**Blog: The Rise of Robot Coffee**

**By Eddie Pipkin**

Facebook live streaming

<https://live.fb.com/>

Slate on the rise of robot coffee:

<http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2013/10/briggo_coffee_robot_should_starbucks_replace_baristas_with_machines.html>

Why people love Starbucks

<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/6-reasons-why-we-love-starbucks>

Drive through ashes story at USA Today

<https://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/nation/2015/02/18/23614337/>

emc3coaching link

[www.emc3coaching.com](http://www.emc3coaching.com)

Technology is changing the world in which we live. This process is happening so fast that it’s hard to keep up. One of the great debates in ministry circles as how to leverage technology to enhance ministry connections without trivializing the work that we do. There is no official manual for how to do this well, and denominations and local churches are figuring it out as they go. One example is the prevalence of streaming worship services, which has become increasingly manageable from a technical perspective (particularly in recent months with the advent of **Facebook live streaming** and other services).

But technology – wonderful as it is in giving us tools to connect and explore our creativity – can never replace the core identity of who we are and the work we are called to do.

I was thinking of that last week when I came across an article about the advent of robot baristas. Robots have been infiltrating every corner of our lives, and automation has increasingly been a part of the landscape (some of you probably already have a Roomba, and we all know driverless cars are just around the bend). Automated coffee has been around for as long as those rest stop vending machines have existed. But those infamous machines make some pretty terrible coffee. The **newest robot coffee** **machine** produces exquisitely brewed cups of custom coffee – arguably better coffee than what can be made by a flawed human being.

Robot baristas will be cheaper in the long run, more consistent in performance, less trouble to manage, and less likely to spell your name wrong on the cup. On the other hand, Starbucks did not build an empire on selling $5.00 cups of coffee on the sole premise of the excellent taste of the coffee. The additional element that really skyrocketed them to success was the way they built a culture and community that people craved. **People who love Starbucks** (you know who you are) love the vibe of the place. They love the setting and the sense of community; and they love their baristas. They love the interaction with human beings that no robot will be able to replicate in the foreseeable future.

This is the elemental human connection that will set the local church congregation apart as still relevant and essential in the coming decades. Technology simply can’t replace the human community that is the core of the local church. As disciples who encourage one another, lift one another up, hold one another accountable, do meaningful work together for the Kingdom of God, celebrate together, and support one another in times of need, we live out the highest ideals of following Christ. Technology can’t replace – and never will replace – these connections. Yes, we can give people ways to stay connected even when they are not physically proximate (email prayer chains and devotions, streaming worship) and ways to stay involved remotely (online giving, text alerts for service opportunities), but none of these cool new options will replace the impact of gathering together in the flesh with fellow disciples.

In fact, this sense of community and connectedness is more valuable than ever. People are finding that technology too often produces a sense of faux community that leaves them disappointed and unfulfilled. You may have 350 Facebook friends, but just how intimate are those connections when it really counts? People are finding that conversations stay at the surface level, rarely engaging in deep or meaningful ways.

So, if a strong sense of authentic community is our calling card in a world in which people have unlimited options, how do we nurture that authenticity? Guard against from these pitfalls:

* **A false sense of connectedness produced by technology itself**. Because individual ministries may be posting updates to social media, email, or websites frequently, we tend to assume that means that people are connected, but just because the information is out there (no matter how frequently, no matter how creatively), this doesn’t mean people are engaging with it. One of the useful aspects of social media is that it’s relatively easy to generate data to measure engagement with precision. Use it. Don’t confuse a lot of comments by a small group of users as mass participation (people who engage your social media with comments tend to really get into it.) These posts and comments are NOT substitutes for actual conversation.
* **On the other hand, you can’t assume that everyone who is physically present is connected.** Just because somebody is in the room (particularly for worship, but even for smaller gatherings like studies or small groups) does not necessarily mean they are forming strong connections with the greater community. If you have vibrant circles of connectedness within your congregation, their very enthusiasm and natural gravitational pull to one another can be intimidating to newcomers (especially the wallflowers).
* **Winging it instead of building useful accountability structures.** Even if you see a lot of energy in the room (for instance, during worship), doesn’t mean that things are happening that build lasting connections – it can be the live action version of the issue mentioned earlier in which all the interaction remains on the surface. “Hi, hi, good morning” etc. Just because there are opportunities to participate, interact, or connect, we assume people are utilizing them. Churches which succeed in developing congregations filled with healthy disciples always work from strong accountability systems that use a structured approach to keeping people connected and giving them the tools to grow.
* **Thinking a culture of connectedness builds itself.** Many ministry leaders are natural extroverts who love striking up a conversation, hearing people’s stories, and encouraging people to get involved. This, however, is not natural behavior. We can’t assume that people in our congregation know how to make these kinds of connections or expand their circles to bring in others or even understand that this is part of their responsibility as disciples. It’s important to demonstrate how this is done. Even if people intellectually know how to initiate this kind of interaction, having the vision for this culture regularly communicated and demonstrated will give people positive encouragement and generate excitement.

With those warnings in mind, as you set out to be intentional about a healthy culture of connectedness, leveraging technology can produce great results that empower your vision (and can be a lot of fun in the process). For instance, it’s become a trend in recent years to set up a “Drive Through Ashes” ministry for Ash Wednesday. People are busy; people still love the symbolism of the imposition of ashes; why not give them an opportunity to engage their spiritual need in a way that connects with their lifestyle?

Pastor Don Lincoln of Westminster Presbyterian Church says, “We recognize that we have an opportunity to be in ministry to this community, and we’re on a main drag in Chester County, where people know us and see us, and it seemed like a great opportunity to invite people to share their Lenten journey with us, particularly people who are busy and traveling to work and wouldn’t have time to stop in for a full service.” [**Check out the video story at *USA Today*** – they are holding up a sign that says “Ashes and Free Coffee,” which is pretty funny if you think about it.]

It’s a great example of adapting to societal changes AND maintaining that personal touch (while spreading the word via technology). There may eventually be an option for a robot that dispenses ashes or attends a hospice bedside or serves Holy Communion, but that will miss the whole point, won’t it?

What have your experiences been in guiding your ministries through the options of using (or intentionally not using) technology? Share your stories. At **emc3coaching.com** you can find out more about resources like our *Connect!* Material, which is all about Incarnational Hospitality, the face-to-face sharing of God’s grace that is the foundation of connected communities.