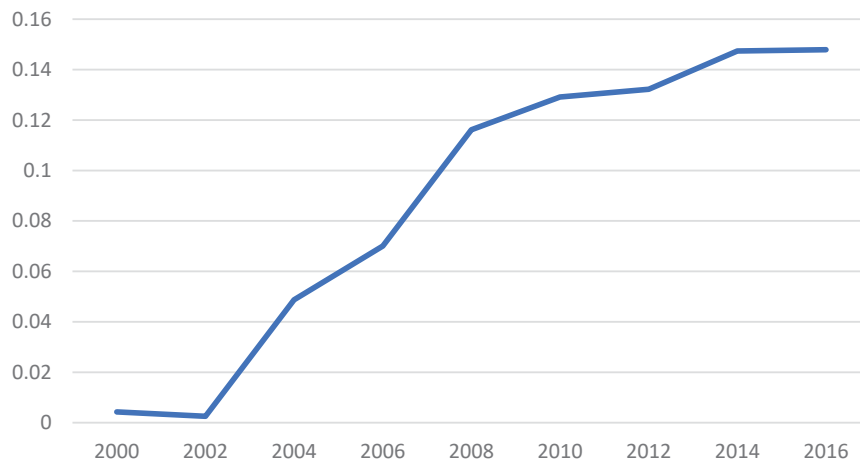


Figure 2
Fraction of Americans Who Never Pray



Source: General Social Survey



Sarah Hamersma
Syracuse University

On Being a Visible Christian Economist

My identity as a “Christian scholar” or “Christian professor” has enjoyed significant affirmation over the years, through both institutions and individuals who have invested in me and for which I am incredibly grateful. I had opportunities as an undergraduate at Calvin College (advised by Kurt Schaefer) and as a participant in the Pew Younger Scholars program (under Dave Richardson) to have frequent interactions with Christian professors who affirmed my academic pursuits from the beginning. The notion of glorifying God through research and teaching was brought home to me early and often, and while there are always those times of feeling my activities are too far removed from practical “gospel work,” I can always pick up my copy of *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* and remember why I do what I do. I highly

recommend that book to any young scholars who sometimes feel they are turning into “intellectuals” and to whom that sounds—as it did to me—like an unholy or dangerous thing. (I met Mark Noll after reading it and told him his book was, to me, right out of “Killing Me Softly With His Song”—he was “strumming my pain with his finders, singing my life with his words.”)

It’s probably notable that the reason I actually met Mark Noll was because of the great work of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville, a para-university organization in which I was very involved when at my first job as a faculty member at University of Florida. The Center provided a home base of academic connection for students and faculty ready to “explore the intellectual and cultural resources of the Christian tradition” in light of our university work. We organized panels, guest speakers, short courses, and film screenings, in collaboration with university departments whenever possible. I presented my thoughts on “Why Economists and People of Faith Need Each Other” and contributed to a panel focused on different disciplinary understandings of justice (alongside an historian and a philosopher). The Center was the place where I found “my people.” The study center movement more broadly has provided wonderful programming and resources for thinking about the life of a Christian academic, and I would love to see other Christian economists get connected with centers near them. (There are now over 25 centers across the country.¹)

That said, I think my identity as a “Christian *economist*” in particular is still very much a work in progress. Framed positively, I see growth in that identity even in very recent years, long after I had felt secure as a Christian academic more generally. While I have always been connected with ACE, I have also always been aware that it is a specific subgroup of Christian economists who find themselves connecting with ACE regularly. In other words, I think we have a sample selection issue. This means that, at ACE events, I am likely to be connected most often with people whose jobs differ from mine in at least one of two important ways. First, compared to a general gathering of economists, I have the impression that ACE represents more institutions that place teaching responsibilities above research responsibilities. (In fact, I’d like to note an excellent, well-attended session put together partly by ACE people at the Southern Economic Association meetings last year focused on the pedagogy of teaching undergraduate econometric methods.) Second, compared with

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a general gathering of economists, my colleagues in ACE are more likely to be in Christian institutions where there is an expectation that faith informs work, and thus the research that is done may bridge into theology or philosophy in a more explicit way than mine would. I do not think either of these is problematic, but merely that the nature of professional conversations is less likely to veer toward the work I do, happily situated in a secular research university. Role models for my specific kind of work—especially females—are relatively rare in the (visible) world of Christian economists.

A primary role that ACE has played has for me has been one of encouragement and fellowship. I am always excited to connect with my friends at ACE, and there is a very real brotherhood/sisterhood there. As I consider where it might extend its reach, I wonder if ACE could find a way to better establish and maintain professional connections with economists across a broader range of institutions, including secular ones. While there are certainly economists out there whose Christianity is purposely hidden, there may be ways to find others who might identify as Christians but haven't thought about themselves as a "Christian economist" *per se*. (I've learned of several through an engagement strategy I'll describe more in a minute.) We really need those people represented in ACE to help with that always-important discussion about what our identity means and how it plays out in our work. Our recent practice of using one of our ACE sessions at ASSA to contribute to a topic of broad AEA interest is a great start to building connections outside our established group.

In particular, when it comes to younger economists, I think there is mentoring that could and should be done by members of ACE. Given the difficulty of identifying new Christian economists in the pipeline, when we know of a young Christian scholar, we should be connecting with them intentionally and consistently. When a Christian graduate student attends the ACE luncheon, for instance, is there someone who will check in with them a few months down the line and ask how their research is going, or how we could be praying for their job search? How do we develop those norms without it being awkward? Perhaps there are some ways to maintain a loose connection (e.g., a quarterly email providing links to some things ACE people are working on) so that an occasional check-in doesn't come out of nowhere. We might look to other professional economist affinity groups for ideas on how they stay connected with busy graduate students and assistant professors.²

Along with being a place for young Christian economists to find some connections and encouragement, what might it look like for ACE to commit to forms of hospitality and partnership that connect us more with our economist colleagues outside “the fold”? There may be opportunities for organizing panels or presentations, conferences or collaborations. My experience is that developing a distinctive Christian identity becomes much more concrete when one is in a variety of conversations on topics of shared concern with non-Christians. We may learn more about who we are in these outside conversations than our inside ones.

I have had a new kind of engagement in recent years that I did not expect would play a role in my deepening as a Christian economist, but has turned out to be invaluable. It is . . . Facebook.

Now, people use social media in a lot of ways, but I will just share a few things about my experience that have always stopped me from “shutting it off” when I get on a Luddite kick. (Please note: My preferred classroom environment involves a chalkboard, where a bonus is one of those document cameras that acts like an overhead projector but you don’t need to make transparencies ahead of time.) What is it that is happening on Facebook that is growing me as a Christian economist? I can divide it into two key elements: The nature of the content I engage and the network of people with whom I engage.

I always tell a new friend to be ready for content on my Facebook feed that is about one-third theology, one-third economics and policy, and one-third funny things my kids say. (They are *really* funny.) On a typical day, I read and share an article—with brief commentary or a pulled-out quote—in hopes of starting a conversation. Once in a while, I share a thought directly (without an article), reflecting on some things I’ve been thinking about. People know that if they provide a comment, they are part of an engaged conversation among people who are almost always thoughtful and respectful. I think of myself in a hosting role—Christian hospitality if you will—for conversational potlucks. I also participate in interesting conversations hosted by friends who have a similar approach to curating meaningful discussion and learning from each other.

What might the day’s topic be? It could be a new federal tax reform. It could be the future of evangelicalism. It could be abortion (yes, I go there). It could be American polarization. It could be the role of Christians in policy advocacy. It could be about community and culture.

In some sense, this variety of topics might not seem particularly con-

nected to my development as a Christian economist as such, but this is where the network of people pulls things together. I have long been concerned about the challenges in my efforts to (a) explain economics helpfully to non-economists in the Church and (b) explain the Church helpfully to economists outside the church. In the context of Facebook, I can engage in both kinds of conversation regularly—and these conversations happen in the presence of *both* types of people! If I want to convey concerns about an economic policy with potentially bad unintended consequences—perhaps one strongly supported by my Christian friends—I can initiate a conversation that pushes these fellow Christians to think twice about it. As the conversation develops, I can try to address their questions about the economics of it, and then other economists (not just Christians) are likely to chime in as well. I find that I can function as a bridge in some conversations between people who wouldn't otherwise interact, and who have things to learn from each other about faith and about economics.

So how did this network form? A key element is including only people I actually know. This is particularly important when I am helping cultivate a challenging conversation among people who don't all know each other; I can help smooth rough edges or clarify ambiguities because I know who the people actually are.³ My approach leads to slow but high-quality growth in the network with whom I interact. I have had not one, not two, but *three* people send friend requests specifically because they are also Christian economists and had seen my posts through mutual friends.⁴ I have also had the chance to directly or indirectly identify other Christian economists through these online connections—sometimes once-removed, on a friend's thread—whom I've never seen at an ACE function.

In light of my very positive experience, I hope that we Christian economists might think about online conversations as an emerging tool for both connecting with each other and better serving our Christian friends and economist friends (and that small but wonderful intersection of the two). As an added bonus, I feel I have become more and more secure in my identity as a Christian economist as I have put myself in a position to articulate that identity in many conversations in recent years. I have purposely avoided most “subgroup” interactions on Facebook in favor of conversations that my whole list of friends will see. It can undoubtedly be more comfortable to speak in jargon (economic or theological) with

my own tribe (economic or theological), but I like the accountability that comes with knowing that many others could be listening to that conversation. I want to take seriously the call to be without reproach.

A conversation topic that I keep coming back to these days is the connection between economic research and responsible dissemination and policy making, particularly as it pertains to controversial issues. This is an example of an area where I hope Christian economists can contribute. My pathway to pushing this issue forward has been evolving in small steps. Initially, I became familiar with some excellent empirical work being done by a Baylor professor, Scott Cunningham, whom I have gotten to know over the years. (He presented in one of last year's ACE sessions at ASSA, though remotely.) His work is impeccable and also controversial and highly publicized, so it was perfect for me to bring to the classroom for my applied econometric methods class with Ph.D. students in Public Administration.⁵ My students and I continued to talk about the paper after class and realized there was just a lot more to hash out that was not specific to Scott's paper. For instance, if your research has a clear result with policy implications, what are your responsibilities when it comes to disseminating that research, and how should you connect with the media and policymakers, particularly around controversial issues? I organized an informal discussion a couple of weeks later, and my students and I discussed these questions, along with some recent controversy about a new opioid paper by Jennifer Doleac and Anita Mukherjee. The conversation was so enjoyable and productive that I posted about it on Facebook. The first person to respond to it was a close colleague of mine—our Ph.D. director in fact—who wanted to know when we'd be doing this again so she could join us. Many other economist colleagues near and far expressed their interest in such conversations in the comments.

Now, that could have been the end of it, but I realized that there was an opportunity to push this forward, and social media would again help me. I decided to try to organize a panel discussion at the APPAM annual meetings and used Facebook for open recruiting, tagging a few people I thought might be interested in participating based on their responses to the earlier post. Within a couple of days, I had a set of four panelists—in different subfields, in different kinds of departments and institutions, of varying seniority!—who were excited to be part of a moderated discussion. I had additional volunteers who saw the call a bit later and have agreed to be backups (or to help seed the audience!), and some who

were interested but not attending those particular meetings. On the spur of the moment, with days before the deadline, I organized an identical session for the AEA meetings, with only one person overlapping (one of those Christian economists I met on Facebook, actually!). That panel will include Cunningham and Doleac, who were part of the inspiration for the discussion. While I don't know yet whether either session will be accepted, I feel like this is the kind of activity that a Christian economist can do as part of the larger profession: Help bring us back to some fundamental questions—including ethical ones—and perhaps help all of us learn to better articulate what it is we hope we are doing as economists.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://studycentersonline.org/membership/member-study-centers/>
- 2 I'm thinking particularly of organizations like CSWEP that pay particular attention to mentoring women through the pipeline, or other groups that gather and support underrepresented minorities, via racial or LGBT groups.
- 3 While choosing "Facebook friends" who are actually my friends—or at least colleagues—seems natural to me, my impression is that those even a little bit younger than I do not use these networks in the same way.
- 4 These are the rare cases where I was happy to add people to my network even though I had not yet met all of them in person.
- 5 Scott was even kind enough to Skype in and talk to my class about it (which I barely managed technologically, but it was worth it). ■



Steven McMullen
Hope College

Christian economists often find themselves in an odd position. For many of us, our Christian convictions are at the heart of our motivation for studying and understanding the economy. When we make economic policy, there are lives and communities at stake and serious questions of justice on the line. At the same time, however, we are trained to be scholars of the world as it is, dispassionately exploring and explaining complex phenomena. For many economists, it is not easy to see how being a Christian should make a difference in a person's practice