

# Catholic schools careful with social media

Doug Heidrick wasn't so sure Calvert Hall College High School should get into Facebook, a popular online social media page. The school's communications director wasn't convinced it was an appropriate venue for a Catholic school and he feared a presence on Facebook would siphon visitors from the school's well-established website.

"I saw that the Christian Brothers were using it and the pope was too," Heidrick said. "If the pope had a page, why not us?"

More than a year later, Heidrick is using two Calvert Hall pages on Facebook – a school page and an alumni page – that allow graduates and friends to get updates on the latest school news and interact by posting messages. The two pages have thousands of fans between them.

"It's been very effective to reach out on Facebook," Heidrick said. "It's helpful for updating our database with alumni contact information."

Facebook provides a good forum for discussion of school-related topics, Heidrick said.

"You have to monitor it to make sure the content posted by the users is appropriate," he said. "I've had to delete things occasionally, but nothing related to Calvert Hall. It's usually someone advertising for a service."

More Catholic schools are venturing into the ever-changing world of social media. In addition to Facebook, they are establishing Twitter and LinkedIn accounts. Blogging is also popular.

William Glover, archdiocesan director of information technology, said it's important for Catholic institutions to have a presence on the Web and in social media.

"If we're not there, then there's a void and people look elsewhere," Glover

explained. "If they are looking for a school and it doesn't have a website or a Facebook page, they might turn left instead of right. We want people to come closer to Christ and these are the virtual doors."

Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City has an active Facebook page that promotes parish and school news and events. Mount St. Joseph High School in Irvington is another school with a robust Facebook presence.

"It's an incredible marketing tool," Glover said. "It's a way to get something out very rapidly."

The Archdiocese of Baltimore has developed guidelines for how teachers, youth ministers and others who represent the church can interact with students through social media.

The policy prevents those who minister in pastoral settings with young people from "friending" young people on personal sites. If a professional page is established, the policy states that the page must be consistently monitored and should not be the personal site of any of the adults affiliated with the ministry.

Teachers are also reminded that on any of their blogs or social network sites, they will be recognized as representing the values of the Catholic Church and should conduct themselves accordingly.

"When we post something, we want to make sure it's Christ-centered," Glover said. "Does your remark demonstrate Christian charity?"

The U.S. bishops recently released guidelines for the use of social media. They recommend that Church ministers have permission from a minor's parent or guardian before contacting the minor via social media or before posting pictures, video and other information that may identify that minor. Parents must also have access to everything provided to their children, the bishops said.

As more schools enter the online world, Glover said it is important that they do their research before diving in.

"You don't want to start something and not do it well," he said. "That discredits your

organization. If you start a Facebook initiative, you have to keep up with it. The audience wants you to keep that communication flowing.”