

The MySpace Cry

What does the fact that so many kids share intimacies online say about the church?

Jesus once asked His disciples: “‘Are you listening to Me? Really listening?’” (Matt. 11:15, The Message). Thousands of teens in our society are asking the same thing, as evidenced by the comments they generate on Web sites such as MySpace, a site designed to help them connect electronically with other young people. Many of their comments are graphic statements about the issues they confront every day: emotional conflicts, relationship dramas, family strife, sexuality, insecurities, purpose.

Take the MySpace weblog of Ariel (not her real name), a girl I’ve known for nine years. We no longer attend the same church, but we’ve stayed connected through the Internet—and I know more about her now than I did when I was her youth pastor.

Why? Because in the two years since we had regular contact, she’s amplified her voice online. Subjects that used to stay hidden she now freely discusses on her personal MySpace Web site.

A more high-profile case is that of 18-year-old James Dungy, the son of Indianapolis Colts head coach Tony Dungy. In December 2005, James’ girlfriend found him dead in his college apartment.

For weeks the public wondered how such an apparently well-adjusted boy from a great family could commit suicide. Then an investigative journalist found his MySpace account, which

contained troubling clues.

Ariel and James are not exceptional. According to BusinessWeek, Wired, Time and other periodicals, 87 percent of young people ages 12 to 17 use the Internet.

On average, teens spend 72 hours a week consuming digital media by watching TV, listening to music, playing video games and socializing online. For nearly two of those hours, they ingest multiple media streams simultaneously, iPods blaring in their ears as they surf the Web and plan dates via text messaging.

And increasingly they communicate on personal Web sites hosted by online social networks such as MySpace, Facebook and Xanga. For 1-1/2 hours a day, teens make use of free Web space on these sites to meet friends, watch music videos, gossip, post photos and share intimate details about their lives.

Some sites generate so much traffic they become part of our vernacular. "Google," for example, is now a verb synonymous with online searching. Imagine the influence of MySpace, the leading social network site, which has 2-1/2 times more traffic than Google!

Founded by a 20-something college student and sold in July 2005 to publishing giant Rupert Murdoch for \$580 million, MySpace is nothing short of a pop-culture phenomenon. Membership had quadrupled to 40 million by December 2005 and had skyrocketed to more than 150 million a year later.

BusinessWeek called the millions with MySpace accounts the "MySpace Generation." But even as MySpace membership continues

to swell, teens are migrating to sites like Stickam and DailyMotion, which the New York Times has called “Web sites without rules.”

What does the fact that so many kids feel the need to share intimacies online rather than with a trusted confidante, such as a youth pastor, parent or close family friend, say about the church? How can we engage this growing, global population?

Perhaps what we must do first is try to understand them by inhabiting their space and truly listening to them. Then we can move on to praying for them, forgiving them, restoring them, guiding them and loving them.

John tells us in his gospel that almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, “became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood”—our space—in order to engage us (John 1:14). He was neither shocked by our sin nor offended by our lifestyle. Now He invites us to love the MySpace community, reminding us that whatever we do for one of the least of His brothers, we do for Him (see Matt. 25:40).

Like Ariel and James, millions of Jesus’ little brothers and sisters have carved their space on MySpace and beg those of us with ears to hear them. They ask: “Are you listening to me? Really listening?”

They are on their Big Brother’s mind. He’s listening. He cares. Do you?

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community development. Visit him online at .