

The social network

By [Dennis Sanders](#)

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Via [Scott McKnight](#), I came upon this blog post by [Richard Beck](#) about how Facebook is killing the church. Yes, you heard me: Facebook is killing the church.

The difference between Generations X and Y isn't in their views of the church. It's about those cellphones. It's about relationships and connectivity. Most Gen X'ers didn't have cell phones, text messaging or Facebook. These things were creeping in during their college years but the explosive onset of mobile devices and social computing had yet to truly take off.

So why has mobile social computing affected church attendance? Well, if church has always been kind of lame and irritating why did people go in the first place? Easy, social relationships. Church has always been about social affiliation. You met your friends, discussed your week, talked football, shared information about good schools, talked local politics, got the scoop, and made social plans ("Let's get together for dinner this week!"). Even if you hated church you could feel lonely without it. Particularly with the loss of "third places" in America.

But Millennials are in a different social situation. They don't need physical locations for social affiliation. They can make dinner plans via text, cell phone call or Facebook. In short, the thing that kept young people going to church, despite their irritations, has been effectively replaced. You don't need to go to church to stay connected or in touch. You have an iPhone.

Sure, Millennials will report that the "reason" they are leaving the church is due to its perceived hypocrisy or shallowness. My argument is that while this might be the proximate cause the more distal cause is social computing. Already connected Millennials have the luxury to kick the church to the curb. This is the position of strength that other

generations did not have. We fussed about the church but, at the end of the day, you went to stay connected. For us, church was Facebook!

I think this post exposes one of the weaknesses of the modern-day church, and reminds us what church is all about. Churches are of course made up of humans, so they are social communities, places where people connect with one another. Friendships are made at church. People find their future husband or wife at church.

The problem isn't that churches are social communities; the problem is when that's all they are. In the heyday of mainline churches, congregations could get away with being a religious Elks Club. But what happens when new communal spaces like Facebook come around? Well, people don't need to go to a church to meet other people when they can do that on Facebook or Twitter or someplace else.

Churches have to be places where we can connect with each other, but also remind us of the holy. They have to be places where we are formed into the likeness of Christ. Yes, they need to be places of social connection, but that can't be the main thing anymore. It never was supposed to be.

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