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## Where two or more are gathered ...on Facebook

*Much to her surprise, Cathleen Falsani finds community -- real, authentic, deeply connected, deeply faithful community -- online.*

by [Cathleen Falsani](#)

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“There is no distance in the Spirit.” After nearly 30 years as a believer, I experienced, powerfully and indelibly, the truth of that statement in an unlikely place: Facebook.

Like so many of its 350 million (and growing) members, I signed up for Facebook, the social networking site, a few years ago out of pure curiosity -- to check in with old friends, boyfriends and former colleagues from a safe distance. With its plethora of personal photos, videos and regular “status updates” from members, it was a voyeuristic paradise, not to mention an excellent place to kill time.

I am a journalist, author and blogger and had grown accustomed to sharing glimpses of my life in print and online. Facebook was just another venue to do that, but little more.

That is, until early one morning in April 2008 when I signed on to my account, wiping sleep from my eyes with coffee in hand, and noticed the status update of a friend from college: “David is really sad that Mark died today.”

The words ripped a hole in my heart. Our friend, Mark Metherell, a former U.S. Navy Seal who was working in Iraq training Iraqi Special Forces, was gone. He had been killed instantly by a roadside bomb outside Sadr City.

Sitting in bed with my computer on my lap, tears streaming down my face, I sent David an email asking what had happened and how I could help, joining him in prayer for Mark’s family and the rest of us who loved him (even if we hadn’t seen him in more than 15 years).

In about 48 hours, as news of Mark’s death began to spread, dozens of fellow classmates from our alma mater, Wheaton College, joined Facebook to share stories and pictures of Mark. Facebook became the

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place where we could mourn together and reconnect.

A couple of weeks after Mark was killed, I sent a group email on Facebook asking for responses to a column I was working on. That email started a “thread” -- a discussion among a group of people. There were 20 of us from all over the world -- Southern California, Chicago, Hawaii, Spain, New York, Atlanta, Florida, North Carolina and Dubai.

More than 18 months -- and almost 20,000 posts -- later, the thread is still going. We call ourselves “Wine & Jesus: The Communion of Sinnerly Saints,” and our cyber-community is, in a very real way, church for us. Our conversations were mostly about Mark at first, and about faith, loss, God’s will and grieving. But they soon turned to the rest of our lives, the mundane and the transcendent.

We brought each other up to speed on what had transpired in the years since we were students at Wheaton. Collectively we are husbands and wives, brothers and sisters (in law and biologically), Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, conservative and liberal, Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Green Party, vegetarian, entrepreneurs, musicians, stay-at-home moms, married, divorced, widowed, mothers and fathers, adopted and adopters, seminary graduates, pastors, chaplains, writers, filmmakers, artists, lawyers, church members and church-averse and believers all. Some of us were close friends in college, some were acquaintances and some had never met. But we are now, I would dare say, utterly and wholly committed to one another. As Bono said in U2’s theological opus, “One,” we are one but we’re not the same; we get to carry each other ...

A few of us have even begun to rediscover (or exhume) our faith. If you had told me even two years ago that I would find community -- real, authentic, deeply connected, deeply faithful community -- online, I would have scoffed. I’m not, by nature, a joiner. Had someone created and invited me to join a group of Wheaton alumni online to talk about faith and life, I would have declined. But this happened organically. And here we are, a year and a half of daily interaction later, with a communion of 20 souls around the world. In the last year, we’ve walked with each other through sickness and pregnancies, the death of parents and siblings, job losses and career changes, adoption, divorce and even a marriage between two friends who met through the thread.

A few months back, we had a conversation about how hard it has been for some of us to reach out, ask for help and be willing to receive it. “Being merciful to ourselves,” is how Shani, the hospital chaplain, put it. In response, Brian, a filmmaker who was in the midst of relocating across the country with his wife, Sara, and their newborn and toddler, wrote: “Sara and I quote Henri Nouwen frequently of late: ‘The weakest among us create community.’ Somehow, I feel I’m on the receiving end in this thread considerably more often than I am giving out. So thanks to all.”

For me, the thread has become what the sociologist Ray Oldenburg, in his book “The Great Good Place,” described as a “third place.” Most people have two primary places -- home and the workplace. Then there is a third place where they feel part of a chosen community. It might be a bar (illustrated beautifully in the television series “Cheers”) or a restaurant, a house of worship or a bowling alley.

For me, Facebook is that place. One of the persistent criticisms of Facebook and other online social networks is that they provide a false sense of intimacy and community -- all of the interaction with none of the commitment. While that may be the case with some folks, nothing could be farther from my experience.

Rather than satisfying our need for connection and leaving it there, our Facebook community has made us yearn to be in one another’s physical company. About five months after the thread began, eight of us got together in Chicago for a long dinner. Some of us hadn’t seen each other in almost 20 years, while others were practically next-door neighbors. We were nervous about meeting, wondering whether the connection we experienced online would translate into the “real” world. It took about a minute to realize that it did. Beautifully. When we sat down to dinner, we stopped to pray together. We knew that our friends on the thread who could not be with us in person were with us in spirit, praying with us, sharing in the love and transformative power of sacred friendship (and awaiting updates about the dinner on Facebook).

In July, my family moved from Chicago to Laguna Beach, Calif., so that we could live near several of the members of the thread. David now lives about four minutes from me, and I see him and his family almost daily -- we even worship together at the same physical church -- but we still connect each day on the thread.

The constraints of Facebook limit the membership of any thread to 20. But I think I speak for all of our members when I say there is a 21st member: the Spirit of God. Jesus said whenever two or more are gathered together in his name, he's there, too. And he is, in all of his glory and grace, right there with us. On Facebook.