

Friday Night Theology, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2009

## Friends

*"I'll be there for you, when the rain starts to pour,"* sang the Rembrandts in what became the theme tune to *Friends* – but not, it might seem, if you live in London and you're under 25. Today, [Circle Anglia](#) released a poll of 2,000 people which revealed that a third of 18-24 year olds do not even know the names of their immediate neighbours. This contrasted significantly with the over 65s where more than 90% knew their neighbour's names.

Similarly, 82% of over 65s regularly talk to people in their street compared to just 44% of those 18-24, and so not surprisingly 91% of over 65s would trust a neighbour to accept a delivery for them. The figure for under 25s was much lower at 62%. And for all these results, London was shown to be the least friendly region with the North West and South East the most, all of which suggests that social isolation among the urban young may be a serious problem...

Or is it? Because no doubt many of those young people would accept that they don't particularly know their neighbours. Instead, they would argue that's because their friendship groups are accessed online in networks rather than geographically in neighbourhoods. They may not know their neighbour's names, but they do know loads of folk on Facebook.

Of course, this change in social networking from local communities to virtual ones can hardly be denied, but the question that remains concerns the nature, depth and quality of those online relationships. A [2006 US study](#) found that the average number of people with whom individuals "can discuss important matters" was only 2. In addition, a quarter of people had no friends defined in that way, which was double the rate of twenty years previously. It may well be the case that we have plenty of Facebook friends, but can we actually draw on them when, in the words of the Rembrandts, *the rain starts to pour?*

All of which is perhaps partly behind the rising tide of both depression and suicide, particularly among young men. The fact is we don't just need icons on a computer screen, but flesh and blood individuals with whom we can talk, share, laugh and cry if we're going to live lives that are healthy. Now, of course, such friends don't have to be our neighbours. There are many real, but non-local, ways of forming friendship groups such as via work, clubs, interests etc. But one of those that is both local and real is the church.

Sometimes these days, church gets a bad press – especially among the young. In the words of one Christian youth leader, "Kids can do Jesus, but they just can't do church." But the thing about church – despite all its inevitable failings and weaknesses – is that it is full of people. Actual people. Some of those people you'll like. Some of them will be incredibly difficult. But it is community. And the thing about community is that the more we invest in it, the more it invests in us. So here's my suggestion this week: if you don't yet know your neighbours, go knock on their door and just say 'hi'. And if you don't do church that much, why not give it a go? For, as far as I can see, the alternative of being alone is so much worse.

*Justin Thacker, Head of Theology*