They say that everything's bigger in Texas. To some degree that's true especially when considering the land mass that is Texas—268,000 square miles. And while the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists consists only of the central and eastern portions of Texas, it remains a massive territory.

So then how does a Conference of this size go about keeping its members, and more specifically, its pastors, connected. In the end, it requires a number of approaches since pastors, much like others, are quite diverse in terms of their social and communication preferences. At the same time, Texas has discovered the power of social media networks in keeping a specific group of people connected and communicating.

Recently, the Texas Conference launched a Facebook forum for its pastors. Already over a quarter of the Conference's 188 pastors have joined the group in an effort to start an ongoing conversation among pastors in the Texas Conference. The idea behind starting the group was relationally driven—to maintain existing and create new relationships among pastors, who by virtue of vocation share a lot in common. Additionally, the Facebook group was also launched to foster a corporate culture that was dialogue-oriented, rather than top-down.

There is one, however, that makes this pastors' Facebook forum unique. It is a Secret Group. That's what Facebook calls...
groups that don’t exist on Facebook. Try to search for the Texas Conference Pastors’ Connection and you will get no results. Membership is by invitation only and privacy controls are so stringent that only members of the group are allowed to see its content or to even know of the group’s existence.

That’s an important feature for pastors who, as public leaders, need to know that there is a safe place for them to communicate openly about life and ministry. So far the online community has proven to be a success. Both conversational topics and comments on the Group’s wall have been quite diverse. Topics range anywhere from church finance, to finding balance in life and pastoral ministry, to dealing with doubt and the complexities of the Christian walk. One of the most engaging topics began when one pastor asked a simple question: “What’s the best car for a pastor to drive?” Eighteen comments later, the jury is still out!

Pastors are also exchanging prayer requests, seeking intercession for health-related concerns and family members. Again privacy and confidentiality is the key ingredient that the Facebook Secret Group environment offers. And finally, pastors are taking advantage of the opportunity to encourage each other on Sabbath mornings, at the beginning of the pastor’s most challenging and taxing day.

Only the future will tell how this forum will develop and how Texas pastors will chose to use it to facilitate relationships and effective communication amongst themselves. As Karl Leukert, a Texas pastor and an avid user of the Facebook forum put it, “I don’t think this group has reached its full potential yet.”

Phil Cooke’s book, Branding Faith, explains why some churches and nonprofits impact culture and others do not. Phil Cooke was a powerful keynote speaker at SAC a couple of years ago. If you didn’t pick up a copy of his book then, you may want to do so now. Order from AdventSource.

“Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For indeed, that’s all who ever have.” Margaret Mead
To Snap or Not to Snap
The Legality of Photographing Children

A recent opportunity to photograph children at the NAD Kids Health Expo, brought up the question, “Can children be photographed without the signed permission of a parent or guardian?” Gerry Chudleigh, an experienced photographer among our ranks of Communication directors, offered the following information that will serve as a reminder and a guide when including children in pictures for media distribution.

Sooner or later every photographer is informed that he or she cannot take or publish pictures of children without consent forms signed by the children’s parents or guardians. Is this correct?

The fact is that the only photos of children, or adults, that require a signed consent form are photos used as design elements on video, websites, in print, etc. Photos used to tell a news story never require permission, written or otherwise.

Except in the case of pornography, there is no law in the U.S. or in any state that requires photos of children to be treated differently from photos of adults. And there are no laws that limit the right of an organization or individual to publish news, including photos, of anyone. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects free speech, and photos are considered speech. Laws in Canada are similar. For a detailed discussion of laws that are often mistakenly thought to restrict photos of children, see http://tinyurl.com/767m3la.

I have been taking pictures for the church for about 10 years now. I do not have a photo permission form in my camera bag or in my files, and have never used one. I never ask if the people in front of my camera have signed consent forms, because I am always taking photos in public places for the purpose of telling a news story.

When we take photos of kids at the Oshkosh Pathfinder Camporee we don’t worry about whether parents have or have not signed consent forms,
or not because we are reporting news, which
does not require permission.

But if I took photos for non-news
purposes, I would carry consent forms and I would
use them. If you are using a photo of a person the
same way you would use a stock photo—as a design
element in a video, on a website, or in print—you are
probably using the person as a model, so you must
pay a modeling fee unless they agree to let you use
their photo for free. This is not a matter of privacy but
of fair business.

If you print a feature story on education in June
and you illustrate it with a delightful picture that you
took in October of a student reading a book, you are
using that student as a model. That picture could have
been used earlier in a news story, but you will have to
get written permission to use the same photo now as
an illustration.

Photographers have broad rights to take photos
and publish them. But we are also part of the church.
We have the legal right to publish news photos of
anyone we see, but those people also have the right to
ask us not to. Schools can tell us we can’t take pictures
of their students, and parents can tell us we can’t
take pictures of their kids. But they have to tell us in
advance; they can’t sue us afterward for publishing a
picture as news.

When people tell us they don’t want us to take or
publish their picture, we don’t. But that rarely happens.
A few weeks ago I took a picture of a (non-Adventist)
mother and her two daughters picking up desserts
at the Pine Springs Ranch 50th Anniversary open
house. I liked what I saw on the back of the camera,
so I walked up to her and asked for her name and the
names of her girls and told her we might publish the
picture in our news magazine. She looked pleased and
made sure I got all the names spelled correctly. The
picture, with their names, is in the February Recorder.
I didn’t get a written consent because I knew none was
required, but if she had said, “Oh, please don’t print
that picture because of custody issues—or any other
reason—I would not have used it.

Gerry Chudleigh is Communication Director for the Pacific
Union Conference.

Would you like to explore new ways
to capture and create
exceptional images with
a digital camera and
software? AdventSource
carries a book by Jim
Krause that may get you
started on the way to
better photography.