My Facebook friends: Connected but lonely

by L. Gregory Jones in the July 15, 2008 issue

With one child in college and two teenagers at home, I learned vicariously about "being friended" and "facebooking." My kids didn't want me to join Facebook, but relented when I told them that our seminary students were forming groups on Facebook and inviting me to participate. I entered a new universe.

Little did I know how often I would be friended, or how fun it would be to discover "friend requests" in my Status Update section. I'm still a novice, but I have 181 online friends. (Facebook has recently instituted a cap of 5,000 friends per account.)

Facebook keeps me in touch with people in interesting ways. I reconnect with high school friends; I have an easier time keeping up with birthdays; I receive updates about people I know. This morning, for example, I learned through Facebook that one of our graduates was ordained last night. I was able promptly to send her a message of congratulations.

Social networks like Facebook are significant and promising. It's a great gift to be able to communicate with people across great distances and through clever new ways of associating in groups. In our frenetic, work-obsessed culture, Facebook reminds us that social networks matter. A popular book for business leaders instructs them to *Never Eat Alone*, as social networks are one of the key secrets of success in business.

But Facebook friends and social networking are not adequate substitutes for authentic friendship. We long for relationships with people who know us so well that their lives impact and influence ours. Young people love the high-tech world of multitasking and interactive media, but like the rest of us, they long for personal intimacy. On our campus, we are converting spaces in dorms back to common rooms because of the increasing desire of undergraduates to gather together in small groups.

We may have multiple social networks and thousands of acquaintances and still find ourselves profoundly lonely. A sociological study found that between 1985 and 2004 the average American's number of close confidants declined from three to two, and that those reporting "no close confidants" jumped from 10 to 25 percent. Lynn Smith-Lovin, one of the study's authors, noted that "you usually don't expect major features of social life to change very much from year to year or even decade to decade." But the data suggest a "remarkable drop" in the number and quality of friendships in American culture. The findings also confirm and amplify my anecdotal sense that more and more "connected" people, from CEOs to talented youth and young adults, are struggling with loneliness.

Why does a lack of confidants matter? We are created for relationship, and we long for support and encouragement from those who know us well. We are not likely to turn to Facebook when a loved one is dying, for guidance in vocational discernment, or for the joys and warmth of physical embrace. Nor are we likely to search out a casual business colleague to explore a gut-wrenching personal decision. We want people who know us—our histories and dreams, our joys and griefs, our hopes and fears—to be our guides through uncertain and sometimes choppy waters.

Further, our confidants sometimes know us better than we know ourselves. They can and do check our propensity for self-deception. They challenge us, support us and encourage us to dream even when we have given up. Even when they call us to account, we are confident that they are doing so with our own best interests at heart.

The destructive consequences of loneliness will likely afflict that 25 percent of Americans who have no confidants. Loneliness becomes a spiral downward that diminishes a person's capacity to relate to others and to envision a hopeful future. Luther wrote that "a lonely [person] always deduces one thing from the other and thinks everything to the worst." The loneliest people I know are the most cynical, and it is often difficult to befriend them or even to be around them.

Duke's Pulpit & Pew project uncovered a significant amount of self-reported loneliness and isolation among American clergy. This parallels findings among other leadership groups, including CEOs of businesses. This loneliness ought to sound alarms among those institutions and people charged to support and encourage congregations and clergy. If there is any place in American culture that ought to encourage deep and lasting friendships, it's the church, and our pastors ought to be

catalysts who nurture others' friendships. Can churches be vehicles for both extending social networks *and* deepening friendships, for laity and clergy alike?

I will continue to enjoy my Facebook friends; at the same time, I will treasure those friends and confidants who sustain and nurture me. Most important, I'll pay renewed attention to the practices and time these deeper friendships deserve.