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Urban Ministry and Social Media: Moving From Billboards to Cafés

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Troy Bush

abstract

A social revolution has occurred in the last ten years. Social media has forever changed the way we communicate and develop community. At the same time, the urban age has dawned, and the convergence of these two global events creates unprecedented opportunities for urban ministry. This article examines the rise of cell phone texting, Facebook, and Twitter, including city rankings based on the use of social media. It concludes with recommendations for ways urban churches, ministries, and missions can maximize their use of social media.

I was a slow adopter. Friends were joining and sending me requests to join this thing called Facebook. Frankly, I thought it was a bit silly and a waste of time.

On a whim after receiving another “invitation” to join, I logged on and signed up. Looking at the info section, I felt I was participating in one of those annoying party games where the host thinks it is enjoyable to have everyone share personal details of your life with complete strangers. Maybe it’s a matter of personality, but I would prefer to visit my dentist.

I chose to skip all the questions about favorite books and interests and opted not to post a profile picture or add albums of personal pictures. The non-descript question mark, now a gender specific silhouette, given to everyone as a profile picture until you upload your personal pose, was just fine for me.

Six months passed, and I had logged into Facebook maybe three times. I still saw little need for this Web site to steal precious minutes from my schedule. A few “friends” were sending me requests to confirm them as a friend, and I marveled at the personal detail they shared through their Facebook pages. If telling stories and events of the past in their profile were not enough, some felt the need to share daily details of life through status updates. It felt like reality TV had gone viral.

I remember the day everything changed. A friend chided me for not adding a profile picture and called into question my technological aptitude. For no other reason than to silence him, I added a profile picture, an album, and more information about my life—and everything changed.

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My journey into the world of social media had begun, and I had little idea where it would lead. Nor did I consider then the breadth of possibilities it could have for urban ministry. I remained a bit skeptical about how many people would use this new form of social interaction and once they started, how long it would be before they moved on, seeing it only as a short-lived experience—like a day in an amusement park.

Today I am a thoroughly convinced user and advocate of social media. A global revolution in communication has occurred, and to understand some of its benefits to urban ministry, we first need to look at cell phones and texting, Facebook, and Twitter.

texting

Cell phones are no longer primarily voice communication devices. Texting has become a significant means of communicating with a phone. Today, 66 percent of cell phone users send text messages with their phones, up 7 percent from 2009.ⁱ Even more telling is the percentage of people that are texting more than calling. In just one year, 2009–2010, the percentage of people texting more than calling jumped from 35 percent to 50 percent.ⁱⁱ This 15 percent increase represents an irreversible tsunami in the way people are communicating with one another and they way they are receiving information.

ⁱ Vlingo Corporation, *Texting While Driving in America: Vlingo's Third Annual Comprehensive Report, September 2010*, Vlingo Corporation, <http://www.vlingo.com/sites/default/files/TWDinAmerica.Vlingo.2010.pdf> [accessed December 15, 2010].

ⁱⁱ Vlingo.

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Usage by age confirms this trend. Among 13-to19-year-olds, the cell phone has become the primary technology for communicating. Teens perceive a cell phone as a marker of social status second only to their clothes. It is more important than jewelry and shoes.ⁱⁱⁱ Cell phone status, especially among teens, is a global characteristic. A couple of years ago I was interviewing two businessmen in Moscow, Russia, about social needs in the city. They both agreed economic times were tough, and people did not have enough money to buy food. I responded that their answer may be true, but I could hardly find a teenager in Moscow without the latest cell phone. They laughed and agreed, saying they could always find money to purchase them.

More than 80 percent of teens text more than talk with a cell phone, making texting the primary mode teens communicate with a cell phone. One-third of 13-to19-year-olds send more than 1,000 messages per month.^{iv} Texting has become such a vital communication channel that 47 percent of teens say that if texting were no longer offered, their social life would end.^v Interestingly, this perception differs among male and female teens with 54 percent female and 40 percent male sharing this perception.^{vi}

Adults may have been slower to get on the texting bandwagon, but getting on they are. For example, 25 percent of 50 to59-year-olds use their cell phones more for texting than for voice communication.^{vii} All age groups of adults are texting more, and the trend continues year after year. From 2009–2010 the number of adults in their 40s increased from 64 percent to 70 percent. Among people in their 50s usage increased from 55 percent to 64 percent.^{viii}

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facebook

Facebook is a social network launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, *Time* magazine's 2010 Person of the Year, and friends at Harvard University. Initially spreading to other Ivy League schools, it eventually expanded to include high school students and then to anyone over 13 years of age. It allows users to post status updates and create photo albums. It includes common interest groups and the ability to integrate a variety of games and third-party sites into a person's

ⁱ Harris Interactive, *A Generation Unplugged: A Research Report, September 12, 2008*, CTIA-The Wireless Association http://files.ctia.org/pdf/HI_TeenMobileStudy_ResearchReport.pdf [accessed December 15, 2010].

^{iv} Vlingo.

^v Harris Interactive. Financial concerns are not the driving force here either. Just ten percent of teens say they text in order to save money.

^{vi} Harris Interactive.

^{vii} Vlingo.

^{viii} Vlingo.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 12 profile. Facebook reports they have more than 500 million registered users. The average user has 134 “friends,” and 50 percent of active users log on to Facebook on any given day.^x

Growing at nearly 22 percent per year, it overtook Yahoo in February 2010 as the second most popular site in the US.^x Nonetheless, the number of users tells only part of the story. Facebook users spend 11.6 percent of their total online time on Facebook versus 4.25 percent on Yahoo and 4.1 percent on Google.^{xi} But there is more.

Facebook has overtaken Google in some areas as the primary source directing people to other Web sites. The trend indicates social networks like Facebook may be replacing search engines. The main reason, and one that is significant to urban ministry, is that people are now navigating to Web sites based more on their friends’ recommendations than their own searches on the Internet.^{xii} This developing phenomenon is called friendcasting, and in the future it will be more important to develop social-media optimization over search-engine optimization for church and ministry Web sites.

Users are able to update their status via their cell phones, and smart phone users can upload pictures and video. A number of third party applications integrate multiple social networks like Facebook and Twitter, so users have constant access to all their social networks via their smart phones. Laptops, desktops, and Internet service are no longer even needed in order to utilize these social networks.

twitter

Twitter is another giant in the social media world. Launched in 2006, it is a cross between instant messaging and microblogging. Limited to 140 characters, it allows users to post microblogs, known as tweets, which can be seen by the people that choose to follow the user.

^x Facebook, *Press Room*, Facebook, Inc., <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> [accessed December 15, 2010].

^x Compete Pulse, *Compete Ranking of Top 50 Web Sites for October 2010 Shows a Top-Five Showdown Is Coming*, Compete, Inc., <http://blog.compete.com/2010/12/06/compete-ranking-of-top-50-web-sites-for-october-2010-shows-a-top-five-showdown-is-coming/> [accessed December 15, 2010]; and Compete Pulse, *We’re Number Two! Facebook Moves up One Big Spot in the Charts*, Compete, Inc., <http://blog.compete.com/2010/02/17/we-re-number-two-facebook-moves-up-one-big-spot-in-the-charts/> [accessed December 15, 2010].

^{xi} Compete Pulse, *We’re Number Two!*

^{xii} Benny Evangelista, *Facebook Directs More Online Users Than Google*, San Francisco Chronicle, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/02/14/BUU51C0AMN.DTL> [accessed December 15, 2010].

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As of April 2010, Twitter has grown to more than 105 million users and

continues to add 300,000 new users a day. Users post more than 55 million tweets per day with 37 percent now being posted directly from cell phones. More than 180 million unique visitors go to the site each month.^{xiii}

From 2010's most influential Twitter celebrity Justin Bieber to your next door neighbor, there is something strangely personal about learning what they had for lunch or that they left the window down as they pulled into the automated car wash. Twitter has created social windows into our lives, and people are joining by the millions to share the experience.^{xiv}

Our use of Twitter, however, is evolving well beyond sharing personal details of our daily lives. Writing for *Time* magazine, Steven Johnson said, "But the key development with Twitter is how we've jury-rigged the system to do things that its creators never dreamed of. In short, the most fascinating thing about Twitter is not what it's doing to us. It's what we're doing to it."^{xv}

Twitter brings together three significant elements that create a potent cocktail for viral communication: social networks, live searching, and link-sharing. Users have adapted this social network to enable them to share instant information to a nearly universal audience through networks of friends. And they are doing so in real time.

By using a hashtag in front of a key word (e.g., #communitychange), Twitter users learned they could group all tweets about a given subject, following them and searching them in real time. Instant and viral communication occurred as people tweeted while attending conferences, church services, or community events. Secondary conversations began as people following the tweets began to interact with them and expand the conversation.

Users are also bypassing search engines by including links in their posts that point people directly to Web sites. The proprietary method Google uses to list sites that appear on your screen, while not obsolete, has encountered a stealthy competitor created by the users of Twitter. Even more threatening to Google is that this development includes the most coveted element of marketing—the endorsement of a friend.^{xvi}

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^{xiii} The Huffington Post, *Twitter User Statistics REVEALED*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc., http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/14/twitter-user-statistics-r_n_537992.html. [accessed December 15, 2010].

^{xiv} Elaine Wong, *The Year's Most Influential Twitter Celebrity: Justin Bieber*, *Forbes*, entry posted December 15, 2010, <http://blogs.forbes.com/elainewong/2010/12/15/the-years-most-influential-twitter-celebrity-justin-bieber/?boxes=Homepagecmnetwork> [accessed December 15, 2010].

^{xv} Steven Johnson, *How Twitter Will Change the Way We Live*, *Time*, Inc., <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1902604,00.html#ixzz17aH4QI5L>.

^{xvi} Steven Johnson.

Urban ministry can benefit from the marketing research of companies like Netprospex and TwitterGrabber.com. These companies provide an invaluable understanding of people using social media and even report urban specific information. Table 1 below reflects Netprospex's list of top cities based on social media use by professionals. They rate cities based on the number of employees with at least one social media profile in networks like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn; the average number of connections per employee across major social networks; and the average number of tweets, number of followers, and number of users following.

The West Coast cities of San Francisco and San Jose top the list making Silicon Valley king of the urban social media world. Adding Los Angeles at number nine on the list, California cities dominate the top ten cities. Only two East Coast cities, New York and Boston, make the top ten. New Yorkers, sometimes considered unfriendly, have almost twice as many friends across all social networks as people in Houston.

The list shuffles when we look at cities with the greatest total number of Twitter users. In Table 2, London tops the list with Los Angeles, Chicago, New

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Table 1

Top cities based on social media usage
by business professionals^{xvii}

-
- 1 San Francisco, CA
 - 2 San Jose, CA
 - 3 New York, NY
 - 4 Austin, TX
 - 5 Boston, MA
 - 6 Seattle, WA
 - 7 Denver, CO
 - 8 Salt Lake City, UT
 - 9 Los Angeles, CA
 - 10 Atlanta, GA
-

Table 2

Top cities based on total Twitter users^{xviii}

-
- 1 London
 - 2 Los Angeles
 - 3 Chicago
 - 4 New York
 - 5 Atlanta
 - 6 Toronto
 - 7 San Francisco
 - 8 Boston
 - 9 Seattle
 - 10 Sydney
-

York, and Atlanta taking the top five spots. Three cities outside the US (London, Toronto, and Sydney) earned spots in the top ten. As in Table 1, Atlanta was the only city in the southeast US to earn a spot in the top ten coming in at number five.

^{xvii} NetProspex, *Social Business Report: A comprehensive look at the use of social media by business people across the US*, NetProspex, Inc., https://www.netprospex.com/np/system/files/NetProspex_Social_Report_Fall2010.pdf [accessed December 15, 2010].

^{xviii} TwitterGraber, *Top Twitter Cities*, Grader.com, <http://twittergrader.com/top/cities> [accessed December 15, 2010].

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 For sure, these lists make for good trivia, but what of their usefulness to urban

ministry? First, they reveal to those working in the respective cities the need to utilize social media, even if their city is not in the top ten. Second, they provide quantitative data that church and ministry leaders can share with their colleagues. Many ministry leaders remain skeptical about the value of social networks, and not a few see them as a waste of time. Quantifying an urban population's use of social media can help skeptical leaders recognize the strategic opportunity social media provides them. Third, urban strategists can make informed decisions about how to use social media and which cities they should prioritize.

In my own ministry in the Atlanta Metro these studies helped our staff team see that Atlanta is highly engaged in social media. The data challenged us to increase our use of social media for evangelism and discipleship and to include social media in our strategic plans. It also helped us discover more effective ways to utilize our Web site. Considering 39 percent of churches are not using any type of social media and only 30 percent of those that do are using Twitter, many more churches should discover their city's social media ranking.^{xix}

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^{xix} Buzzplant Pulse, *How Churches and Their Members Use Social Media*, (Franklin, TN: Buzzplant, July 2010), 6.

SOCIAL PROFESSIONALS

TOP 50 US CITIES ON THE NETPROSPEX SOCIAL INDEX (NPSI)

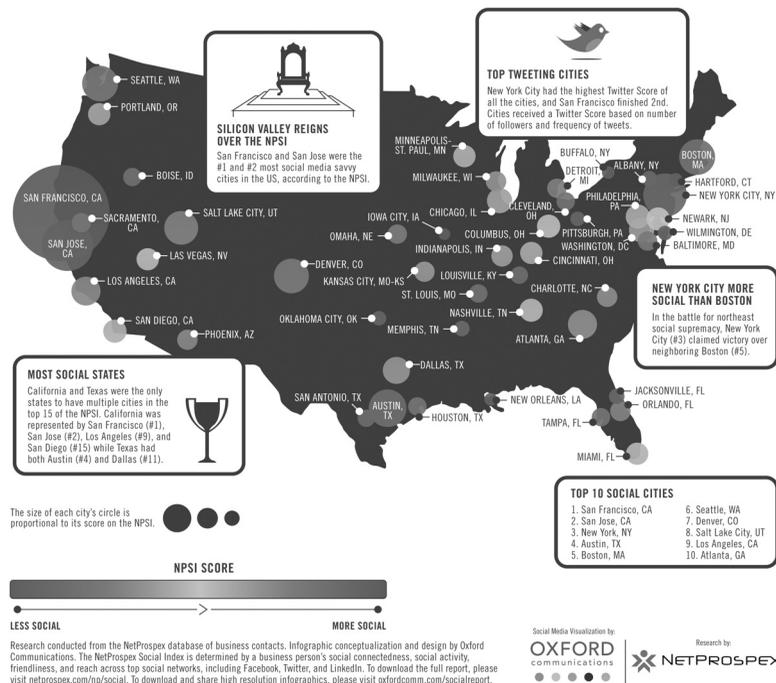


Figure 1

Cities are the perfect environment for integrating social media and ministry. Large populations, a near universal use of cell phones, and the vast use of social media create a rich environment for new ways of connecting and communicating with people. As social media evolves, ministries are finding increasingly creative ways to use it. The following paragraphs describe a few ways social media can be used for urban ministry.

announcements

Financial resources are always thin in urban ministry; yet the need to communicate to the church and the community is constant. For every dollar saved on printing and signage, more people can be fed and more evangelistic efforts can be initiated. Social media is largely free, and it can be effective if used thoughtfully.

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Postings on Facebook and tweets in Twitter are just the beginning. Posting a reminder about the time change for a service or a ministry team meeting are among the simplest uses. Tweeting emergency updates such as weather announcements provide instantaneous communication.

Strategic communication seeks to link email, texting, Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and Web sites. For example, create a texting database in your church, and send messages about upcoming events that point to your Facebook page and Web site. Post Twitter updates with links to videos on your church's website, and provide opportunities for people to register and provide their email addresses. Follow up with emails that point to content on your Facebook page. Include in all email newsletters links to your ministry's Twitter and Facebook pages. Encourage attendees to re-tweet your tweets and to like and comment on your Facebook updates, pictures, and videos.

These integrated links weave viewers into your various social media, and with each touch they experience various aspects of your church and ministry. You can repeat critical announcements and updates in a variety of ways. It also allows guests to window shop your ministry and explore at their own pace even before they visit your worship services.

personalize the pastor(s)

Especially in large churches people find it difficult to connect personally with the pastor(s). Social media allows the pastor to open up his life to his congregation. In city ministries it is critical that people develop trust with their pastor and be able to

Bush: Urban Ministry and Social Media: Moving From Billboards to Cafés follow his example for living and ministering in the city. Twitter and Facebook provide a vehicle for people to connect in a personal way as if they were personally spending time with their pastor.

Matt Chandler, pastor of Village Church in the Dallas Metro, allowed his followers to walk with him through his battle with cancer. When some might have gone silent, Matt used social media as a window into his life during these difficult days, tweeting regularly about his thoughts and experiences. People felt a personal connection with him as he was diagnosed, went through surgery, and lived through weeks of chemotherapy treatments. Other pastors are learning that a few comments throughout the day about their activities and personal lives give people the opportunity to pray for them as well as get to know them at a more personal level.

discipleship

Utilizing social media for discipleship may be one of the more under utilized applications of this resource. On Facebook, churches can post devotions or mini-Bible studies on subjects common to life in the city. They can text or tweet a daily verse or a personal word of encouragement from the pastor. Emails and Facebook postings can include links to blogs that provide additional sermon applications. You can Tweet links to your Web site where you provide online Bible study resources and exclusive podcasts. During periods of churchwide fasting you can tweet messages encouraging people to be faithful and to complete the period of the fast.

Life in the city provides dozens of “down moments.” Time spent riding a bus or waiting for a subway train provides brief periods when you can connect with people through social media to help them grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. From tweets to bite-sized postings on Facebook, you can build a place where people “self-feed” during these free minutes. Including links in tweets to podcasts, sermons, Bible study resources, and reminders that encourage people to practice spiritual disciplines expand the ways social media can reinforce your discipleship ministry.

Missions training is also possible through social media. During the month of Ramadan, you can provide daily tweets explaining basic Islamic beliefs and practices. You can post to Facebook pictures of Islamic people groups in your city providing people an online prayer album. You can tweet about blog postings where you share ways Christians can serve their Muslim neighbors in the city and ways to have gospel-centered conversations with them.

Social media provides a broad range of benefits to social ministry in the city. Project Masiluleke in Africa has shown remarkable results in the battle against HIV/AIDS. By sending text messages to 1 million people daily to connect with HIV call centers, there has been a threefold increase in call volume. A second phase of the project provides low-cost self-testing with access to counselors. A third phase uses text messages as medication reminders to those taking anti-retrovirals.^{xx}

Project Masiluleke alludes to a host of possible uses of social media. From text messages to patients of a free clinic in the city reminding them to take their medicine to tweets and Facebook postings aimed at helping families save money in their grocery budget while eating more healthily, social media can be an integral part of community ministry in the city. An ESL course can send tweets for their students to remind them of words and phrases from the last lesson. Alerts can be sent on behalf of a family whose only car broke down, asking for help so the husband will be able to go to work the following day. Tweets announcing the start of a ministry for adults recently divorced can include a link to your Web site where church members and non-members can register and learn that you also provide a special class for their children who are living through the affects of the divorce.

Addressing HIV/AIDS in the Latino community can be challenging. Through texting campaigns and social media, you can increase awareness and make testing clinics available. Through brief testimonies from men, you can use social media to encourage Latino men who are at risk to get tested.

create conversations around services and events

Twitter users have created a multi-level communication platform that has unique possibilities in urban ministry. Recently, I attended a gathering of urban leaders in New York City where one of the screens in the auditorium displayed tweets in real time that carried the designated hashtag word for the gathering.

Candidly, you have to have attention deficit disorder to enjoy the full effect of this experience. While the plenary speakers were talking, people in the audience were tweeting thoughts, questions, challenges, and recommendations. It felt like the monologues had erupted into a fountain of conversations. People not in the audience moved the conversation to another level as they tweeted responses to the tweets about the gathering.

^{xx} PopTech, *Project Masiluleke: A Breakthrough Initiative to Combat HIV/AIDS Utilizing Mobile Technology & HIV Self-Testing in South Africa*, PopTech, Inc., http://www.poptech.org/system/uploaded_files/27/original/Project_Masiluleke_Brief.pdf [accessed December 15, 2010].

Bush: Urban Ministry and Social Media: Moving From Billboards to Cafés Churches from Seattle to Miami are experimenting with this form of

interaction. At the same time, it is not the only way to use social media to leak out the message and experiences of your events and worship services. Simply encouraging your church members to post and tweet comments and quotes from the worship services are effective means of moving the Gospel from inside the walls of your church out into the community.

prayer

Social media provides a great platform for urban prayer ministries. You can create a Facebook group focused on a citywide prayer emphasis. This group will serve as a hub of prayer updates and announcements. It will also allow people to interact with one another, share Scriptures, and even pray with one another as they post prayers. Twitter can provide daily or hourly prayer reminders and include links to prayer guides and other resources such as podcasts on praying for your city.

You can also establish an ongoing Facebook prayer group for your city. This group would provide general information about the city including the names of city leaders, church leaders, and churches for whom people could pray. Updates could include information about legislative action or city events and calls to pray about these matters. Matters of social injustice could be communicated so people could pray against them, even leading to action to stop them. Evangelistic efforts and church planting efforts could be highlighted, calling on followers to pray for them and to support them. This group would be a connecting point for people who are burdened to pray continually for their city, and for people looking for prayer information about their city to use personally, in small groups, and in church services.

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Another use of social media is to communicate urgent prayer requests. For example, a church or the pastor can tweet a prayer request for a family whose youngest son was just injured in a car wreck. Followers can pray and expand the circle of prayers quickly by re-tweeting the prayer requests. It is the old prayer chain exponentially expanded.

community and small groups

Developing community is critical in urban ministry, so it is no surprise city churches and ministries are finding creative ways to use sites like Twitter and Facebook to their advantage. Each of your small groups can create its own group on Facebook and follow other members on Twitter. Utilizing both enables people to get to know each other and to share their lives with one another in a way busy urban life usually prohibits. Dedicated Facebook groups allow small groups to

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develop something of a virtual café for their members where they can collect
memories through photo albums, videos, and postings of mini-stories.

Announcements can be made and information can be shared. Real community can
develop as individuals entangle their lives and communicate with each other.

gospel stories

It is easy to forget we are talking about SOCIAL media. The virtual environment is
not the driving force in this new form of community. People are central. Their lives
and stories, even if told in 140 characters at time, are the fuel behind the explosive
growth of this medium. Above all uses in urban ministry, the telling of gospel-
centered stories is the most significant use of social media for urban evangelism
and missions. Just as we would equip believers to share their stories at work or in a
café, we should train them how to share through Facebook and Twitter their
stories of God's providence and grace.

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I have observed my teenage children share tweets and status updates about
their spiritual walk, growth, battles, and convictions. On more than a few
occasions their non-Christian friends have commented on their posts. These
authentic moments of communication between friends about spiritual matters via
social media demonstrate the personal and social nature of these sites.

Just as their friends are watching them at school, they are watching them in
these virtual communities. The work of the Holy Spirit becomes most evident
when one of them sends a private message through Facebook or a text message
asking a probing question or requesting prayer for a personal need.

Additionally, my children's stories have been an encouragement to other
believers. Even adult believers with whom they are friends have posted comments
as they follow their Facebook updates. Urban Christians face many challenges and
frequently feel they are alone in these battles. Being able to see the stories of other
believers having similar experiences encourages them to remain faithful.

conclusion

In less than ten years the way people are connecting with one another has changed
dramatically. This meteoric rise of social media confirms only that more changes
will follow. Even the creators of media such as Twitter could not predict how the
public would use their site, nor can they be certain if or when they will move on to
whatever comes next.

What is certain is that ministry in the urban context has an entirely new way to
connect with people and to build community among them. Like any resource,

Bush: Urban Ministry and Social Media: Moving From Billboards to Cafés though, it has its limitations, and one of the greatest of this resource is that it is not automated. Social media still requires people to thoughtfully use it, and too many churches are slow to realize the full potential of social media.

Mickey Mellen, writing for the blog *Church Marketing Sucks*, recently conducted a test where he tweeted a question directly to twenty-five churches that had Twitter accounts publicized on their church Web sites. Only three churches responded, leading him to question if the others were even “listening.” It seems most churches still view sites like Facebook and Twitter as social MEDIA.^{xxi}

Social media is about relationships and two-way communication. Unlike the traditional church Web site that is largely an electronic billboard, social media is like a café or a town square. Not everyone talks all the time, but it is a place where people can watch, listen, learn, and join in the conversation when they are ready. When they do engage, someone needs to be on the other end—listening and ready to respond. It is in this response that these sites move from billboards to community cafés, and the power and usefulness of social media comes alive for urban ministry.

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^{xxi} Mickey Mellen, *Churches Aren't Paying Attention on Twitter*, Church Marketing Sucks, entry posted December 8, 2010, <http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/2010/12/churches-arent-paying-attention-on-twitter/> [accessed December 15, 2010].