

# Pastoral Use of Email, Instant Messages, & Text Messages

© 2006 by Nick B. Nicholaou, all rights reserved

President, Ministry Business Services, Inc.

Reprinted from *The Clergy Journal*

---

A pastor's time is one of his or her most valuable resources. Because it is finite (even pastors only get twenty-four hours in their day), it is important to choose a communication strategy that helps balance the demands of email, instant messages, and text messages with the demands of personal time with God, family, staff, and message preparation.

## Some Context

Many pastors try to take steps to protect their family time. Some of these include not answering the phone during meal time or family time, small breaks and vacations away from the demands of church ministry with their family, and taking sabbaticals.

These are wise methods that help protect the time a pastor needs for personal and family time. They also communicate to the congregation the importance of balancing work and personal time.

This discipline of balance is also important in digital communications.

There will occasionally be members of the congregation or church board that don't understand this important discipline. A good teaching is Jesus' example! He regularly pulled away from the crowd for time with those closest to him, his disciples. He also prioritized personal time during which he could pray and hear God's voice.

## Email

Email has flattened organizational communication. Because it provides easy access to anyone in the organization, it often means those in leadership receive emails that are more appropriately sent to other team members, requiring re-direction of those emails. That re-directing process takes time. Left uncontrolled, a pastor can easily lose their days to this and other digital communication processes.

Most pastors today have at least one email account. Many manage the re-direction of emails by having two email addresses: one for the public, and one for staff and those with whom he or she works closely. The public address is usually screened by a secretary or administrative assistant who does the re-directing—including re-directing some emails to the pastor's hidden address.

This makes the pastor appropriately available to those on his or her team while also being appropriately available to the congregation and community. And it allows the pastor to focus on that which needs his or her attention.

## Instant Messages

Instant message (IM) access can be very disruptive. Yet there are some whom the pastor wants to have instant access. Team members who directly report to the pastor and some close relationships in church leadership are good candidates for this higher level of access. These are trusted individuals who understand the demands of the pastor's time.

One innovative pastor uses IM to begin his day in a virtual pastoral staff meeting! By agreeing to be available for a brief time every day, this allows his staff to ask quick questions they need answered or to set up meetings with him they need to have. It also helps give him a sense of what is happening in the church and among the team in a very time-efficient way. It efficiently increases everyone's productivity.

## Text Messages

Cellular text messages can be received almost anywhere, making them a disruption factor that is much higher than email or IM. It is unlikely that a pastor would be at a son's or daughter's soccer game with a notebook computer connected to the Internet and communicating via email or IM. But text messages, delivered by cell phones, can interrupt any setting!

Because anyone who knows the pastor's cellular phone number can send him or her a text message, it is important to protect those numbers! A pastor should consider:

1. Turning on the feature that shields his or her cellular number from those they call. When desired, this setting can usually be over-ridden by preceding a dialed number with “\*82”. (For those I call often, I add this prefix to their entry in my address book.)
2. Only share cellular phone numbers with family, close friends, and key members of staff and church leadership who will guard the pastor's time and not abuse this higher level of availability.

Time is always in short supply. There are few positions where this is felt as strongly as it does by pastors. By strategizing their digital communication options, pastors can be appropriately available to family, key staff, and key church leaders while also protecting the balance of family and personal time.