

## The qb: June 2010

### Article: Speaking out (John Sweetman)

#### Using Facebook well

The first three sections of these reflections are partly based on information from Jesse Rice's book, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community* (David C. Cook, 2009). This book is well worth a read. I have drawn from Rice's reflections, but have reorganised them and added ideas and conclusions of my own. I have also consulted users of Facebook to glean their ideas and opinions.

#### 1. The attraction of Facebook

Scientific investigation has shown that authentic emotional connection is important for healthy personal development. Connection makes us happy and secure, and disconnection makes us unhappy and unstable. Our search for connection and community (or "home") is inherent in our nature.

We live in a world where connection is becoming more difficult through our busyness, our social dislocation, and our pace of life mainly driven by developing technology. It's hard to find space where we can easily connect and build community. Then along come mobile phones, social networking and, in particular, Facebook. Suddenly, connection is relatively simple and efficient. We can easily and quickly connect with others. The possibility of community has suddenly expanded exponentially.

Facebook is impacting the world. In 2009, five million people signed up to Facebook every week. In March 2009, Facebookers were using the site for up to three billion minutes a day. In March 2010, Facebook passed Google as the most visited site on the web. Facebooking is not limited to younger people. In 2008, the fastest-growing population on Facebook was 55 year old women.

One attraction of Facebook is the human need for community - a sense of place and belonging, what we see as "home." Rice (2009, 76-84) suggests that there are four homelike qualities that Facebook effectively facilitates.

1. *Home is where we keep all the stuff that matters to us.* On Facebook we can store our pictures, declare our values and beliefs, and share the things that are close to our hearts. Our "wall" is our place.
2. *Home is wherever we find family.* Facebook facilitates quick and easy homelike moments with family and friends from anywhere in the world. It's like we can gather all the people closest to us together and have access to them all the time.
3. *Home is where we feel safe because we can control the environment.* Facebook has provided users with a significant amount of control over their digital world. We can write status updates or speak through private messages. We can "confirm" or "ignore" others in a way that is not always possible in the real world.
4. *Home is where we can just be ourselves.* The ability to feel okay and accepted for who we are is a clear indicator of home. Facebook provides opportunity to say and do whatever we like and still be accepted for it, without any interference from the outside. Facebook dishes out plenty of unconditional positive regard. We are appreciated and accepted for ourselves.

At its best, Facebook provides us with a safe environment to grow connections and build community with old and sometimes new friends. We can keep people close no matter where they live. We can connect with others regularly. This can be of great benefit in a relatively isolated, time-poor society.

## **2. The reality of Facebook**

However, is Facebook really “home”? In most cases, it’s more like being at a party with a whole lot of friends and acquaintances, than sitting at home with a few good friends. Facebookers tend to connect with a lot more people online than they do in real life. Here are some reasons why I think that the environment of Facebook is more like a “party” than a “home.”

### **1. The issue of control.**

Facebook gives us a lot of control over our relationships. Our self-portrait tends to be very positive. Our profiles often highlight our successes and downplay our failures (by making fun of them). We present ourselves as we want to be perceived. We also choose our friends. This can make us feel safe and good about ourselves. Control is one key to our sense of well-being. This is the way we behave at a party. We hopefully present our best side. We don’t go too deep in our relationships unless we can get away with someone to a quiet corner.

At home with family and friends, things are different. We can’t avoid the tensions and difficulties that take real relationships to a deeper level. We can’t avoid being with people that challenge us or cause us to question our motives or approaches. In other words, we can’t hide and protect our real self behind a wall of control that slows down personal growth and the development of mutual relationships. For most people, Facebook does not and cannot provide this home. Having said that, it seems to me that there are many people who don’t have such a home anywhere and Facebook may provide a step forward.

### **2. The issue of over-connection.**

Like a party environment, Facebook provides us with a large number of possible relationships. But the party eventually finishes and we go home. We don’t live at parties or we would probably end up more shallow and frazzled people. The challenge is that the Facebook party can always be with us. The demands of a large range of constantly changing connections can eventually produce anxiety in people. We are confronted with too many options. We are trying to follow too much information. This can create pressure and anxiety. It can actually feed a sense of increasing powerlessness and wear us out, in some cases even causing addiction as we lose our sense of control. Trying to maintain too many diverse relationships inevitably means that these relationships will not be as deep. That’s fine and expected at a party, but it’s not like home.

At home, we have fewer, deeper relationships. We take time just to be with these people. At times we communicate in short, rapid-fire statements, but at other times, we share in long, meandering chats or pursue activities together that require no words. At home we appreciate time just being together and doing things together.

### **3. The issue of performance.**

As happens in a party environment, the nature of Facebook tends to turn our friends into audiences and us into performers. Our communication is often based on what we think our invisible entourage may like the best; we enjoy being appreciated and respected. This is normal and expected in a party environment.

But home relationships generally grow around reciprocity, trust, and mutual revelations concealed from the rest of the world. Party friendships look like the real thing, but the performance element involved can generally make them only limited imitations of home friendship.

#### **4. The issue of blurred roles and relationships.**

Our social worlds were more plainly differentiated before Facebook. Our home and party worlds were more clearly different. Our classmates and workmates were usually divided from our friends and family. We commonly had more personal access to the lives of our friends and family than our workmates. If Facebook is seen as principally a party world, then there are no major problems. But when the boundaries between home and party get blurred, relationships can become confusing. Rice (2009, 128-147) discusses three boundaries that can get fuzzy and confusing with social networking if it is not understood:

- a. *Privacy and authority.* Facebook can bring bosses and workers, teachers and students, parents and children, leaders and followers together. In some circumstances, this may create more healthy relationships, but it raises questions about what is appropriate and helpful for those who are not our peers. Facebook postings can create misunderstanding at any time, but this is far more likely to occur when those reading them are not aware of or part of the context for which they were aimed. A posting targeted towards a friend may be understood very differently by a parent, a child or a boss. Additionally, while deletions are possible, cyberspace never forgets. There are fewer second chances if we get it wrong.
- b. *Peer and romantic relationships.* Facebook makes choosing friends both simpler and more complicated. We have access to a much wider pool of potential friends. For many people, this is a good thing. We need relationships. But who should have access to our information and thoughts? Who will we invite to our party? Who do we “ignore” and what will be the repercussions? Who actually is a friend? Facebook relationships become even more complicated when friendships turn into romances. The public nature of online romance makes things even trickier than they were before Facebook. It can be very complicated and people get hurt.
- c. *Personal identity and time management.* Facebook along with other technology can mean that we need never be unplugged. We have a heightened ability to be always “on.” Some people have no private world; they are always connected. This can reinforce the belief that we always have an invisible entourage and may cause us to live in response to this entourage rather than in response to our heart. A healthy self-confidence can be subtly undermined. We become less confident in our own voice and ideas. Listening to others can be very positive. We make better decisions in the context of helpful advice. But as lists of friends grow, the voices of others get louder, and our self-confidence can suffer. Then there is the immediacy of the online world that can overwhelm and interrupt what is actually happening around us. Being always on can thwart our awareness of and intentionality in the present moment.

None of these issues mean that Facebook is flawed. But its role needs to be understood. Facebook is a great tool for connection. It positively breaks down some of the barriers to communication in our individualised society. Like any communication medium Facebook has both its benefits and its problems, but it needs to be seen more as a “party” environment than a “home” environment.

### 3. Does Facebook facilitate real community?

This question cannot be addressed adequately until “community” is defined. If community is mainly characterised by present relationship or connection and shared interests, then Facebook enables community for the people who can connect through digital media. If community requires some form of shared history and ongoing responsibility for and holistic engagement with each other, then it’s difficult to see how it can be achieved through Facebook alone.

Rice (2009, 176-177) quotes Dallas Willard as saying, “... community means assuming responsibility for other people and that means paying attention and not following your own will but submitting your will and giving up the ... little consumer world that you have created.” While it may be possible for Facebook to facilitate such a community, it is very unlikely. The undemanding nature of Facebook friendships and the degree of personal control militates against taking responsibility for others and giving up our own desires.

Facebook (like most party environments) tends to promote the consuming of relationships rather than self-giving community. As Rice (2009, 179) says, “Our Facebook connections typically require little thought or action on our part. We don’t have to work hard at them, or offer much of ourselves in return. We don’t have to “take responsibility” for anyone... And perhaps most importantly to us, we get to reveal and withhold whatever we feel like. We are in control.”

This is not necessarily the case. A number of the Facebookers I spoke to intentionally use Facebook as a means to be available to and to care for others. Some have built strong, healthy, self-giving relationships through Facebooking. It’s not impossible, but it’s not what normally happens on Facebook without strong intentionality.

So my conclusion is that Facebook, like a party environment, does not generally facilitate real community. It can contribute to the building of community and may assist the maintenance of community that has already been established in another place, but by itself alone it can build connection but not community. This connection can be important in many contexts, but it should not be mistaken for community. Facebook provides a taste of community but the relationships generally are too limited to constitute true “home.”

### 4. Using Facebook effectively

If you’re interested in using Facebook effectively, here are a few suggestions that might help you make the most of this tool. I have added a few pertinent quotes from various pastors and spouses who have expressed their opinions about Facebook to me.

1. *Facebook can be an effective way to maintain or re-establish community.* Many people stay in touch with friends and family through Facebook and some can find friends from previous times with whom they had lost contact. This was the original purpose of Facebook. It facilitates helpful connection in an easy and inexpensive way.

Bruce: My wife has been into Facebook for some time. Recently she set me up on Facebook, so that I could connect better with people I know here and around the world - ex-church members, old friends, relatives, young adults at church, etc. Without Facebook I would not be connecting regularly with these people. I have found Facebook to be very helpful in doing this.

Andy: Personally I have found Facebook useful in a number of ways. I have started communicating with some cousins I haven’t seen for over 40 years. We found each other using Facebook. It has become a useful way to quickly share photos with family and friends that are scattered all over the world.

2. *Facebook can be an efficient way to connect with those who have similar interests.* All sorts of groups congregate around pages that express common interests. Facebook is a useful way to stay in touch with people in the groups and organisations that express your interests and concerns. You can discuss issues and learn more.

Andrew: I think that Facebook reflects the new world reality that people congregate (and build community) around shared interests. Previously community was built around geography and physical interaction. Facebook has removed some of the constraints of geography and physicality. It allows for even the most obscure of sub-cultures and worldviews to find like-minded people and experience virtual community with them.

3. *Facebook can keep us in contact with helpful information.* As we become skilful at sorting through and filtering the huge amount of information that is passed on through Facebook, we can gain access to news and ideas that are helpful for our relationships and ministry.

Karen: I have lots of "friends." These are friends, extended family, school mates, contacts made on camps and conferences, Christian workers networking, teenagers I've ministered to and church members. As an introvert, it can help me get info about what's happening and to advertise events I want to promote.

4. *Facebook can be a useful way to disseminate and discuss information.* It's an inexpensive way to get the information you want straight into the hands of those who might be interested. Our church uses it extensively to invite to events and obtain feedback about ideas.

Geoff: I deliberately use it, like most things, for Kingdom purposes. It's a fantastic way to get out news and comments about Kingdom life – mission, ministry, evangelism, discipleship, networking Christianly. Rowland Croucher uses it to generate interaction on moral and Christian issues.

Andy: For my parachurch organisation, it is another tool I use to share about what we're doing (on a more informal basis) with those who are interested.

5. *Facebook can be used to influence and evangelise.* The more personal and friend-oriented nature of Facebook (compared with blogs and internet sites) allows more honest and open discussions about real issues. We can try to influence and make a difference in the lives of our "friends."

Andrew: When I think of our mandate to make disciples and share the gospel, I think Facebook provides a vehicle and forum to be agents of the Great Commission.

Merryl: In our congregation we have over 25 cultures represented, many of whom are short term visitors to Australia. A significant number are baptized and discipled, but their return to their country of origin presents them with significant challenges. Through online social media, we can maintain contact, and to a degree continue discipling.

## 5. Using Facebook healthily

Facebook and other social networking sites look like they're here to stay. If we can't or don't want to hold them back, some of us have to find ways to be at the cutting edge of this change and to shape it in ways that reflect Kingdom values. Here are some thoughts on how to use Facebook well and avoid the possible dangers.

1. *Remember Facebook is not a substitute for community.* As I've already pointed out, Facebook can contribute to the building of community and may assist the maintenance of community that has already been established in another place, but by itself it can build connection but not community. We all need life-on-life relationships from which we cannot escape if things get tough. We need friends who can see us and care for us as we are. We need community not just connection.

Josh: I don't use it and interestingly the young guys here in the church don't use it either and have no desire to. We connect during the week by playing sport together or going fishing, etc. In saying that, my wife has found it useful from a ministry and personal perspective with ladies around her age, both within and outside the church.

2. *Make sure that Facebook remains a servant and doesn't become a master.* Facebook can move from being a great forum for connection to a dominating activity in our lives. How much is too much Facebook? It depends of course on your context and use of Facebook and the time that you have available, but if you find that sleep or work or friendships or family or relaxation or time with God are suffering, then it's probably becoming a master. Listen to what the people around you are saying.

Karen: These days I don't spend much time on it, maybe 10 minutes every 2 days. I can scan for what's happening and comment and message young people or friends. Any longer, and I feel like I'm losing time I'll never get back.

Andy: I would spend less than half an hour per day on Facebook. I continually ignore requests to have Facebook farms, cafes, etc. I know people who have all the apps and waste hours.

Merryl: You need to be able to set boundaries and control this medium. For example, I don't leave the chat option open at all times. It is something that I can use, but I choose to select when I do. I try to be aware of wasting time within this medium.

Jesse: I don't go online immediately before bed or immediately after waking up. I give myself space to focus on the moment and get in touch with God

3. *Facebooking must be grace-filled.* People can be especially harsh, egotistical, self-serving, and arrogant on-line. They justify it by saying they're just being honest, but in fact they're being proud, unloving, judgmental and just plain sinful. You can have a mighty fine argument, you can make some impressive statements, you can be incredibly right, but without love it's all just damaging hot air (1 Cor. 13:1-3). There certainly is a place to speak your mind and tell the truth, just make sure it's full of grace and motivated by love.

Merryl: Here are some biblical guidelines that I find helpful. 1. Are my comments and posts fitting and appropriate? (Eph. 4:29) 2. Are my comments and posts true and written in love? (Eph. 4:15, 25) 3. Are my posts and comments wise and non-inflammatory? (Matt. 10:16) 4. Are my comments really self-seeking? (Rom. 2:8) 5. Are my comments and posts praiseworthy? (Phil. 4:8)

Rachel: I think that our mantra at school is very helpful in checking my Facebook postings: "Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?"

4. *Be aware of the public nature of Facebook.* This is a big issue. Remember that whatever you put on Facebook will be read by a wide variety of "friends." It's like telling everyone at a party. Don't have your closest friends in mind when you post on Facebook, but write for the general public. You are not anonymous. Don't say things that you would not like your parents or children or workmates or church family to hear. If it helps, think "How would I feel if my pastor or my boss or God read this?" Nothing is absolutely secure on Facebook. You can have no secrets. Don't say things that you will later regret. Be very careful. I'm not saying don't be authentic. Just don't say the authentic things you would say to an intimate friend.

Jeff: I am not a user of Facebook and I have come to the conclusion I never will be. Among my responsibilities, I am chaplain to the local police. Their basic line to anyone using any social networking site is the following, "If you aren't prepared to show what you put on these sites to your worst enemy - THEN DON'T SAY IT!" When you sign up to Facebook you hand over all your rights to your Facebook information. Even in the most secure security setting (apparently) anyone can get in through the backdoor to your page and take what they want. You can never remove what you place on your page, no matter how much you think you can control it.

Bruce: My biggest concern with Christians using Facebook is that many of them, some pastors and missionaries included, often forget that on Facebook their audience is more than their Christian friends. It includes many non-church people. These Christians so often talk about Christian things in front of these non-Christians in a way that they would never do face to face and in a way that is in my opinion very unwise and unhelpful to the promotion of the gospel.

Karen: No one reads my page and then thinks they know all about me. We should all be selective about what we reveal about ourselves as appropriate to the context. More damage is done on Facebook through over exposure than lack of openness. For example, young people declare their loves, dates, and post photos of parties. All posts they may one day be embarrassed by.

Chris: I personally have some very strong reservations about the use of Facebook because of the huge security holes in the programme. Admittedly Facebook is trying to address the issue.

5. *Be careful about forming inappropriate relationships.* The intimacy of Facebook can provide a fertile ground for the development of relationships that are unhealthy and inappropriate. I realise that this can happen anywhere, but Facebook offers an easily accessible and somewhat private environment for people to get close, especially as many of the difficulties of real relationships can be avoided. Predators are a danger for younger people, but more prevalent is the problem of people connecting with friends and old flames when their marriages are not going well or they're feeling vulnerable. Be careful. Guard your heart. Choose your friends wisely.

Carl: I do have deep concerns about Facebook. So much so that when I was a chaplain in Timor I removed my own profile. I was on Facebook and did value the chance to catch up with some young people from when I was a high school chaplain. However, I was very troubled by the serious and sometimes fatal damage that was done to relationships when people revealed too much of themselves and/or entered into inappropriate relationships. This was true of both the serving personnel who were lonely and their partners back in Australia who were also lonely.

Mark: Some of the married couples in our church have joint Facebook accounts. This is a great protection against any building of inappropriate relationships. I think it's very wise.

6. *Be aware of and honest about your reasons for Facebooking.* Maybe you're looking for a close circle of friends that you can share with. Then be upfront about it and be selective in who you accept as friends. Maybe you're wanting to grow your influence with as many people as possible. Then certainly invite and accept lots of people, but don't try to treat them all as close friends. Maybe you just want to see what happening among your friends and family, but don't want to participate. Great. Don't feel pressured to do any more. Maybe you're mainly using Facebook to stay in touch with overseas missionaries. That's very useful. There are many different ways Facebook can be used. Remember that Facebook is a tool. You can control it. Don't let the Facebook system or the expectations of your fellow Facebookers control you. Know why you're doing it, be upfront about it where appropriate, and shape your time and approach accordingly.

Merryl: If your sole aim with your page is to grow your church or organisation then be honest about it. Don't present it as friendship when that is not really your motivation. I consistently encounter sites that are supposed to be for personal use but that are forever posting about their amazing church or pastor or ministry.

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