

Online ministries...

I have been asked to talk briefly on some of the things I am involved in online. Before I get started please let me say this:

- 1) I can't do brief.
- 2) I do not take credit for the stuff I do... it is a collaborative effort... I am but one part of a greater whole. I am blessed by people and in turn I hope to bless others... thats how this works.
- 3) The concept of "online" relates to activity that is enabled with an internet connection... as opposed to the physical world – this touchy feely interaction is "offline" - I don't need an internet connection to be able to give you a hug.

The internet has been around for a good while but a few years ago there was a shift in the way people used it... before it was all about publishing – information was published online... factual information, promotional detail, that kind of thing.

Then something happened... users were no longer happy just reading what people and corporations wanted them to read... they wanted access... they wanted to be able to create & publish on their own... and most importantly, they wished to share their content with others.

This create / publish / share idea is what some people refer to as "social media" or "web2.0".

Quick question: Who has a facebook account?

Facebook / Myspace / Bebo / Orkut are all examples of this move towards the creation, publishing and sharing of personal information. Not only do you create a profile and publish personal details about yourself... you share this with others.

Another question: Who here has referenced Wikipedia in the last month?

Wikipedia is a prime example of this – a group of people create encyclopaedia entries that others can then build upon... which we can all reference. Create... Publish... Share...

OK so what does this have to do with my "ministry"?

Matthew 5: 14-16 says this...

"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven."

What I have done and continue to do is to go and be public with a defining element of who I am. I am a follower of God in the Way of Jesus... because I firmly believe I have received God's grace & have been forgiven for all that I have done wrong and continue to do wrong.

I don't see this as my ministry but as part of who I am... this is my identity: I am out with this fact. I am openly a Christ-follower in all elements of my life and in all communities that I interact within.

Question: How do you define community?

You will probably define community either by where you are or what you do... this is no different online... except that the idea of physicality differs.

My online communities are Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr; as well as communities I have been party to creating like my own personal blog or the Podcast that I cohost. These are “places” albeit not in the traditional sense... I need to be in Facebook, for example, for me to contribute within it. They are also interest-based.

I strongly believe that God has given us all two gifts that are unique to ourselves...

- 1) He has given us a story. We are all on a spiritual journey. This journey is ours and ours alone. You may call this a testimony but that's just a fancy word for a story. What is important is that we are called to shine... we are called to be open about our story and our journey.
- 2) He has given us passions and interests. Some people are into banding... Some people like coffee... Some people like to knit... our passions and interests are as diverse as we are.

No one's story is more important than another's... just as no one's interest's are more important than another's. They are all God-given, in my humble opinion.

I believe the online world is fertile ground for these stories and these interests.

Now let me please focus on two areas that are important to me just now:

First off is Twitter... you may have heard something about Twitter in the news... and I will ask Olwyn, Dorothy & Andrew to keep me right here... but Twitter is an online service whereby you can let people know what you are doing at any given day or time... and have conversations with others on Twitter too.

For those of you on Facebook... its like updating your status... and for those of you not on Twitter... its like phoning up all your friends to tell them what you are up to... except this is one message not many.

To me Twitter is more than just “I'm having my breakfast” or “I'm at the Bellshill Salvation Army” because I can have conversations with others on Twitter... I can support, build up, encourage, inspire and correct others and, in doing so, be supported, get built up, encouraged, inspired & corrected.

Not only am I shining my light and going public with what I believe... I am using the tool daily to encourage others as inspired by Hebrews 3: 12 & 13

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

And Acts 2: 44 – 46...

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

Twitter enables me to connect, on a daily basis, with likeminded people from all over the world. I might not be physically present but I am present with them online.

So much so... a friend called Frank coined the phrase “Twurch” as in Twitter Church because we supported each other as a true, intentional faith community does... through prayer and in other more tangible ways too.

Twitter gives the opportunity for someone to say “hey, I am hurting... I need your help” and for others to hear this cry and respond accordingly. I find this fantastic. This “twurch” has helped a person get beyond marriage difficulties and has supported me, personally, when I was in hospital. It is amazing that I don't need to be face-to-face with someone and yet I can give and receive support that I might not have been able to give or receive.

The attacks in Mumbai... the plane going down in the Hudson river... these events are a couple of examples of news being announced on Twitter by ordinary folks well before the mainstream media gets hold of it. We are using this instantaneous nature to glorify God... and long may we continue to do so.

The other example of an online ministry is the podcast I co-host with a chap called Jonathan Blundell who lives near Dallas in Texas and a chap called Stewart Cutler who lives just over the road in Hamilton.

A podcast is a digital audio or video file that can be downloaded by a person with the correct equipment and listened to / watched at their leisure. Before only radio or TV stations and the like had the ability to create and publish content... now folks like you and me can... and do.

For me... the idea behind the podcast is simple and yet profound: get people to tell their story.

How did they come to know God..? What are they doing for Him now..? How have they experienced the love of God..?

Think Melissa and Xmas' testimony this morning... thats the kind of thing we look for. Its all about ordinary folk who have had an extraordinary experience of God and/or are doing extraordinary things for Him.

People like authors... Students studying to become Youth Workers... A Homelessness advocate who has now become homeless... People leading church plants and fresh expressions of church...

Hopefully you get the gist? I would love to get David Napier on there or Eva Burrows... folks like that. I would also love to get Isabel & Olwyn on the show but they have... so far... resisted! As I said ordinary folks who have extraordinary stories... who are doing extraordinary things for God. Ask Isabel or Olwyn sometime about what they do and they'll tell you about something beautiful.

And thats the name of the podcast – something beautiful. Its from a phrase Brian McLaren used about us all being part of the kingdom of God... that we are all agents of something beautiful... and when you consider what is spoken about on these weekly 1 hour audio files... it is such an apt name for what we do.

Thing is... you cant argue about a person's story. You can argue about their theology, their politics or their worldview... but you cant argue about their story. That's why our stories are the most

important thing we have to say... and this podcast enables some people to get their story out there.

We interview the folks via a “voice over IP” software solution called Skype... then 2 hosts discuss the interview and pull out the key points. This is then packaged up into an mp3 and uploaded for download from places such as iTunes or directly from the website.

The stories have been tremendously encouraging and inspirational... and we have built up a community of listeners who we interact with on things like... Twitter and Facebook. We average approximately 150 downloads per week... with a smaller nucleus engaging further with what has been discussed. This has been recognised by the Emergent Village which has led to them promoting us as part of their podcast network... which is a great honour.

So yeah... that's some of what I've been up to online.