trouble writing with a pen due to arthritic fingers) is very helpful. Social media and technology can become just one more entry point into our tradition that can serve all in various ways.

7 Don't be afraid to experiment! Learning is messy; so is being in faithful community. You will find critics but also helpers. There may be those in your meeting who have a gift for this work. Support and encourage their living into those gifts, as you would any other in your meeting.

In the past few years, I have seen digital outreach among Friends become effective and powerful. We have joined together to invite each other into shared times of prayer and conversations about witness and ministry, and we have reminded Friends and others in the community to join in events virtually and in person. I am reminded often in this work of the underlying call to be publishers of Truth. I believe John Yungblut says it best in his 1974 Pendle Hill pamphlet *Quakerism of the Future*:

Indeed if one has been visited by a direct sense of inward presence, he is driven to tell everyone who will listen to him. Strange and unendurable irony—that Friends who speak so much about the Inward Light should so timidly hide their own light under a bushel! The time has come to preach the faith we have resolved to practice. If we have good news for our brothers, and I believe we do, let us shout it from the housetops! Let us learn to be publishers of truth about our faith as well as our social concerns.

I look forward to learning more about how we publish the truth we are given, in whatever measure is ours to hold, on whatever platform God sees as being most able to share news of the life among us, to whomever might have ears to hear. - Kathleen Wooten