

**Reflections on
Wired For Ministry**

**Technology in Ministry
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Chapter three of John P. Jewell's book Wired for Ministry contains a list of four values that virtual community are lacking and Jewell states that the lack of these make "online communities fundamentally flawed in terms of delivering valid Christian community" (Jewell, 60). Further, he suggests that "virtual communities cannot provide or replace Christian community" (Jewell, 60). These values are the lack of accountability, the lack of truth, the absence of permanence and finally a lack of real presence.

There are two reasons I believe this section of Jewell's writing stood out to this reader. First as an avid user of technology and a Pastor, it is imperative that I utilize the skills God has blessed me with to encourage the building up of the Christian community. Next, as a Pastor to singles (college and career) many questions and comments come to me regarding online dating services and virtual communities that invite singles of all ages to be a part of. One of the most pressing questions I am asked is if church attendance is important for singles because there is a great appeal for singles to become part of online singles communities.

The concept of creating a virtual Christian community for singles does impact the ministry in which I work greatly. Singles are often more busy than their married counterparts. Many work multiple jobs in order to make house and car payments as they do not enjoy the opportunity of living in a two salary household of pooled resources. Many singles also fill any vacant time in their lives with volunteer work or in handling the excess demands of raising children in a single parent household. Single people desire to become vital parts of community life within a society that is extremely mobile and often does not treat them as whole people. As I read this section of Jewell's work, I pondered the needs of singles along with the appeal of virtual Christian community.

I found my thinking challenged and expanded through Jewell's discussion of the limitations and pitfalls of virtual community. In many ways his observations of the limitations of online community also seemed to match many of the pitfalls I have observed within singles ministries. First the lack of accountability; this allows people to check in and out at will and in many singles ministries there are those that seem to move from church to church and successfully avoid living in an environment that provides any accountability. I agree with Jewell that accountability is a feature within community that helps us to mature and also brings truth to the community.

Truth was Jewell's next pitfall and I also agree this is an area of community life that is vital for growth. How do we encourage those that feel shamed or inadequate to reveal themselves truthfully to the community of believers? True self disclosure can be difficult on the web or in other environments where we feel vulnerable or risk being shamed. It is, in my opinion, a natural reaction for each of us to want to look good in the eyes of others and to be esteemed in any community that we are a part of.

Virtual community does not have permanence; this is Jewell's third reason why online communities cannot replace Christian communities. For many college students and singles in the church this is not only the case in virtual community, but in the actual community as well. As I read Jewell's thoughts on this important part of community life, I reflected on the past nine months of my involvement with the singles ministry of my church. There have been several key people who have moved on and many more surprising newcomers have come on board. One of the pastoral tasks that takes a great deal of work is the important work of investing in the lives of the people around you so they do not simply slip away or fall through the cracks and disappear.

Jewell's final observation of the limitation of online community is that they do not have any "real presence." This was perhaps the most astounding concept that I found in this section of his book. I was reminded of my Pastor's encouragement each time we have communion in our church that it is a reminder for us of the presence of Jesus among us and in us. Jewell suggests we remember that God is with us in the community of the church. As I considered how vital it is for ministry to contain the aspect of presence in the lives of those that we serve, both personally and through the presence of others whose very bodies are vessels that contain the Holy Spirit, two scriptures came to my mind.

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Hebrews 10:24-25

This passage encourages us to continue to meet together as it is an avenue in which we can best share our love and good deeds with each other. Likewise the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:19-20 seem to affirm this view.


"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Matthew 18:19-20

One could debate whether these verses compel us to be physically together in the same location when we meet to encourage or agree. However it does seem clear to me that the desire of Christ to be present in the midst of these situations along with Jewell's previous three observations of areas in which virtual communities can be found lacking add considerable pressure to aid in value being given to seeing these scriptures as an encouragement to engage in

meetings that take place in real time and real close proximity and not simply to rely on virtual presence. If Jesus is to be with us I agree with Jewell that,

"Christian persons may use online connections to facilitate community, but that community cannot exist without the community or "real presence" where real people gather as the body of Christ" (Jewell, 61).

I could not find any areas that I disagreed with Jewell in his comments. The only observation I would make is in how the four points of concern which Jewell raises concerning the shortfalls of virtual community can be found in areas of our society and church as well.  While his given perspective in this book is to examine the impact of technology on ministry I found myself considering the shortfalls of real time ministry and the local church community as it exists outside of technology. I believe that the limits of virtual community should compel us to more readily examine how the church is reaching the needs of its congregants in real time.

To translate the concept that Jewell presents here into a practical ministry setting, there are four positive values I believe a virtual community must find as it connects to a local ministry. First the virtual community must be accountable. The pastor or overseer of this ministry must make sure the direction and communication found on and in the online community to be accurate in two specific ways. Through first representing the ministry to be in agreement with the mission of the local church and secondly by approving members of the community through some type of qualifying process that involves personal interaction.

The virtual community must also be truthful in representing the actual events of the community and its values. Well established boundaries must be utilized to enforce the truthfulness of the community. These boundaries need to be enforced through the active review and qualification of all material that is broadcast online. The virtual community must be reliable. While permanence is something not entirely attainable even in the real world, I believe that

consistency and reliability are important to any type of ministry endeavor. As a pastor I try to be disciplined each week in some specific ministry tasks in order to give parishioners a sense of reliability and comfort. While I will never meet all needs I do try to maintain a specific level of reliability and I believe an online community should reflect this motif.

Finally I agree with Jewell that an online community is not enough to meet our needs. Through the readings of this course I have spent a great deal of time considering the proper role and utilization of technology as it pertains to the context of ministry that I currently reside in. The use of technology as a communication tool can encourage people to come together in an accountable, honest, reliable and real community are worthy goals that are worth working toward and I am thankful for Jewell's encouragement for us to pursue this endeavor as we encourage God's people.

