

## Constituency Live Stream Expands Audience, Social Media Reach

Story By Celeste Ryan Blyden

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*Members of Columbia Union Conference Communication Services used social media to report on the union's constituency meeting in real time and, in doing so, reached nearly 17,000 people on Facebook. Left to right: Taashi Rowe, Beth Michaels, Celeste Ryan Blyden, Kelly Butler Coe and Michelle Bernard. Photo by Al Peasley*

When the officers of the Columbia Union Conference decided to convene an historic constituency meeting where they asked representatives from the eight states that comprise our union to authorize ordination without regard to gender, it occurred to us that the world would want to witness this event and wouldn't want to wait to read about it a month later in the September *Visitor*.

Sunday's unprecedented event called for unprecedented handling and garnered unprecedented attention. Over 100 new people started following @VisitorNews on Twitter; and though we only gained about 100 new fans on Facebook, our weekly Facebook report shows that our postings reached nearly 17,000 people. Our union website, which attracts no more than 200 people daily, saw visits from 4,426 unique visitors in one day. For example, people watched in Canada, Russia, China, Bermuda, Brazil, Sweden, South Africa, Mexico, and all across the United States. And not only did they watch, they commented—on each and every photo, quote, comment, question and reply.

Here's a snapshot of our day:

As Pastor Henry Wright of **Potomac Conference's Community Praise Center** in Alexandria, Va., stepped to the microphone, Michelle Bernard, *Visitor* Facebook editor, finished posting a tweet, grabbed her camera, ducked past the microphone obstructing her view and darted across the sanctuary to snap his photo. Meanwhile, Beth Michaels, *Visitor* managing editor, started typing what he was saying into a Facebook post. Shortly afterward, the duo posted the photo and quote on the Columbia Union *Visitor* **Facebook page** and seconds later, Kelly Coe, *Visitor* art director and designer, tweeted it @VisitorNews using the hashtag #ColumbiaUnion. By this time, Wright wrapped up and the chair recognized another who would have two minutes to speak to the motion pending.

"Hey, somebody on Facebook is asking if it's true that we ordain women elders," said Michaels seated on my right. "She says one of the presenters reported it."

"Tell her we've been doing that since 1975," I said, noticing that the delegate at the microphone next to us was beginning to speak. "I'm still trying to tweet another quote. Can somebody grab this one?" I heard myself say over my shoulder. I got my answer with the sound of fingers clicking on keyboards behind me and further down the pew where Taashi Rowe, *Visitor* news editor, was typing furiously on her laptop as if taking dictation from the delegates.

I dragged my mouse across all the pages open on my browser—Facebook, Twitter, email, Google Analytics—and stopped on our specially created **webpage** to make sure the live stream was working properly.

That really was unnecessary because a friend watched and texted commentary throughout the proceedings. "Why r u all taking pics during prayer? Seems irreverent." and "U need titles on the speakers. Who is this guy?" and "This guy needs to go back to wherever he came from!"

And so it continued for four hours! In that time, five of us (see photo) shared dozens of tweets, photos and Facebook posts, all, the while keeping up with the meeting and answering questions or comments via text message, email and the aforementioned social media. And nobody stopped to use the bathroom.

"Thanks for your updates ... keep them coming," tweeted @reggieexum.

"President Weigley is praying before the delegates vote. #ColumbiaUnion," Bernard tweeted.

"Shut the mics down. We shouldn't be able to hear their offside comments," texted Ednor Davison, communication director for the Atlantic Union Conference, while the votes were counted. From her living room in Boston, she kept one eye on the live feed and the other on our social media posts.

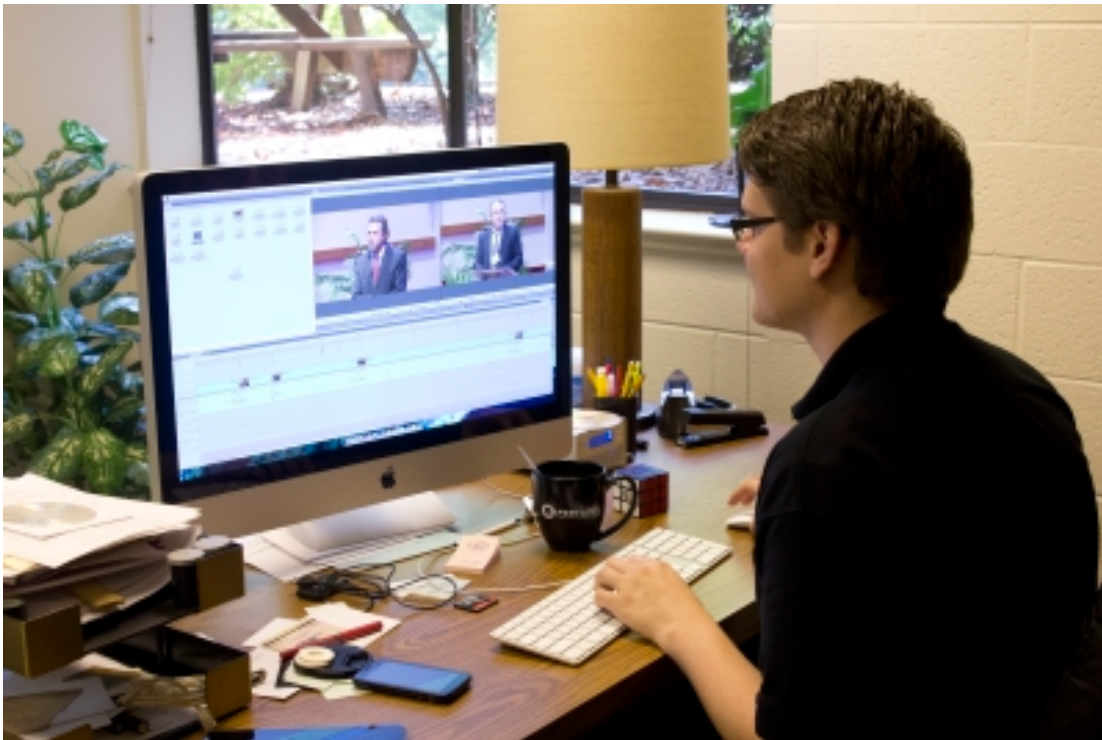
And when the results came in, so did more texts, tweets, Facebook comments

and emails.

“Proud to be an SDA today. RT [@carpenterale](#): Historic! [@VisitorNews](#): Results of the vote: 209 Yes, 51 No, 9 Abstain. [#ColumbiaUnion](#),” retweeted [@lillithp](#) after [@Cpe](#) tweeted the results.

“My prayer was that the Spirit would work in a clear fashion. Can you get any clearer than 80%?” emailed retired Pennsylvania layman Bob Cowdrick, who was among the more than 160 others who emailed or posted comments on our website in the weeks after we published a 12-page section of the July *Visitor* advocating for women’s ordination and announcing the special constituency meeting.

“Riveting program, Celeste! More so than the Olympics,” emailed Martin Weber, communication director for the Mid-America Union Conference.



*Aaron Cheney, Potomac Conference’s communication intern, managed the live stream and edited the nearly four-hour video. Photo by Tiffany Doss*

## **Hello Social Communication Era**

All of this makes me want to say: “Hello social communication era! This is your predecessor trying to keep up!”

It’s true that before this weekend I pushed for “real time news distribution” and often explained that we are not scooping ourselves by daily posting news to our website ([www.columbiaunion.org](http://www.columbiaunion.org)) or publishing the *Visitor News Bulletin* email

weekly (sign up at [www.columbiaunion.org/emailnews](http://www.columbiaunion.org/emailnews)) because the circulation numbers are still very low compared to our magazine, which is mailed to 55,000 households monthly and proved to be a strong tool in educating members about women's ordination (see July 2012 *Visitor*). And yes, we've had a freelance Facebook editor for over a year now, but the rest of us paid lip service to work-related social media and basically used it to find quotable tweets and posts to reprint in the magazine. Now, having coordinated communication for the Seventh-day Adventist Church's first live-streamed, live-blogged and social-media reported constituency meeting, we've somehow added this uncontrollable, uncontainable beast to our portfolio.

Suddenly, social communication is our new reality and, as much as Adventists event hop, I expect this will soon be our new norm. A year ago, after attending the North American Division (NAD) Media Summit, I defined social media as "the blending of technology and social interaction for the co-creation of value." Now that it's part of our job description, I would define social communication as "the convergence of technology, social networking and communication management to facilitate news reporting and information sharing in real time."

### **No Turning Back**

Remember life before smart phones? Remember the General Conference Session newsroom before computers? Remember file sharing before email? Neither do I. And soon, I wonder if we might say, "Remember when we printed books, newspapers, magazines and newsletters and *mailed* them?"

We just got word from Barna Research Group that they've completed the survey commissioned to help us know how our members prefer to get news about their local and global Adventist Church family. We are eager to get the results, but after experiencing this unprecedented event and the impact of social media on our communication work, I can almost predict what we'll learn from the report.

And now that we've tried—and survived—our first foray into social communication and understand the value, demand and potential it brings to our work, church and mission, just like the hymn suggests, there's no turning back.

*Celeste Ryan Blyden serves as communication director for the Columbia Union Conference and editor and publisher of the union's Visitor magazine.*

**COMMENTS POLICY:** The Columbia Union Conference *Visitor* encourages quality conversation and welcomes your thoughtful comments. All comments are subject to approval but will not be edited. **Please limit your comments to 500 words or less. Only one comment per person will be published.**

**Join the discussion:**

## **Cindy Tutsch**

**Reply**

3 years ago

You and your team did an amazing job, Celeste! Thanks for all that hard work to keep not only your constituents but the world "in the know."

## **Alex Golovenko**

**Reply**

3 years ago

Our whole family had watched the session on Sunday. Thank you for making this participation possible. My kids (18,15,12,10) commented that it was better than watching Olympics, and that they are proud of their church! I wish this level of openness will become reality all over the world, in all Unions of our worldwide Church. Many of our church members (London, Canada) watched the broadcast too, as we informed the day before of the broadcast being available, and it served as a revival inspiration :)

## **Jocelyn Fay**

**Reply**

3 years ago

Superb job. Thanks so much for being conscious that the whole world was watching and making it possible for us to do so. Thanks also for reporting so well and so quickly to the traditional Adventist media. I'd been wondering how they would handle your meeting. All the best as you continue to lead the way.

## **D Bindernagel**

**Reply**

3 years ago

I turned my computer on at 6:30 PST to make sure I did not miss anything. I was so glad you all decided to let us hear the delegate comments. I didn't tweet, text, or comment on Facebook, this baby boomer had my concentration consumed on the Live Stream. I would really like to be able to rewatch the proceedings especially Henry Wright's comments. I had heard they would be available but cannot seem to find them. also Do you know if the PUC is planning to give us full coverage Aug 19?

## **Visitor Staff**

**Reply**

3 years ago

Hello D,

The video of the Columbia Union Constituency Special Constituency Meeting is

now available at <http://www.columbiaunion.org/2012specialconstituency> under "Watch the Session."

## **Visitor Staff**

**Reply**

3 years ago

Thanks to all of you who have shared your thoughts on the July 29, 2012, Columbia Union Conference Special Constituency Meeting. We appreciate hearing from you. To share further comments with union leaders, please email [comments@columbiaunion.net](mailto:comments@columbiaunion.net).

## **Robert Cowdrick**

**Reply**

3 years ago

Celeste-- you promoted me prematurely. I am a retired layman in the PA. Conf., not a retired pastor. The entire staff is to be commended.  
Bob Cowdrick

## **Visitor Staff**

**Reply**

3 years ago

Thank you for your kind words Bob. We've made the correction to your title. --  
Taashi

## **Jim Miles**

**Reply**

3 years ago

Great job. Thanks for the excellent follow-up with the archive videos. Love to see the church leveraging the latest communication technology!

## **Pamela Harris**

**Reply**

3 years ago

Thanks for the up-to-date social media coverage and live streaming of the event. I watched it live and followed every speech. I followed your Twitter feed as well. Great pre-coverage in the Visitor as well. Congratulations on great reporting of an historical event.