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Study guide

A mirror and a lens

Technology and spiritual development

By Robert C. Blezard

The printing press, which was perfected just in time for Martin Luther, enabled the ideas of the monk/pastor/professor from an obscure region to spread across Europe. The press sowed the seeds for the Reformation and helped connect like-minded Christians to form communities and networks. Today's internet holds the same kind of promise for Lutherans to share ideas, proclaim the gospel and gather as communities and networks. Across the ELCA innovators are doing just that. Is your congregation taking advantage of digital ministry opportunities?

Exercise 1: Ministry potential

Probably at no other time in history has technology been advancing so rapidly and also occupying a greater part of our lives. Only 150 years ago there were no automobiles, no electricity, no radio or TV, no airplanes and no telephones. And 100 years ago there were no electric sound systems, no tape recorders, no central heating or plumbing systems (to speak of). And 50 years ago there were no home or small-office computers, no internet, no smartphones, cable TV was in its infancy, and photocopiers were expensive and limited in their use.

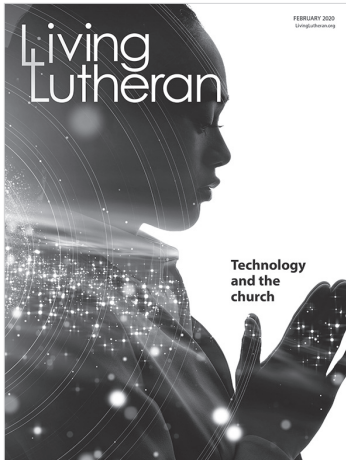
Consider each of the following now-commonplace technologies that have revolutionized ministry: electricity, central plumbing and heating, automobiles, radio, TV, the telephone, a photocopier, home and small-office computers. Discuss what "church" was like before their development, and what it is now as a result:

Now discuss how the explosion of digital technology may have the potential to revolutionize ministry for the 21st century and beyond. What are the opportunities, the challenges, the pitfalls of digital technologies?

Exercise 2: Social media and me

Facebook started in 2004. So if Facebook were a person, it would just this year be getting its driver's license (in most states) and still be five years away from being old enough to drink alcohol. Yet in that time, Facebook and other social media companies—Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and countless others—have mushroomed into powerful forces in our lives. How about yours? Discuss.

- How has social media enriched your life?
- Do you have a personal Facebook account? What do you use it for?
- Do you belong to or "like" any Facebook pages or groups? Why?



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Study guide: **A mirror and a lens** *continued*

- In what other social media platforms do you participate? (List them on paper, if necessary.)
- How does social media incorporate into your daily life? What purposes does it serve?
- How would your life change if social media were eliminated today?
- Given how social media has served you as an individual, how might it serve your congregation for connecting with others, spreading news and information, and educating others about faith?

Exercise 3: Mission-focused

Here are the three most important questions ELCA congregations are asked in the 10-plus-page “Mission Site Profile” they must complete when looking for a new pastor:

- How does this congregation understand its reason for being in the light of God’s call to mission and service?
- Who are you?
- Why are you here?

Answer these questions for your congregation. One possibility: Invite study participants to first write down their responses, and then center discussion around sharing them with one another and settling on a “consensus” understanding.

Next, explore how digital technology can assist your congregation in fulfilling God’s mission.

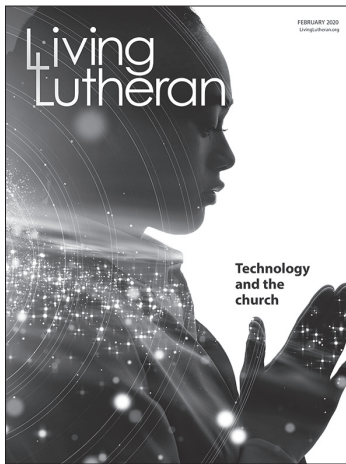
Exercise 4: Virtual gathering spaces

Jesus promised, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20).

- Is Jesus present when God’s people gather through digital tools, such as Skype, Zoom, Facebook Messenger or Google Hangouts? Why or why not?
- How could these platforms assist in development of your ministries?
- How might these platforms be used for the following ministry purposes: Bible study, pastoral visitation, worship attendance, small-group gatherings, prayer groups and Christian education?
- What other ministry purposes can you think of where people could gather digitally instead of face-to-face?

Exercise 5: Is technology “unspiritual”?

There are negative sides to any technology, but is that any reason to avoid them? The same innovation that can deploy nuclear missiles anywhere on the globe



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Study guide: **A mirror and a lens** *continued*

also boosts communication and weather satellites into orbit. Similarly, the same internet technology that spreads lies and pornography can also bring Christian devotionals and sermons to any smartphone or computer in the world. Discuss:

- Is internet technology inherently “unspiritual”? Why or why not?
- Should Christians avoid using internet technology for their ministries? Why or why not?
- Is there a “spiritual” difference between reading the Bible on your smartphone versus a hardcover book? Listening to a sermon “in person” versus livestreamed or recorded? Attending a Bible study at church versus at home via Zoom?
- What are the opportunities for using internet technology in your congregation’s ministries? What are the risks?
- How can a wise congregation capitalize on the opportunities while avoiding the risks?

Exercise 6: Technology and life balance

A consequence of our digital age is that more and more people are spending more and more time on their phones and other devices. In the article, Craig Mueller says this is not by chance; rather “creators of apps and programs design them to break down our resistance” to not using them.

- Do you think people spend too much time on their smartphones and other devices? Why or why not?
- Have you found yourself using your phone or digital device more than you thought was healthy? Can you share? What can you do about it?
- What’s a healthy balance between “device time” and “no-device” time?
- What can congregations do to help their members find this healthy balance?
- Why should congregations take on this task?

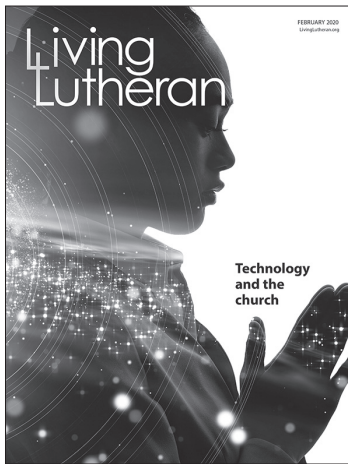
Exercise 7: “New” media

Because of the “new” media in his day, Luther’s ideas were able to spread to people who might never have heard them before the printing press was invented.

- How is today’s internet a similarly “new” media? How is it different?
- Should our churches embrace digital technologies as a way of reaching new people with the gospel? Why or why not?
- What are the risks? What are the opportunities?

Exercise 8: My religious app

We have apps for everything these days—shopping, driving directions, banking, music—so why not faith life? Adults can download apps for things



Study guide: **A mirror and a lens** *continued*

like Bible reading, devotionals and medications. The Metropolitan New York Synod has developed an app for kids that helps them understand the Bible and church life. Discuss:

- Is it a good idea for people to use apps for religious education? Explain.
- What's the difference between reading Scripture in print versus on a digital device?
- Is it a good idea for children to have apps that help them understand the church and the Bible?
- How can religious apps foster faith formation?
- Should they complement or replace church-based faith formation?

Exercise 9: The new church

Churches are more and more using digital media and technology.

- What do you see as the benefits; the up-sides?
- What do you see as the drawbacks; the down-sides?
- What do you see in the future for “virtual congregations”?
- Will we still need conventional congregations?
- How can the two coexist?

Exercise 10: Generational divide

Here are laments you hear across the ELCA: “We need younger members! How can we possibly reach them?” At the same time, we know that teenagers and young adults are more likely to be adept in digital media than their retired grandparents. Could there be an opportunity here? Discuss:

- To the best of your estimation, what's the average age of your congregation's membership? Does your congregation need younger members?
- At the same time, how well has your congregation taken advantage of the opportunities offered by digital media and technology to bring people together and tell your story?
- How might digital media and technology help your congregation bridge the divide between older members and younger members?

Exercise 11: For action

Form a digital task force in your congregation to explore the opportunities and potential that digital media and technology hold for helping your congregation's mission. They could investigate what other congregations are doing in this area. They could also explore the feasibility for your congregation and recommend action steps.

- Who would be the best people in your congregation to undertake this study?

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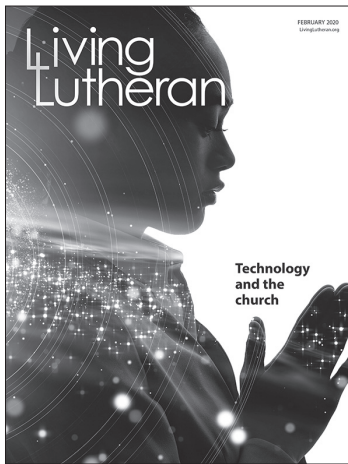
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- How would they go about it?
- What would it take to get started?

Exercise 12: Digital inventory

How well is your congregation adapting to the digital age? Use this checklist to take stock of what your congregation is and is not doing digitally. Make copies for study guide participants.

First, go through the list and *Yes* or *No* whether your congregation is or is not using an aspect of digital media. Then go back and score each checked category from 1 to 5 according to how well it is used, with 1 being “poorly used” to 5 being “extremely well-used.” For instance, if your Facebook page is popular and well-kept, it might score a 5. If your website is not kept up to date and is poorly organized, you might score it a 2.

Yes/No _____ Website

Yes/No _____ Links to *Living Lutheran* and devotional materials

Yes/No _____ Bible studies and other educational resources.

Yes/No _____ Archived sermons

Yes/No _____ Written

Yes/No _____ Audio

Yes/No _____ Video

Yes/No _____ Church calendar

Yes/No _____ Video “welcome” and other special messages

Yes/No _____ Links to a Facebook page and other social media

Yes/No _____ Email distribution for newsletters, announcements, etc.

Yes/No _____ Members-only login for privacy and sensitive material

Yes/No _____ Giving portal for online donations

Yes/No _____ Above content is always kept up to date

Yes/No _____ Facebook page

Yes/No _____ Link to website

Yes/No _____ Church address

Yes/No _____ Church contact info

Yes/No _____ Worship times

Yes/No _____ Special events

Yes/No _____ Above content always kept fresh

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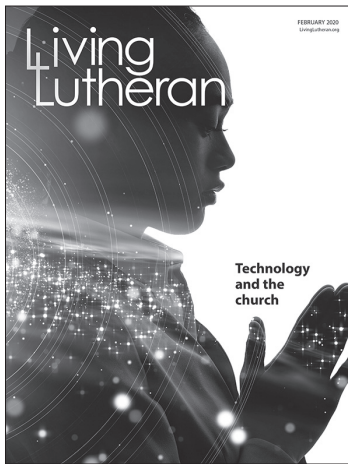
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Yes/No **Livestreaming worship**

Yes/No Audio

Yes/No Video

Yes/No **Digital meeting groups**

Yes/No Bible study

Yes/No Specialized ministry (men, Women of the ELCA, youth, etc.)

Yes/No **Twitter feed**

Yes/No Pastor

Yes/No Congregation

Yes/No Specialized ministry (men, Women of the ELCA, youth, etc.)

Yes/No **Instagram**

Yes/No For pastor

Yes/No For congregation

Yes/No For specialized ministry (men, Women of the ELCA youth, etc.)

Yes/No Other? _____

Yes/No Other? _____

When done, discuss: What does this reveal about our congregation's use of digital ministry? Where are our strengths? Where do we need to improve? Why?

A mirror and a lens

Technology and spiritual development

How does the digital era both help and hinder our spiritual development? How can Lutherans leverage digital technology's attributes—and respond to its challenges?

These were the questions *Living Lutheran* put forward to three ELCA experts on the topic, who guide us through the complex relationship between our spiritual lives and technology by offering their responses here.

Their backgrounds and perspectives on how Lutherans should respond to the digital age are distinct, but each agrees that the church has a unique role to play in this cultural moment.



Distracted?

Read on ...

By Susan Barreto

We live in a society that struggles to focus. Most of us blame our smartphones and other technology, often sold as a way of bringing us closer together.

In a few clicks, we can post photos and messages to all our friends and family at once. News is instantly at our fingertips, anytime, day and night. Yet the very technology designed to save us precious time in any number of daily tasks often leaves us feeling unaccomplished at the end of the day.

In the cacophony of beeps and dings urging us to take action, there is a subtle shift happening in how we view our technology and our spirituality. We often view spirituality as peaceful and gadget-free, yet we increasingly access spiritual messages via social media and podcasts.

Both technology and our human spirit demand our attention. Each has a claim on what it means to be human, and both seek to define what being a “righteous human” means in the 21st century.

Some people have even speculated that technology will ultimately replace our spirituality. Futurists point to the power of artificial intelligence and, more specifically, the inevitable point of “singularity,” when the intelligence derived by machines surpasses that of humans (Google search aside!). Predictions vary widely, but most observers say we’re hurtling toward that eventuality at breakneck speed.

In Silicon Valley, the idea of an “artificial intelligence god” gained steam in 2017, when self-driving-car engineer Anthony Levandowski established the Way of the Future church. According to organizational materials, the movement centers on “creating a peaceful and respectful transition of who is in charge of the planet from people to people plus machines.”

The idea of people and machines being in charge, removing God from the equation altogether, is a far cry from the Lutheran ideal of grace.

Technology is viewed by some simply as a way to extend and improve human life. Proponents of “transhumanism” suggest we could outlive our current bodies with the help of technology, perhaps uploading ourselves into a server as bodies become sleeves for our immortal consciousness.

This notion of us becoming our own saviors

through technology reveals a belief that religion and technology are in conflict. But each provides us with a mirror to our current reality, as well as a lens focused on the future and how to improve it.

If we take our eyes off our screens long enough to appreciate the world around us, we can also take solace in where we see God. God is in, with and under all that is around us, as detailed in Colossians 1:16: “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him.”

Both technology and our human spirit demand our attention.

ELCA Lutheran theologian Philip Hefner sees the creation and use of technology as not only a human enterprise but also a God-infused one. In *Technology and Human Becoming* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003), he wrote: “If we are to speak of religion, it must be a religion that encompasses the human life that is cyborg and technosapiens. It cannot merely be a religious way of *dealing* with technology, as if technology were somehow external to who we are.”

New medical devices, smartphone apps, even our Wi-Fi connectivity—each has a piece of God’s very creation within it, as do the developers who make the invisible visible every day.

Considering technology as our ultimate savior and life-giver is problematic; worshiping a powerful algorithmic god is short-sighted. Within any computer code lies a human being created in the image of a loving God—who, in turn, supports the human intellect as it seeks to surpass itself. †



Susan Barreto is editor of *Covelance*, the magazine of the Lutheran Alliance for Faith, Science and Technology, and a member of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Champaign, Ill.



Encountering God in online spaces

By Kathi I. Johnson

My husband and I met 17 years ago. While many of my friends found their significant others at college, in a bar, at church or in some other physical location, Steve and I were the first ones I knew who had met online, begun dating and, eventually, gotten married.

I remember being nervous to tell my grandmother how I had found this new person in my life. She listened and then simply responded, “Well, if God can have people meet in other ways, why not on the internet too?” Indeed.

In the years since, I’ve developed relationships with many dear friends via the internet. Some I’ve seen in the flesh and some not. Whatever the case, the depth of some of these friendships has shown me one way to encounter God in online spaces. We pray for each other, we vent, we share ideas, we share our lives. When one of us is struggling, we hold space for that struggle. When one of us is rejoicing, we also rejoice.

Besides these friendships, though, I’ve found my spirituality deepened in other ways. I scroll through Instagram, see beautiful photos and marvel at God’s creative work. I scroll through Facebook and Twitter and see myriad concerns for prayer and myriad reasons to give thanks to God. I find religious texts and prayers to read, and some of my colleagues share their sermons online. In all these ways, I encounter God in online spaces on a regular basis.

When I began a doctoral program in preaching in 2017, I had been sharing my sermons online for several years. As part of my doctoral work, I began a ministry called Digital Gathering (digitalgathering.org). Through regular broadcasting on Facebook Live, Digital Gathering has become what our mission statement calls “a place to explore through Scripture, prayer, and reflection.” I offer a reflection set in a short liturgy, which includes a Scripture reading and several moments of prayer.

For some people, these videos have become a holy pause in their busy lives—a time set aside for quiet reflection and prayer; an opportunity for a few moments of Sabbath rest. A time to encounter God in an online space.

When I’ve told others about my ministry online, some people honestly question if anything good can exist on the internet. There is, after all, so much evil to be found online—so much that can damage our relationship with God and destroy human relationships.

But isn’t that life? Don’t we find that everywhere? The world, our families, our workplaces and schools, and even our churches are filled with damage and destruction, along with the resulting pain and grief.

This message of good news can be shared near and far.

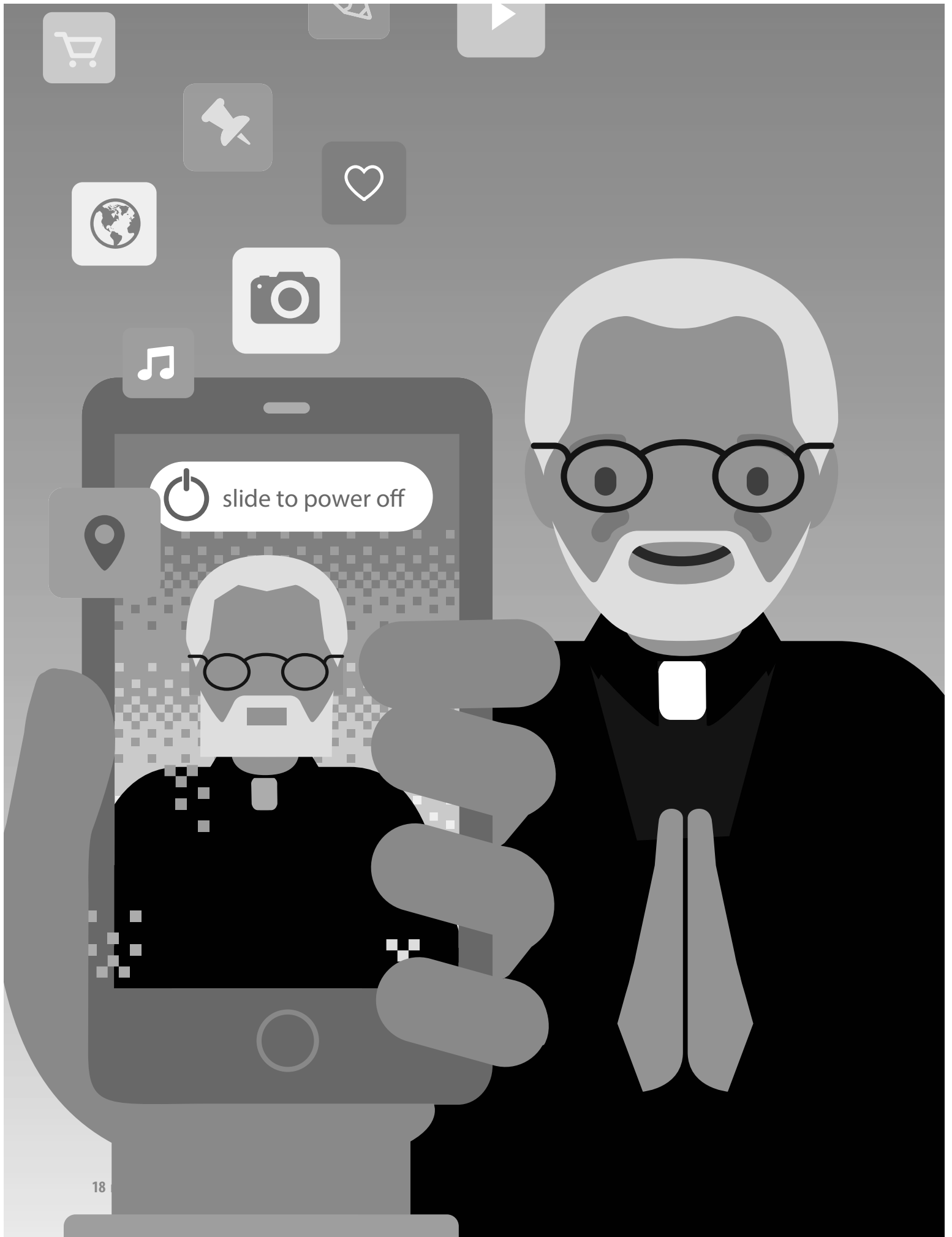
As people of faith, we aren’t called to deny the existence of evil, wherever it may be. Rather, we are called to remember that God has “reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

God has reconciled the world to Godself and entrusts the message of reconciliation—the message of the gospel—to *us*. This message of good news can and should be shared near and far. We have the ability now more than ever before to tell others about God’s love for them.

Many of us shop, order food, connect with friends and family, read and write online; tweet, post and share online; mourn with those who mourn and laugh with those who laugh online. Given this range of very human activities, it makes sense that, in online spaces, we can meet the same God who came to live as one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. †



Kathi I. Johnson is a pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, San Antonio, and the developer and curator of the online ministry Digital Gathering.



Opportunity and caution

By Craig Mueller

I don't think of myself as someone who uses a smartphone that often—yet I count 80 apps on my device. I depend on it to stream music, play podcasts, find and pay for parking spaces, determine the quickest route somewhere, forecast the weather, make appointments and much more. I also use it for spiritual purposes through meditation and daily prayer apps.

Congregations now use technology not only for websites but also to connect with people, post on social media, send e-newsletters and livestream worship services. Many faith communities use some or all of this new media to bring the gospel to people in innovative and creative ways.

Sometimes these efforts bring new people to existing worship communities; other times individuals pick and choose what speaks to them, without affiliating with any congregation. (Many people today, after all, identify as “more spiritual than religious” and may not feel comfortable being part of a church.)

In the past decade or so, technology has revolutionized our daily lives in ways we could have never imagined. Just as the printing press fueled the Reformation by distributing knowledge and increasing literacy, now social media allows people to create, share and collaborate, making religious and spiritual practices available to everyone.

There is, of course, another side to technology. Our smartphones can entice us away from exercise, reading, face-to-face relationships, nature and more. Given a spare moment, I might get out my phone rather than observe people or creation. When we live our lives online 24/7, we surrender to a frenetic urgency. Many of us find it hard to relax and enjoy unplugged moments of reflection and leisure.

Though we may wish we had more willpower to turn off our phones, creators of apps and programs design them to break down our resistance. Our phones are irresistible and addictive. I wonder whether our churches should provide opportunities to discuss and model a periodic detachment from technology.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel argued that industrial and technological advances have made us less aware of the beauty of creation and our common humanity. Rather than fixating on building, mastering and conquering space, we should receive the gift of time represented by Sabbath observance.

In *The Sabbath* (Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), he wrote: “There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann holds up the Sabbath as an act of resistance: Our ancient faith holds up a day of rest from the demands of consumption and production. Sunday worship is countercultural, helping us to distinguish its meaning and grace from the efficiency and moneymaking that guide the rest of our week.

Resistance to our always-on, workaholic culture should begin with congregations.

Though it's fashionable to use technology in creative and effective ways in worship, some people may feel refreshed by an unplugged service that reminds them to breathe deeply, be still and then depart, newly centered and awakened to nature and a slower pace of life.

The gifts of technology are clear to most of us. In fact, we are dazzled by what each new smartphone can do. Perhaps the time has come for the church to help us find the rest and renewal missing for more and more people.

Resistance to our always-on, workaholic culture should begin with congregations and religious leaders. What if we were to intentionally detach from commerce and media for a day, a half day or a couple of hours? This may sound radical, but so is God's desire to give us rest and renew our weary bodies and souls. †

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



Craig Mueller is a pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Chicago, and author of *Any Body There? Worship and Being Human in a Digital Age* (Wipf and Stock, 2017).