

CULTURE AND FAITH EXPERT, MARK SAYERS, EXPLORES HOW OUR SOCIAL NETWORKED, STATUS-DRIVEN LIVES ARE FAILING TO DEVELOP DISCIPLES WITH REAL DEPTH.

There's been a lot of hype over social networking. The Facebook phenomenon has created a loose, organic network that allows you to talk to a wide range of people. While this offers a lot of breadth, there's not a whole lot of depth. As we all know, the more invites you get on Facebook the more you ignore them. So it seems the larger and looser the network, the less effective it actually becomes.

The big risk is that we see social networking as the magic bullet to our own isolation. The Church is looking for the simple solution that will make discipleship happen. But that bullet simply doesn't exist. Real social change is borne out of a deep commitment to the cause, with dedicated people and a deep connected engagement. Something that Facebook activism and 'come as you are' networks don't provide.

If you're looking for a tool for social change – like seeing a group of people becoming followers of Jesus – then you've got to admit that social networking is pretty weak. Especially when compared to the tried and tested methods of people believing in something passionately and having a focused approach.

PRINCIPLES FOR SOCIAL NETWORKING

#1 NEVER LET IT BECOME A REPLACEMENT FOR REAL FACE-TO-FACE RELATIONSHIPS.

#2 DON'T FORGET JESUS' TEACHINGS ON HUMILITY AND NOT LETTING YOUR RIGHT HAND KNOW WHAT YOUR LEFT HAND IS DOING. MAYBE YOUR HUNDREDS OF FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD DON'T NEED TO KNOW ALL THE GOOD DEEDS YOU/YOUR CHURCH ARE DOING ALL THE TIME.

#3 BE CAREFUL OF CREATING A CULT OF CELEBRITY AND FALSENESS OF YOUR LIFE THAT DOESN'T REALLY EXIST.



This is what gets me worried about our current predicament. Most people have jumped on social networking. Many have learnt how to do excellent large-scale events. We have discovered how to focus on 'hot button' issues that resonate with this generation. **But the Church has had to tweak and bend to engage in this new medium. It's not a natural fit.**

A pastor friend of mine recently said how he's sick to death of all the, *'it's gonna be a phenomenal night at church tonight'* updates on Facebook that other leaders post, trying to ensure attendance. It's exhausting.

My fear is that we have done a terrible job of going deep in creating the kind of personal commitment, discipline and readiness that we need to turn our situation around. I believe there is a big difference between getting someone interested in a four-week Coke Zero campaign, compared to getting engaged in a movement that involves devotion and worship. **It is far better to have a smaller group who is deeply committed to the cause versus a large semi-interested crowd.**

Of course, social networking in and of itself isn't evil. Instead, I believe Facebook reflects where we're at – that we are shaping Facebook far more than it's shaping us. **The fact that Facebook is narcissistic is because we are.**

As someone who uses the Internet a lot and has a blog that is well read, I am constantly self-examining and checking with others to make sure I don't fall into self-promotion. For instance, I deliberately don't promote who I'm meeting with via Twitter messages. This constant self-examination is key. And yet we cannot deny that Facebook and Twitter have helped speed up feedback and given us greater reach than ever before. They are great tools for resourcing and connecting networks.

But they are not the answer.

Ultimately, the methods of creating social change have not really changed that much. Commitment to a cause is infectious, but it is hard to catch across a computer screen or at a large event. It is caught in person. Therefore **at the end of the day it is about discipling others.**

Jesus was born into a culture where the apprenticing model of the Rabbis was normative. Jesus' statement that his followers must hate their families in order to be his disciples – which is so deeply shocking to our modern sensibilities – was actually not so shocking to Jesus' hearers because it was a well-known Rabbinical saying, underlying the importance of apprenticing yourself to a spiritual guide.

At its heart, following Jesus is about a constant dying to self in order to live for Him.

Social media can work when it helps us achieve this goal. And so the challenge for us is to take all of the tools that give us such breadth and meld them with the challenge to go deeper. Screens – on our laptops, iPhones and stages – can transfer important information. But the task of discipleship, of creating passionate followers prepared to die for a cause, can only happen face-to-face.

Mark is Senior Pastor at Red Church, a Church of Christ in Melbourne and Co-Director of Uber Ministries. This is an edited and re-framed excerpt from Mark's blog, marksayers.wordpress.com