

Emerging Voices | Social Media Changes Church Life, Relationships

You likely have been deceived by social media relationships and connections with fellow church members at some point.

A Facebook “friend request” that you thought was a hand of friendship was shattered when you met your new online friend in the fellowship hall after church.

Rather than engaging in pleasant conversation, they looked you straight in the eye and went their way as though you were from a distant planet.

Experiencing this all-too-common occurrence made me realize that, while we share common space for worship, there is a preference as to the platform we desire to use for fellowship and connection.

It seems that many Christians now prefer relationship and fellowship via social media.

Through this medium, we express love, affection and admiration to the posts, tweets and shares of the other.

Yet, come Sunday, heads are bowed, eyes to the side, as your online “buddy” silently walks past you with no words, smile or acknowledgement of your existence.

Indeed, what happened in virtual space does not transfer to the real world.

Social media has evolved the ways we live in community. Hands are taking more responsibilities for the mouth, sentences are broken down to “emojis,” moods and feelings are summarized into “gifs,” replies contain only “lol,” a thumbs-up or an angry face emoji; all of this demonstrates the medium we now use in communicating.

While the struggle to figure out how to manage human social interaction continues, we are already changed by the technologies we use in communicating and building relationships.

To this change, individual Christians, the church universal and local congregational life are not exempt.

Relationships and communications between churchgoers, and other Christians, have drastically changed already.

I fear that the influence of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and other social media platforms has transformed us into people we ought not to be.

Sherry Turkle, in her book, "Alone Together," made a startling observation. "We bend to the inanimate with new solitude. We fear the risks and disappointments of relationship with our fellow humans. We expect more from technology and less from each other," she writes about our dependence on new technologies.

The sad truth is that social media outlets now mediate much of our communication and relationships.

We have lost the language and attitude of empathy because we are unable to be with each other without our mediating tools.

We do not know how to talk with one other because we have given that power to our devices.

You may ask, "What is the problem with the ways new technologies have changed church members' communication and relationships?"

Turkle asserts that now "we fear the risk and disappointments of relationship with our fellow humans."

Because we have become afraid of the other, our communications and connections are no longer deep. We have become shallow, distant and impersonal.

We are continually isolated and forced to go through our pains, questions and

struggles alone. We lack the ability to empathize, walk with and be compassionate to a fellow brother and sister.

Instead of being compatriots and fellow sojourners, we are choosing to go solo, preferring the solitude offered by the inanimate.

My concern, as a Christian, is that through the new medium of relationship and communication, we are presented a way that reduces the burden of the laborious demands of the Christian calling.

We are offered a pseudo way of being Christians by loving in abstraction, caring via “emojis,” preaching through “posts” and fellowshiping through “chats.”

I believe that, as created beings made in the image of our Creator, we are made by relationship, for relationship and through relationship.

The triune God, in whose image we are created, is inseparable unity, celebratory diversity and, in relationship, one.

We are more like our Creator when we live in relationship with one another. We are more at peace within ourselves when in relationship we celebrate the diversity of each person.

God, in keeping with Christian tradition, is relationship. And as the church, we are to reflect this nature of God to one another and the world.

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To be sure, there are many important and praiseworthy benefits of social media. But shouldn't we care that it is changing how we care as Christians?

Shouldn't we be worried that the ways we love and empathize with one another is more absent than present?

Shouldn't we start asking how social media is aiding or abating our ability to be the church?

Yes, we should.