How Do You Find Real-Life Theological Conversation Partners?

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[0:00] Welcome back. Today's question is, how do you find real-life theological conversation partners, the theological and biblical conversations which I find stimulating and important, or of no interest to the Christians I know in real life?

Do I need to do what you've done and move across the world to be closer to the people I interact with on the internet? My experience is probably rather atypical on this front.
First of all, I have met probably, at this point, over 200 people in person whom I first knew on the internet. So that, I suppose, is a rather unusually high figure.
The other thing is that the several or more people I've interacted with regularly talking about theology in person in my locality have been people I've met largely through the internet, or indirectly with the internet as some factor.
So whether that's discovering that we have a common interest in some theological conversation that's going on online, whether it's recognising some, or whether it's a past connection that has originally occurred through the internet and that person has moved to Durham to study, or whether it's another situation where there's a mutual friend who puts us in contact.
[1:18] So many of my friends have been through the internet, or people who have come across my work online and live in the area, are studying in the area and getting in contact with me.

There have been so many contacts I've had in these sorts of ways. Most of them have not really amounted to much, but a number of them have developed into deep and long friendships.
So there are a lot of opportunities out there that can be formed through the internet that actually work out in person. The internet, as I've described it in the past, can be like scaffolding.
It enables you to build connections, or it can be like that string that you throw across a great divide, and then you use that string to move over a wire, and then that wire can move over a cable, and that cable can be used as the basis from which to move things across for a bridge.
That the internet is very much a means by which you can forge connections, connect people across great distances, and create networks that will increase your range of visibility within your locality.
[2:28] You'll find a lot of people within your locality come into your awareness as you interact online a lot, because there are a number of other people who are feeling probably, in your broad locality, there are probably a number of other people who feel that they're isolated and want to talk theology and have similar interests.

There are people out there. There are other people who are being enterprising and forming connections in whether that's day conferences, whether it's meet-ups, whether it's just two people meeting in a location between them.
There are a lot of people who are doing things like this, whereas I find whenever I'm travelling, I'll tell people where I am and hope to arrange to meet up with two or three people in each city I visit. I've found this has been a great way to form theological friendships, many of which can last for years. And so the internet can be a great means for forming real-life friendships, and you don't need to leave your hometown to find these.
Often you'll find there are people in your locality, and the internet can bring those to the surface and help you to discover them, not least because other people might be aware of them when you are not.
[3:45] And so a further thing I'd say is that having a high profile online in certain theological circles has really helped me.

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That's another area where I am, I suppose, atypical in this respect, that people know that I'm based in Durham, people know that I'm moving this place and that, and my activities and whereabouts are not hard to discover, and people who are aware of me online will often want to meet in person if they're passing through for a day.
And many people do pass through Durham just as tourists and want to meet up. And that has been, in my experience, a way in which I've met dozens of people in that way, just people who've been passing through.
So I think that there are a great many ways in which you can form friendships and theological conversation partners in your locality just by being visible online, just by exploring your networks and developing new networks, whether that's something like an email discussion list, an online forum, blog in a set of different blogs in the blogosphere, whatever it is, these can be ways of forming connections and finding out more about people in your locality who might be interested in talking theology.
The other thing is, be prepared to expand a bit and talk to people who are not within your immediate theological context. Many of my closest friends here are not evangelicals by any description, they're not Protestants, and yet we have very stimulating regular conversations.
[5:27] And that will often be something that, if you're looking in your locality, you'll find the people who share common interests will not necessarily share all your convictions, all your commitments.

And it can be important to be willing to sacrifice on some of those fronts just to have stimulating conversation partners. And also to spread your interests a bit more widely.
I find many of the people I talk with here in person are not people who share all my interests in theology. Rather, we find that we are exploring some sort of common ground which pushes me and pushes them and stretches us both as it draws us both outside our primary area of interest.
And that can be a very helpful thing. Then use your conversation part, develop the conversation partners that you have online. That's another thing. If you can't find them in your locality, do what you can to make the most of what you do have, which are these online conversation partners.
For me, I've found, for instance, regular Skype calls with friends across the world. That has been really helpful for me. I have regular correspondence with different people.
[6:41] I have, for instance, more recently set up a weekly book discussion with a friend. And we both read through a book together during the week.

And then we'll discuss it together for an hour on Skype. That sort of thing is not hard to set up. And if you look around, there will be people who are interested in this. Many people who are theologically feel isolated and want to have someone to talk to about things.
Look for those people and set up a book discussion group. Your primary conversation partners are always going to be found in your library. And if you have other people in person that you can talk to about those books, it can be even better.
And I've found so much help within that sort of conversation. And having people who are taking, reading the same sorts of books or reading things that I'm not reading, that they can push me in that direction and help me to learn about things that may not originally have been on my radar.
Theological conversation partners today are so much easier to find than they ever would have been in the past. And one of the problems is that we do have a lot of these conversation partners online.
[7:54] And then we find that we're feeling dissatisfied with our in-person context, our real-life context. But what we have gained is immense.

And we should not despise the real-life context simply because we have all these benefits of conversations with people with a similar set of concerns to us online.
There are things about real-life conversations that you will not find online. These are people that can keep you faithful, keep you stretched and moving a bit further afield beyond your areas of immediate concern.
There are people also that you'll find in the context of your church that will be spiritually challenging for you in a way that people online will generally not be. There is something about in-person interaction which is something more.
And often that will be found not in people who want to just talk theology with you, but in people who will stretch you in other ways, who will move you beyond your narrow academic focus.
[9:02] And that academic focus can be a very good thing, but people who can move you a bit further afield from that. And so make the most of those sorts of interactions.

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Make the most of those friendships. And don't despise those on account of the conversation partners that you can find online to talk about theology with. But on the other hand, make the most of those conversation partners online.
There are plenty of ways to find those conversation partners through email discussion lists, through things like the Davenant Institute and other groups like that have done a lot to create networks of people.
The Theopolis Institute also does a lot of this, to create contexts where people can get to know each other, get to know people who have similar interests, whether that's through regional and national convivia for the Davenant Institute or for Theopolis programmes.
These are things that I've been very excited about, in part because it enables people to connect to a wider body of people who share similar interests, concerns, and to network people.
[10:05] And those networks can be very powerful and helpful. And you won't need to move to make a lot out of those. You'll often find those networks throw up connections within your locality.

And that's certainly been the case for me. My experience may be somewhat unusual in this regard, but I think there are plenty of things about my experience that may be instructive and helpful for other people.
build contexts where serendipity happens. And welcome those sorts of possibilities. If people are travelling through your town, arrange to meet up.
If someone is in your area, go to some sort of location between you and meet up there. If someone is... Get people around in your networks to know where you are, to know your interests, and they will point people in your direction too.
These are all ways that I've found incredibly helpful. And I've developed dozens of contacts that I've met in person through this. So I'd recommend others do the same.
[11:10] Take the opportunities. Don't let these things pass you by. And look to put yourself in the way of these opportunities. They do happen. And people are not as isolated as they often think they are.

We may think in the Elijah mode that I alone am left, but there are dozens of us. So look around a bit. Put yourself in serendipity's way.
And you will be surprised what you might find. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account.
And Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless and thank you for listening.

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