



A SNAPSHOT OF TRENDING TOOLS
CHRISTIANS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD | FEBRUARY 2019

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Introduction

Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. (Hab. 2:2)

As The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod began its national radio broadcast ministry, theologian Theodore Graebner encouraged the use of this new tool to proclaim the Gospel: “It was Jesus Himself who complained that the children of this world were wiser in their generation than the children of light. And this applies today in the matter of radio. Certainly, the enemies of true religion and of good morals are making use of this wonderful means of communication, while evangelical Christians are lagging far behind. ... Should not the beginning now being made on a small scale through the installation of a radio plant in Concordia Seminary be followed by similar efforts elsewhere, until no one living in this country shall be beyond the range of sound Christian preaching and teaching through the radio?”¹

The radio ministry that began with that new station continues to this day through the many Christ-centered programs of KFYO.² Lutherans are historically well-acquainted with the successful use of mass media in the service of the church. Martin Luther eagerly embraced the printing press as an important technological tool in the spread of Reformation teachings. Luther and the other

reformers exchanged sharp words and arguments in print, publishing barbs that would delight (or dismay) many of today's social media users. Historian Mark Edwards described Luther's effective use of the new print media: "Not only did the Reformation see the first large-scale 'media campaign,' it also saw a campaign that was overwhelmingly dominated by one person, Martin Luther. More works by Luther were printed and reprinted than by any other publicist. ... [Luther] outpublished all his Catholic opponents five to three."³

In this discussion guide, social media will be considered according to its dictionary definition as "forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)."⁴ Included in social media are platforms such as Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Snapchat. This is a limited list — according to one estimate there are over 50 social media platforms, and counting — and, as these services become outdated, they may be replaced by others.⁵

These rapidly changing methods of communication are considered indispensable in all areas of life — at home, at work, at all levels of education, in managing health care and providing entertainment. Through social media, people connect with friends and engage with opponents. How should we as Christians use these social media tools? Will such connections damage the community we share in the Body of Christ or will they build up our relationships as brothers and sisters in the household of God?⁶

Social media technology leads us along pathways both helpful and hazardous. In this discussion guide, we will consider the use of social media and its impact on life and

faith according to seven categories: community, trust, knowledge, influence, identity, temptation and vocation. How can we best use — or, if necessary, avoid the use of — this technology to glorify our God and Savior, build up the Body of Christ and extend His kingdom in the world? The Lord Jesus prayed for His twelve disciples, and for His disciples of every age, including the challenging, media-connected age in which we live: “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:14-17).

Friends and Followers: Social Media and Community

We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.

(Rom. 12:5)

The Need for Community

An advertisement for an internet service provider proudly announces that nothing keeps people more connected than the internet. There is some truth to that claim; we have technology quite literally at our fingertips that enables us to stay in touch with one another 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We like to connect with others; we *need* to be connected.

The social fragmentation that exists today in our digitally connected world has been traced to rising rates of suicide, drug abuse and depression: “Since the 1980s, reported loneliness among adults in the U.S. increased from 20 percent to 40 percent. The former surgeon general announced recently that social isolation is a major public health crisis, on par with heart disease or cancer. He noted that loneliness is associated with increased risk of heart disease, stroke, premature death, and violence.”⁷ Responding to the crisis of loneliness in Great Britain, in January of 2018 the Prime Minister appointed a “Minister for Loneliness.”⁸

After creating the first man and placing him in the garden of Eden, God said of Adam, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” God brought the livestock, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field to Adam to receive names, “but for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18-21). God created a woman, Eve, so that the man and woman might live in communion with Him and with one another. God created us for community, fellowship, and love, and medical research supports what we already know from Holy Scripture, suggesting “that prayer, religious faith, participation in a religious community, and practices like cultivating gratitude, forgiveness, and other virtues can reduce the risk of depression, lower the risk of suicide, diminish drug abuse, and aid in recovery. ... Church attendance is a social activity that protects people against loneliness and isolation.”⁹

Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35. How did the earliest believers express their participation in the community into which they had been baptized? Which of their actions could reasonably be expressed through today’s social media? What aspects of their life in community would be poorly served by online platforms?

Read 1 Cor. 12:12-31. Like the early believers, we are baptized into the one Body of Christ. How might social media be used to build up that body, as we suffer and rejoice together? The apostle Paul warns against the dangers of pride and division within the

body. How might social media encourage those dangers? How might social media connections prevent such damage to the body?

The author of a *Time* magazine profile of Mark Zuckerberg (the chief executive officer of Facebook) offers the opinion that “Facebook wants to populate the wilderness, tame the howling mob and turn the lonely, antisocial world of random chance into a friendly world, a serendipitous world. You’ll be working and living inside a network of people, and you’ll never have to be alone again.”¹⁰ Yet even as we live in community, are there times when it is helpful, even necessary, to be alone?

People connect on social media; they also search there for answers and for spiritual comfort and insight. They may not always find what they are seeking, because some connections cannot be found through a digital device. The more we become connected online, the less we may be connected personally. “People awash in social media can’t get past the paradox that the best salve for loneliness is properly applied alone. They look for answers in added connections, and more-emotional ones, but God isn’t a closer contact and better friend. He transcends the social, and you must seek him beyond the medium of ‘share’ and ‘like.’”¹¹ Yet even in our loneliness, we are never alone, as the psalmist understood: “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?” (Ps. 139:7)

Read John 16:31-33, Matt. 18:19-20 and Matt. 28:20. Even though He knows His friends will be

scattered when He is betrayed, what comfort does Jesus have? What comfort is ours when we are alone and when we are gathered in community? How might social media use encourage a kind of “aloneness” that is not physically, mentally and spiritually healthy? How might social media help to overcome such aloneness?

A New Kind of Community

Technology changed communities long before the internet. “When mass-produced books arrived, some people began to prefer reading a book privately instead of listening to a book read to a large group. We started to prefer technological and automated services in our work and home that remove the need to interact with a human.”¹² Robert Putnam, the author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, comments that television also changed communities, making them wider and shallower, allowing individual tastes to be satisfied easily and fully. Putnam explains that technological trends today “are radically ‘privatizing’ or ‘individualizing’ our use of leisure time and thus disrupting many opportunities for social capital formation.”¹³ Due to this trend toward individualization, a trend encouraged by social media, people are less inclined to be active in existing social communities, including the church.

Mark Zuckerberg suggested that Facebook can fill the role once played by churches and other community organizations such as Little League: “It’s so striking that for decades, membership in all kinds of groups has declined as much as one-quarter. ... That’s a lot of people who now need to find a sense of purpose and support somewhere else. ... We started a project to see if we could get better at

suggesting groups that will be meaningful to you. We started building artificial intelligence to do this. And it works. In the first 6 months, we helped 50% more people join meaningful communities. ... If we can do this, it will not only turn around the whole decline in community membership we've seen for decades, it will start to strengthen our social fabric and bring the world closer together ... we're going to change Facebook's whole mission to take this on."¹⁴

While we may debate Facebook's ability to strengthen the social fabric, there *are* many online communities for professions and special interest groups — for prayer, for politics, for cancer survivors and caregivers and for the lonely. Individuals or groups can create new online communities or simply wait for new communities to come into existence. “[The web] is a genuine place where people connect, network, and accomplish shared goals, where they challenge and confront others or find something they are not getting in the physical world. As we think about our role as the Church in this digital age, it is important that we think about how we live out our mission not only in the physical world but also in online contexts.”¹⁵

Read Heb. 10:24-25. *How could social media connections be used to “stir up one another to love and good works”? How have such connections been used this way in your own congregation? Members of online communities can certainly encourage one another, but do online connections satisfy the need to “meet together”? Why or why not?*

Some aspects of social media communities are not so new. Face to face or online, we do not always stir up one another to love and good works; we can and do stir up one another to anger as well. With or without social media, problems and conflict will arise in every community, including among the redeemed. The apostle Paul addressed serious conflicts among the Corinthian Christians, who quarreled over favorite apostles, brought lawsuits against one another, readily accepted immoral behavior and expressed loveless attitudes in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The apostle pleaded for unity: "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10). Today's social media platforms are not exempt from such divisions, and some people suggest that social media — in spite of its ability to create community — is especially effective in creating division.

Roger McNamee, an early investor in Facebook, comments that, instead of bringing people together, the popular social media platform drives them apart, and online advertising benefits financially from the divisions. "The use of algorithms to give consumers 'what they want' leads to an unending stream of posts that confirm each user's beliefs. ... The result is that everyone sees a different version of the internet tailored to create the illusion that everyone else agrees with them. Continuous reinforcement of existing beliefs tends to entrench those beliefs more deeply, while also making them more extreme and resistant to contrary facts. Facebook takes the concept one step further with its 'groups' feature, which encourages like-minded users to congregate around shared interests or beliefs ... the larger benefit goes to advertisers, who can target audiences even more effectively."¹⁶

Another Facebook executive, Chamath Palihapitiya (the former vice-president for user growth, who left the company in 2011), believes that more serious damage is being done to community. “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth ... This is a global problem. It is eroding the core foundations of how people behave by and between each other.”¹⁷

Read 1 Cor. 1:10-17. Paul appeals to the Corinthian Christians to “be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” Divisions such as those experienced in Corinth are all too familiar to us today. How could social media be used in the healing of those divisions?

Lasting Community

In the Apostles’ Creed we confess, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”¹⁸ True community already exists in Christ Jesus, a community created by the Holy Spirit, who has called us by the Gospel. Social media use may encourage or harm community, but it cannot destroy the Body of Christ.

Martin Luther said that the Gospel gives us guidance and helps against sin in more than one way — through the spoken Word of God, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and, Confession and Absolution “and also through the mutual

conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. Matthew 18[:20]: ‘Where two or three are gathered.’”¹⁹ Hearing the Word and “mutual conversation and consolation” can take place through social media. Yet the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Social Communications makes an important point in its document, *The Church and Internet*: “There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith.”²⁰

The apostle Paul writes, “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor. 14:26). In admonition and forgiveness, in conversation and community, in shared sacraments, we are called to build up our brothers and sisters in Christ. We can certainly do this through social media, a 24/7 tool to stay in touch with those in need of encouragement and prayer. Yet there are times when the joy, comfort and hope we have in Christ can only be shared face to face — in worship, at the altar, around the font, in the home of a fellow believer, or at a hospital bed or gravesite. We appreciate convenience and efficiency, but these must not be valued above our created need for flesh and blood community.

Read Eph. 4:1-6. We have been called to one hope. What traits, according to these verses, define “a manner worthy” of our calling in Christ? How can those traits be expressed through social media? Which traits can best be expressed face to face?

Social media platforms provide space for social fragmentation *and* social engagement. We can use those platforms to erode unity or to build up and strengthen our unity in the Spirit. We can become entrenched in our own opinions or rejoice in like-minded conversations, while at the same time engaging in dialogue — with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15) — with those whose opinions differ from our own.

When opinions differ, it can be difficult in online conversation to correctly understand those with whom we are speaking. There may be no visual or verbal cues (other than the occasional emoji) to help us judge the speaker's intent and true meaning. We may not know with any certainty the source of the information we receive. How has social media use changed our attitudes toward trust — of information or of individuals?

Trolls and Fake News: Trust and Social Media

In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust. (Ps. 56:4)

Losing Trust

Every day we place our trust in technology that touches nearly every aspect of our lives — travel, health, communication, finances and so much more. In all kinds of community relationships, from business meetings to small group Bible studies, trust is expected among the participants. Do we trust the relationships we build and sustain with social media? Do we trust the companies who have developed such platforms for communication? Social media platforms attempt to build trust, but those same platforms can also lose the trust of those who use them. Facebook faced criticism for selling users' personal information for use in political campaigns. The company had to take steps to regain lost trust.²¹

There are books to help companies in using an online presence to build trust with their customers. Titles reveal what the authors and readers want to create: *Liars and Outliers: Enabling the Trust That Society Needs to Thrive*; *Social Media Fascination: Embracing Social Media to Build Community, Trust and Rapport*; *Trust Agents: Using the Web to Build Influence, Improve Reputation and Earn Trust*.²²

The frequent contacts of friends on social media may build and encourage trust, but wrongly used, social media can also ruin personal trust. Individuals known as trolls, who

love to inflame and anger, lurk throughout the internet, as do fake or false reports of various kinds. For many, what is read onscreen becomes more important than what is said in person. People may stop trusting one another when “likes on Instagram and favorites on Twitter have more meaning behind them than the words exchanged in everyday conversations.”²³ People of all ages, especially teens and preteens, access social media repeatedly every day to see how many “likes” they have received on what they have posted or to see who retweeted their posts. They may believe comments — both positive and negative — from people they do not even know. Misplaced trust in the personal opinions of others can have a serious impact on those targeted by unkind comments.

Read Ps. 52:7, Ps. 146:3-4, Prov. 11:12-13, Is. 31:1-3 and Is. 42:17. According to these verses, when and where is trust misplaced? Where might you encounter some of these untrustworthy sources on social media?

Changing Attitudes

Social media use may be changing our attitude toward trust and its importance. Convenience and immediate feedback are, in some areas, becoming more important than trust. “Convenience is one of the most-recognized features of all new technologies, including the internet. A number of respondents [to a Pew Research Center survey] made the case that it is the convenience of using popular internet

applications that makes the internet most appealing and addictive. Further, they noted that it is convenience that creates the most challenges for internet users when it comes to trust. In making trust decisions, people weigh risk and reward and generally choose reward. An anonymous respondent adapted a classic line from U.S. history, writing, ‘Give me convenience or give me death.’”²⁴

In using the internet, for personal or business reasons, we are navigating relationships with people we know and with others we will never meet. Trust may be negotiated and established according to new standards and even lost trust may not be lost for long. An official with a company that studies the influence of technology comments, “Our trust in our devices tends to stay constant until a catastrophic event — like our accounts being hacked, or a national news story about surveillance, or our devices being stolen. And even then, our concern lasts only as long as we’re dealing with the immediate consequences, such as having to change our passwords or canceling our credit cards.”²⁵ Some issues, however, may impact social media users’ lives in more serious and long term ways, such as the potential harm to the a user’s reputation if personal information is stolen. We need to be aware, not only of information that we may be tempted to share, but of the need for up-to-date, online security. Privacy and security are important factors in a trusting relationship — online or face to face.

Read Prov. 3:29-32. In your social media use, do you ever “contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm”? To what extent do you trust social media contacts? Do you establish trust with an individual or community online in the same way in which you would establish trust face to face?

Changing trust in online information matches a decline in trust for institutions such as the government, financial institutions and the church. A Gallup poll revealed that in 1999, 12 percent of the people interviewed had “very little” trust for the church. By 2017, that number grew to 25 percent. Trust for news on the internet experienced a similar decline.²⁶ Many online sites or groups that appear to be Christian are not necessarily trustworthy sources for spiritual growth or information about the faith.

Read Acts 17:10-12 and 2 Tim. 3:12-17. What does Scripture teach about establishing the trustworthiness of information we may receive concerning our faith in Christ? How might you follow this counsel in your social media use?

Trust in social media varies among its users. An official with a company that promotes networking technology believes that trust in social media will become stronger overall because millennials, having grown up with technology, expect online transactions to be trustworthy. David Durant, an analyst for the British Government Digital Service says, “People who have grown up using mobile technology for social media, interaction with business and increasingly as a way to interact with government will see doing so as entirely normal and consider it the natural channel for a very significant proportion of all their life’s

interactions.”²⁷ Trust, as approached online as well as in other areas of life, has multiple levels or layers and online platforms are used with varying degrees of trust. We would likely trust, and rightly so, information posted by our own local congregations or on the LCMS website (for example, blogs, podcasts and articles by pastors and synodical leaders).²⁸ In some circumstances we would share financial information on sites where such information is required, but would likely not post that information on Facebook. At the same time, we may have sufficient trust in Facebook and other community platforms to share personal and social information.

Read 1 Cor. 7:29-31. *Discussing betrothal and marriage in light of our new life in Christ, and anticipating the Lord’s return, the apostle Paul wants to spare the Corinthians involvement in “worldly troubles.” How might his counsel about dealing with the world apply to our use of social media? Paul reminds us that “the present form of this world is passing away.” How might that statement apply to our trust of the world’s technology?*

In God I Trust

Concerning the spiritual implications of trusting technology, Bernard Bull comments, “Each new technology is framed as a solution to some difficulty or other that ails humanity. Because of this, it has become common to think of technology more broadly as a sort of substitute savior.”²⁹ There is no substitute savior of any kind for those who have placed their trust — for time and eternity — in Jesus Christ. While there are things in which we are tempted to wrongly

place our trust, including false gods and earthly rulers, trust in our God and Savior is always firmly grounded: “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God” (Ps. 20:7).

Read Ps. 56 and Ps. 118. *What do these psalms teach us about trusting the LORD? What has He done to prove that He is trustworthy? What influence does trust in the LORD have on our trust in worldly things, including social media and the contacts we make there?*

We may determine new standards for trust in social media and other online sources. Should we trust — any, all or none of — the flood of religious information available at our fingertips? In his book, *Digitized*, Bernard Bull asks, “Where do people go when they have a faith question? While many still turn to their pastors or a learned family member or friend, countless others are literally googling God. They are typing questions into the most available search engine and exploring what appears at the top of the list. The question is, of course, what will they find there?”³⁰ Should we trust the internet and social media as sources of religious knowledge and spiritual insight? How can we provide knowledge online that is firmly grounded in the truth of God’s Word?

Podcasts and Blogs: Knowledge on Social Media

Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. (2 Cor. 2:14)

Knowledge and Authority

In the sixteenth century, Luther and his fellow reformers embraced the new technology of the printing press, using it to spread the teachings of the Reformation throughout Europe. Yet the books, pamphlets and Bible translations spread more than the knowledge of the Gospel. They encouraged readers to consider new sources of authority and knowledge. Printing “undermined central authority because it encouraged the recipients of the printed message to think for themselves about the issues in dispute, and it provided the means — printed Bibles especially — by which each person could become his or her own theologian.”³¹

Today’s technology continues to impact our sources of knowledge and our opinions about authority. Through social media conversations and the information readily accessible online, each person today can “become his or her own theologian.” The internet “has democratized access to knowledge and information, which has forever changed the way we relate to experts and authority figures. This means that simple appeals to authority may be diminishing in

perceived value.”³² Authority figures, who, due to their years of education and experience were once sought out as important sources of knowledge and wisdom, may now command less respect.³³

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications comments that “the two-way interactivity of the Internet is blurring the old distinction between those who communicate and those who receive what is communicated, and creating a situation in which, potentially at least, everyone can do both. This is not the one-way, top-down communication of the past. As more and more people become familiar with this characteristic of the Internet in other areas of their lives, they can be expected also to look for it in regard to religion and the church.”³⁴ Our society readily embraces the idea that people are entitled to their own opinions, yet does not always welcome the sharing of those opinions. Even Christian evangelism may be regarded as an attempt to force private religious beliefs on others or even dismissed as “hate speech.”³⁵

Read 2 Tim. 4:1-5. *The apostle’s warning about people with “itching ears” applies to every age. How have you seen social media users accumulating for themselves “teachers to suit their own passions”? What counsel and encouragement does Paul give to Timothy? How might the internet and social media provide opportunities for outreach among those who no longer “endure sound teaching”? What experiences have you had in doing “the work of an [online] evangelist”?*

The array of opinions and knowledge (both accurate and inaccurate) available online encourages the idea that there is no absolute truth, no single, overall perspective for understanding our purpose, life and death or the world around us. Many “truths” exist, many of which are more likely to have their origins within the ideas and opinions of individuals rather than in the Word of God. The information available online brings a wide variety of religions and worldviews into our homes and hearts and minds. “The overwhelming number of inputs today means there is no longer any dominant consensus narrative.”³⁶ There is no single account or point of view that offers answers to key issues such as questions of good and evil or human origin and purpose.

Read John 18:33-36. “What is truth?” Suppose Pilate asked his question on social media. What sort of answers might he receive? How would you reply? Pilate was unaware that, in the Person of Christ Jesus, the Truth (with a capital “T”!) was standing in front of him that day (John 14:6). What is our “dominant consensus narrative”? How can you express that narrative — and its impact on your life — in your use of social media? The Lord Jesus said of the Scriptures, “It is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). As Christians, we regard Holy Scripture — with its witness to Christ — as an objective and fully trustworthy source of truth.

New Sources of Knowledge

When we are looking for answers to a puzzling question or a personal problem, we may turn first to the readily available knowledge found on the internet or to our contacts on social media and only *then* seek the face to face counsel of a trusted authority. After all, the “expertise” found online is available around the clock. We might, for example, search for information online about worrisome physical symptoms and only after that search — which may only increase our anxiety about our health — make an appointment with the family doctor. The same approach may be taken with spiritual questions. Religious blogs, podcasts and online discussions provide a steady supply of spiritual insight, which may or may not be biblically accurate. Will users be satisfied with the spiritual knowledge they have found online? Will they be able to discern the difference between truth and falsehood in the information they discover? If they are unable to discern the truth, will they go to a pastor or teacher for help in resolving their questions or untangling the varied answers offered through social media conversations?

Read 2 Cor. 10:1-6. *The apostle Paul defends his ministry against those who oppose his authority. What “weapons of warfare” were available for his use and can also be used by us today? How might you use social media to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion against the knowledge of God”?*

Paul told Timothy, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim. 4:13). Reading in ancient times was often a community affair, so public that the fourth

century saint Augustine was astonished to come upon Bishop Ambrose reading *silently*, even though others were present.³⁷ Now the silent, private reading and interpretation to which we are accustomed is available through very public media. Through the efforts of Google and other companies, books once obtained only through libraries or for purchase are scanned and stored on the internet. These books are easily accessed and provide new worlds of knowledge. Some educators worry that students searching for information online may spend very little time evaluating the information and the sources they find, reading only selected paragraphs and missing overall arguments. As a result, even though more information is available to them, they may understand less of what they read. How will these new avenues of information change our ability to understand and interpret Scripture — and our ability to listen to it?

“The pulpit has changed as a result of smartphone technology. ... Since everyone has a smartphone on them, the pulpit’s authority is no longer necessarily the loudest voice in the room. Attention is now politely requested. Sometimes it’s given. Sometimes it isn’t.”³⁸ Today’s pastors and teachers are faced with the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel and teaching the truths of Holy Scripture to listeners who may no longer regard them as the most trusted authorities in spiritual matters. Yet pastors and teachers still have the task of helping their listeners learn discernment, teaching them to compare what they learn through social media to God’s Word. They are missionaries in a digital world, where “disregarding the impact and resources of technology is akin to a Bible translator ignoring the native language of the very people he was sent to assist.”³⁹ Through careful social media use — posting sermons and blogs or mediating discussions — churches can create “spaces for dialogue” and become “trusted voices in our communities.”⁴⁰

Read Ps. 71:15-18. *Some Christians like to share favorite Bible passages or devotional writings on social media. Is that an effective and helpful blend of Christian teaching and technology? Why or why not? In what ways is online access to all of Scripture (for example, Bible Gateway) helpful to our use and understanding of God's Word and to the spread of the Gospel?*

Knowledge and Thought

The internet and social media not only supply us with knowledge, but they may also shape the way we think about that knowledge once we *have* acquired it. People who are the “native speakers” of technology and its digital language, those who were born into the digital world, are sometimes called digital natives. Those who were not born into a world of online technology, but who have, to some extent, adopted — and adapted to — its use may be called digital immigrants. Digital natives are not only more fluent in digital language, they may even *think* differently. Children raised with the computer can “develop hypertext minds. They leap around. It’s as though their cognitive structures were parallel, not sequential.”⁴¹ Digital natives may prefer interactive experiences in which they receive an immediate response to every action, but may sometimes struggle in their ability to reflect on what they know and their ability to generalize and learn from their experiences.

A university professor comments that students are constantly distracted and that their memory is disorganized:

“We worry that [technology] may be creating people who are unable to think well and clearly.”⁴² Do the children and adults who listen to sermons and attend Bible classes in our churches suffer from an inability to interpret and reflect on what they hear and read? Young people especially may differ in the way they read Scripture. Since online content supplies a steady stream of words and images for them, they may not be able to use their imagination as they read a passage from the Bible or another book. They may be unable to visualize the setting or interpret what the characters are saying, thinking and feeling. The imaginations of such readers “are weak, not least because the media they consume supply all the sights and sounds that the mind creates when all it has is words on a page.”⁴³ These changes may not change the content of our teaching and preaching, but may call for new ways to present that teaching.

Read Matt. 13:18-23. *The one who “hears the word and understands it” bears fruit. In what ways might teaching methods need to change to help the digital natives in your congregation hear and understand the Word?*

Saving Knowledge

In Jesus Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). Christians have found a variety of ways to bring the knowledge of salvation through Christ to the online world. Some churches have staff persons who are specifically tasked with managing their congregation’s digital outreach. Lutheran Hour Ministries offers an online video-based course, “God Connects,” about the Christian

faith and an outreach ministry called THRED. Launched through a Facebook page and a YouTube presence, THRED invites users to join in conversations about faith and culture.⁴⁴ Lutheran Ministries Media, Inc. produces a weekly half hour Lutheran worship service called *Worship Anew*, which is broadcast online and through local television and cable channels.⁴⁵ In its blog, Concordia Publishing House offers free downloadable Bible study resources and offers video-based studies through CPH FaithCourses.⁴⁶ As it engages in its God-given mission, the church is learning to speak the language of digital natives.

Read Col. 2:1-10. *Paul is communicating by letter, the social media of his day, and those who receive his letters may not have seen him face to face. What support does he offer to his readers, who may face “plausible arguments” opposing the knowledge of Christ? How can you avoid being taken “captive” by the philosophies and “empty deceit” you may encounter in your social media use?*

There is much useful knowledge about the Christian faith available online. There is also very harmful knowledge, often supported by some very “plausible arguments” that seek to lead us astray from the truth. The internet and social media are changing the way we view authority and the way we seek and receive knowledge, and perhaps even the way we think about the knowledge we have acquired. Even as we experience these changes, we can find new ways to share the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ in our online presence. “But thanks be to God, who in Christ

always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2 Cor. 2:14) — everywhere — including social media.

Social media influences our thoughts and ideas and even our ability to read and reflect. Has it influenced our faith? How can we use these digital tools to influence others for the sake of Christ?

Views and Shares: Social Media Influence

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works

and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:16)

Changed

Who — apart from the Lord Jesus — has influenced your life? Parents and other family members, pastors, teachers and friends each have a part to play in shaping our behavior, our Christian faith and the way in which we view the world. We may also be inspired and influenced by well-known individuals, past and present, including biblical characters, church and political leaders, athletes and entertainers. Now we can add social media contacts — and the use of social media itself — to the list of people and things that influence us. How will we, in turn, influence those who communicate with us on social media?

A former product manager at Google comments, “Technology steers what 2 billion people are thinking and believing every day. It’s possibly the largest source of influence over 2 billion people’s thoughts that has ever been created. Religions and governments don’t have that much influence over people’s daily thoughts.”⁴⁷ Yet we, called and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, *have* experienced the influence of faith. We are “the body of Christ and

individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27). The head of the body, our Lord and Savior, guides and directs us, as individuals and in community. It is worth remembering that today over 2 billion people claim the Christian faith. We should not underestimate the power of Christian influence.

Yet technology does exert its daily influence in our lives. “It changes the nature of our relationships, our sense of community, how we live out our various vocations, how we organize our thoughts and lives, how we spend our time with family and friends and even how we think and talk about what it means to be human. It’s short-sighted to believe without question that anything with so much power to shape who we are and how we live is a spiritually neutral force.”⁴⁸

Read Titus 2:1-10. According to these verses, how are different groups of people directed to influence others? How might this influence be accomplished through social media? We might especially take note of the direction to “show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned.” How can you use social media in these ways, so that opponents have “nothing evil to say about us”? How can you, in your social media use, “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior”?

Death and Life

In January 2014, a young woman named Brittany Maynard was diagnosed with brain cancer. In April, after being told she had six months to live, she moved with her

husband from California to Oregon, a state that permitted assisted suicide. On November 1, 2014, Brittany took her own life. She had announced her intention to commit suicide in an online video. The president of Compassion & Choices, an organization promoting assisted suicide, wrote that Brittany had “devoted her waning days and energies to outspoken advocacy for legal reform in California and every other state. Before she died, the videos she recorded were viewed, shared on Facebook, and tweeted around the world. The story of her death on People.com had the highest number of readers in the site’s history.”⁴⁹ The video explaining Brittany’s choice had more than nine million views on YouTube. In her last video Brittany said, “I hope for the sake of other Americans ... that this choice [of legal, assisted suicide] be extended to you ... That we mobilize, that we vocalize, that we start to talk about it.”⁵⁰

Motivated by Brittany’s decision, California introduced a bill for assisted suicide modeled after Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act. Legislators introduced assisted suicide bills or promised to do so in Washington, D.C. and 13 states. Brittany’s story also encouraged existing campaigns for assisted suicide in three other states. The California law went into effect in June 2016, permitting physician-assisted suicide. A California senator said, “The case of Brittany Maynard has brought this into focus for many Californians ... There’s a changed public attitude and increased awareness, and we think the time is right for California.”⁵¹

Brittany’s voice was not the only one heard online concerning life and death issues. Dr. Maggie Karner, director of Life and Health Ministries for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, was diagnosed in the spring of 2014 with the same type of brain cancer as Brittany Maynard. Brittany advocated for assisted suicide; Maggie promoted life. While receiving chemotherapy, she spoke at the Connecticut state

house to lobby *against* a right to die bill, which did not pass.⁵²

Maggie posted a video online in which she read an open letter to Brittany. In her letter Maggie wrote, “Brittany, if you take your life, the world will lose some of its beauty again. And quite frankly I’m not sure this world can spare any more public losses like that, with all the death and destruction going on around us every day. We need the presence of people like you. Please don’t let cancer get one more second of your life than it desires. ... Like you, Brittany, I am apprehensive. I know the predictions, I know what’s ahead for me and possibly for you — but we’re still here, aren’t we? We haven’t squeezed out every drop of life left in us yet — so Brittany, please don’t. Please don’t leave us yet. Let’s choose life for as long as we’ve got it.”⁵³

In another online article, Maggie wrote, “I have had the gift of raising three lovely daughters. I want my girls to learn servanthood and selflessness as they care for me. And I also want them to know that, for Christians, our death is not the end. Because our Savior, Jesus Christ, selflessly endured an ugly death on the cross and was laid in a borrowed tomb (no “death with dignity” there), He truly understands our sorrows and feelings of helplessness. I want my kids to know that Christ’s resurrection from that borrowed grave confirms that death could not hold Him, and it cannot hold me either — a baptized child of God!”⁵⁴ Maggie Karner, a baptized child of God, fell asleep in Christ on September 25, 2015. Maggie’s daughter Mary, a trauma nurse, wrote, “And the greatest honor of my life was to care for my mom in her last days. I hope and pray that her legacy will continue to inspire caring American voters to support those choosing to squeeze life for every drop that it has to give.”⁵⁵

Read Phil. 1:27-29 and Phil. 2:14-18. Maggie Karner used her online presence to promote life and proclaim the Gospel. While there can be a lot of angry “striving” online, how can you use your social media presence to join fellow believers in “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel”? Consider controversial issues such as abortion and assisted suicide. What could you say in online discussions of such topics to “shine as lights in the world”?

Read 2 Cor. 3:1-6. Paul and the other apostles did not use LinkedIn to post their on-the-job experience or their qualifications for ministry. How would their flesh and blood “letters of recommendation” accomplish those purposes for them? How did Maggie’s comments and posts on social media serve as “letters of recommendation” for her status as a baptized child of God?

Perceptions

In the opinions they shared and the different ways in which they faced death, Brittany Maynard and Maggie Karner influenced others and inspired online (and face to face) conversations among many people. The topic of assisted suicide is one of the many controversial issues often discussed online. Unfortunately, conversations in social media on just about *any* topic can quickly become controversial, inspiring comments that range from wise to outrageous. Opinions and comments posted by Christians

may be supported and praised by those who agree or criticized and dismissed by those who disagree.

Read John 15:18-25. *In your experience with social media, how is the online presence of Christians generally perceived? There will, at times, be negative perceptions. What reason does the Lord Jesus give for the world's hatred? While we are to rejoice if we are reviled for Jesus' sake (Matt. 5:11), we should not actively seek hatred or mistreatment at the hands of others.*

Before you enter an online exchange, think about the way in which you, in your comments and opinions, represent the Savior whose name you bear. You might ask yourself: "Why am I sharing this? What do I hope this will accomplish? ... Will this build a relationship with this person? Will this build a relationship with the church? Is this a faithful witness to our Savior?"⁵⁶

Read 1 Peter 3:13-17. *What is our response to those who may become angry when we are "zealous for what is good" in our online conversations? Consider a controversial topic you have encountered online or an online opportunity to witness for Christ. How might you present your comments on social media "with gentleness and respect"?*

Witness

Social media may influence us in both negative and positive ways and, we in turn, have opportunities to influence the people we encounter on social media. With such a wide variety of opinions and worldviews present on social media, we want the Gospel to have a voice and a presence, too. “It is here, in proclamation, that media and technology can contribute. They can scatter seeds across the LORD’S fields. They can amplify His voice so it can be heard in places where the Gospel cannot normally, regularly, or financially be shared. ... Even more, the anonymity of the person delivering the message and the hearer’s complete control of the presentation often enable that message to be delivered in an unthreatening manner.”⁵⁷

We can enter the social media mission field as if we were preparing for a foreign mission. There is a new culture to observe and experience and a new language to learn. “Foreign missionaries are usually well trained in studying the culture they inhabit. They have a keen eye for the world around them, using this gift to learn about and explore opportunities to witness to those around them. They encounter these unfamiliar cultures, however, with God’s Word open in front of them, praying for wisdom on how to respond to those they meet. This same mindset can help us make sense of life in a digital age.”⁵⁸

As individuals, we can express in online conversations the newness of life that is ours in Christ Jesus. A congregation can have an online presence that will carry its witness beyond the immediate physical community in which it is located. Sermons, Bible classes and worship services can be made available online, not only for members who are homebound and unable to attend, but also for those who

are outside of the Christian community. “Not only can podcasts share the saving message of Jesus Christ in an on-demand society, but they also have the potential to place powerful learning tools directly in the pockets of congregants. What a blessing that digital audio technology is allowing the Word of God to be so freely accessed and shared!”⁵⁹

The Living and Active Word

The promised Holy Spirit, Jesus said, “will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). The Spirit is at work in the Gospel Word, through our face to face efforts at evangelism and through our online witness. A video-based Bible study produced by Lutheran Hour Ministries presents the story of a young man, an atheist, who enjoyed online gaming. He joined a group called “Gaming by Grace” and became part of a team for competitive gaming, but he was not initially interested in adopting his team members’ beliefs. Eventually, he joined an online Bible study that challenged his opinions. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he came to faith in Christ. The young man was baptized and now witnesses for Christ with other online gamers.⁶⁰

Read Is. 55:6-13. *The Word will accomplish the purpose for which it is sent. How can you bring the powerful Gospel Word into your online conversations? Is online witness easier or more difficult than witnessing in a face to face situation? Why?*

Engaging with people in social media conversations, we may try to convince them of the righteousness of various causes we favor. Hopefully we will also seek to influence them for the sake of the Gospel. Whatever impact our online presence may have on others, our social media use may likely change or influence *us*, however small or great those changes might be. Whether we are digital natives or digital immigrants, social media use may have an impact on our identity.

Likes and Selfies: Identity on Social Media

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

(Gal. 2:20)

Making a Name for Ourselves

In the generations before and immediately after the Flood, communication may have been a little easier than in our world today (even without social media) because “the whole earth had one language and the same words” (Gen. 11:1). As the human pride and evil washed away in the flood waters welled up to the surface once again, the people of earth did some networking and decided to create an enduring legacy for themselves: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4). In response to humanity’s prideful construction efforts, the Lord God did a little networking as well and said, “This is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Gen. 11:6-7). God confused the unifying language and the people scattered across the earth.

Read Gen. 11:1-9. *In what ways does social media (and your use of it) tend to separate and “scatter” people and harm unity? Jesus died “to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:52). In what ways can social media be helpful in recreating, at least in part, the “one people” with “one language” scattered at Babel?*

Preoccupied with Self

Within our scattered language groups, we still like to make a name for ourselves, evidenced, in part, by the widespread obsession with taking and posting selfies and monitoring the resulting online “likes” and comments. Long before social media provided a handy platform for our self-absorption, author Christopher Lasch wrote in his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, “To live in the moment is the prevailing passion — to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future.”⁶¹ Other factors involved in the creation and maintenance of a narcissistic culture, factors influenced by social media, include weakening bonds of family and community, a search for self-fulfillment, increasing disrespect for authority and a therapeutic culture in which people are eager for even the illusion of health and well-being.

While online communication is not to blame for our preoccupation with self (we came up with that ourselves), social media use does encourage self-promotion. Commenting on the digital convenience revolution that makes it “easier to *be you*,” an author comments, “The new

technologies were catalysts of selfhood. They conferred efficiency on self-expression.”⁶² Sean Parker, Facebook’s first president, said that he and others involved in the development of the platform considered ways to catch and hold a user’s attention: “How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible? ... we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that’s going to get you to contribute more content, and that’s going to get you ... more likes and comments.”⁶³ Whatever chemical reaction may or may not be behind the process, we keep returning to these useful and, for some, potentially addictive, forms of communication.

Some individuals are tempted to use social media to build up their own self-images to gain status and self-esteem. In the process, they may create somewhat unrealistic images of themselves, comparing their lives and activities to the experiences posted by others. Young people especially may be inclined to compare themselves to others or become anxious about “missing out” on the activities posted by friends. Surveys indicate that, due at least in part to online identity issues, teens today are more likely to be unhappy, with higher rates of depression and suicide.⁶⁴ The constant presence of social media allows the user no time for rest — no Sabbath rest — no time for prayerful consideration and more realistic reflection on one’s image, identity and activities.

Pictures and comments posted by young people, or by users of any age, may leave users open to the unwelcome criticism of others. “When we post a selfie, we put ourselves out there, into the social stream, to sink or swim. We may subject ourselves to far more judgment and cruelty than is

healthy or sustainable. We may adapt our identities to conform to the social standards already established on Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter ... Where do we find a core identity that is poised to endure the ups and downs of being 'hearted' or 'unhearted' online?"⁶⁵

Read Rom. 12:1-8. *Buried with Christ and raised to new life in Baptism, we have a core identity. We are "living sacrifices" and are not to be "conformed to this world." How can you use social media in a way that does not conform to worldly expectations? How does social media encourage us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think? Why, even on social media, is it helpful to remember that we have "gifts that differ"?*

Social media use not only affects the self-images of teens, but may also influence their understanding of sexuality, of what it means to be male or female. One of Mark Zuckerberg's first digital projects was Facemash, a program he developed while a student at Harvard to compare and judge pictures of women posted online as "hot or not."⁶⁶ For young women, "the constant seeking of 'likes' and attention on social media can 'feel like being a contestant in a never-ending beauty pageant.'"⁶⁷ Kenneth Kremer, author of *Embracing Godly Character: The Christian Community's Response to a Godless Culture*, comments that "today's digitally enhanced form of narcissism threatens the faith of many young believers. ... The popular culture bombards them with messages that urge them to trust their own instincts, dream big, plot their own courses. It tells

them they are superior to others — bronze gods and goddesses, permanently cast in their own Snapchat images.” Kremer advises parents to teach their children to look to Jesus for their identity.⁶⁸ Addressing the impact of social media and the internet on families, Andy Crouch writes, “Human beings aren’t computers. We are a divinely shaped combination of heart, soul, mind and strength. We are meant to take in the world through all our multiple senses, which give us rich knowledge of the world and one another — far richer than computers can process or deliver.”⁶⁹

Read Gal. 4:4-7 and Gal. 5:13-15. In what ways might we be tempted to use social media as “an opportunity for the flesh”? How can you use social media instead to serve others in love? Why is the warning of Gal. 5:15 especially appropriate in our use of social media?

An Established Identity in Community

Long before we ever texted or tweeted or posted a selfie, our identity as Christians was firmly established by God. He chose us in Christ to be His own “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). Baptized into Christ, buried and raised with Him, we have “put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). *Our* actions and words — both face to face and online — are to reflect *His* identity.

As brothers and sisters adopted through Baptism into the family of God, we can also remind and encourage each

other in our established identity together in Christ. The Lord Jesus called each of us as individual believers and at the same time called us to be members of one Body, His Church. Rejoicing in our identity that God has established for us in Christ also means that we rejoice in and love one another as fellow Christians.

Read Gal. 2:19-20 and Phil. 3:4-11. How does the apostle Paul describe his previous identity as compared to his new identity in Christ? How do you, as someone who has been crucified with Christ, someone in whom Christ now lives, represent yourself online? What does this “self” communicate to others about you? What does it communicate about the Savior?

Like the builders of the ancient tower on the plain of Shinar, we like the idea of making a name for ourselves. But we have been baptized into the name of the Triune God, and we need no greater name. Our names will outlast every one of social media’s ever-changing platforms, because our names are written for all eternity in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. 21:27).

“The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). With our names in the book of life, each of us is a new creation in Christ. Yet while we live in this fallen world, we often fail and fall in the struggle against our sinful

flesh. God calls us to repent of our sins of thought, word and deed — including the sins we commit in our use of social media.

Tempted: Social Media, Sin and Repentance

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion. (Prov. 18:2)

In Eden, the crafty serpent suggested to Eve that the fruit God had forbidden to her and to Adam was really quite harmless and that it could, in fact, convey godlike knowledge to those who eat it. Eve took another look at the forbidden fruit. It really did look good enough to eat and supposedly held within itself the promise of wisdom. So, first Eve, and then Adam with her, took the bait, the fruit and the fall. And, as the saying goes, the rest is history — our history. Inheriting the inborn stain of sin from our first parents, we are easily drawn to attractive things that promise enjoyment or godlike knowledge. The tools of technology so necessary in our world today bring with them very appealing temptations.

We live in a fallen world, and those who invent its tools are fallen as well, but tools are just that, tools. We cannot blame technology or algorithms or even the tools' inventors for the sins we commit in our use of social media. Our first parents attempted to blame each other, the serpent and even God for their disobedience and found themselves without excuse. We, too, are without excuse. When we misuse the tools that technology places in our hands to sin against God and one another, we have only ourselves to blame. The apostle James maps out the process: "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin,

and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14-15).

Lured and Enticed

We, in our fallenness, are to blame for the sinful choices we make, and technology designers (in their fallenness) readily take advantage of our weaknesses. Technology is uniquely suited to prey on our sinful desires. Discussing the way in which some interactive technology is designed, user experience consultant Chris Nodder comments, “Sites capitalize on our weaknesses. Sometimes their intentions are good, but mainly they do this for ‘evil’ — in other words to profit at our expense. The best [that is, most alluring] sites manage to make us feel good at the same time. ... The idea behind evil design is that people enter willingly into the deal, even when the terms are exposed to them.”⁷⁰

The designers who create tools such as smartphones are concerned not only with the product itself, but with those who use the product. The phone needs to be efficient and enjoyable to use. Companies want people to use their products and can, through technology, exploit vulnerabilities “to keep people hooked; manipulating, for example, when people receive likes for their posts, ensuring they arrive when an individual is likely to feel vulnerable, or in need of approval, or maybe just bored.”⁷¹

Tristan Harris, the former product manager for Google, comments that a person may check a smartphone 150 times a day. Such addictive behavior is achieved by design, by including a built-in reward within the technology. Harris compares it to pulling a lever on a slot machine in hope of a reward. People check their smartphones to see their notifications. They swipe a finger to scroll through Instagram

to see what pictures come next.⁷² The techniques employed to encourage habits in social media users can be adjusted for each individual. A Facebook report “revealed that the company can identify when teens feel ‘insecure,’ ‘worthless’ and ‘need a confidence boost.’ Such granular information ... is ‘a perfect model of what buttons you can push in a particular person.’”⁷³

Lutheran pastor and author Trevor Sutton writes that “technology is designed to acknowledge and accommodate the needs and wants of the user, as designers seek to maximize user experience by creating products that are built around the user’s desires. User research is responsible for nearly all the design decisions at Facebook. In fact, there is an entire department at Facebook dedicated to Human Computer Interaction and UX [User Experience]. Teams of people at Facebook are thus dedicated to researching, and finding ways to capitalize on, the individual behaviors, thoughts, and impulses of users.”⁷⁴

Read 1 Peter 5:5-11. *How can you be sober-minded and watchful in your use of social media? How might the devil attempt to “devour” you through your use of social media? (The devil can use tools too, for example, fruit.) In what ways might social media use require humility, before God and before others?*

No Place to Hide

Adam and Eve, having eaten the fruit forbidden to them, attempted to cover their shame and hide when “they heard

the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden” (Gen. 3:8). There was no place to hide in Eden, and we cannot hide behind or blame technology, even if social media is designed to shape our behaviors. One Christian author suggests that our social media use does not *shape* us, but rather *exposes* us. “Social media can often feel dark and divisive. Very often it *is* dark and divisive. And yes, at times it is manipulating us into acting out of vice rather than virtue ... Some may feel as though the social media environment is training them to act worse over time. Others, like me, would counter that it is only exposing our worst tendencies—ones that were bad to begin with. That may seem like a slight distinction, but it is a real one.”⁷⁵

Read Eph. 5:1-17. Which of the sinful behaviors listed in these verses — sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking — find an improper place in your use of social media? How might you expose “the unfruitful works of darkness” that are found on social media? We need to remember Paul’s warning, “Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

As the apostle James said, “Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin” (James 1:15). We will choose to act in ways that satisfy our desires. Our technology leads us to expect our needs and desires to be satisfied immediately. Social media can provide such quick satisfaction, but that, in turn, leads to greater self-centeredness, and again, our sinful natures are exposed. One author notes, “There is no doubt that our growing lack of civility is a moral problem,

but I would add that it is a moral problem exacerbated by technological innovations, particularly innovations in electronic media, which have conditioned us to expect immediate gratification. Whether it be fast food, instant entertainment, or immediate sex, the dominant value of all technological innovation from the microwave oven to the birth control pill is *speed*. We cannot wait until next year, or even until tomorrow, or an hour from now; we must have it *this very second*. It is the barbarian, Erasmus would say, who must satisfy all bodily desires the moment they surface. ... Add to road rage, air rage, talk show rage, and after-the-athletic-event-mash-everything-in-sight rage, and one gets a better picture of what kind of people we are becoming — very selfish ones.”⁷⁶

Without Excuse

Some writers, examining the impact of technology on our lives, have assigned the traditional “seven deadly sins” to certain sites and social networks: lust is Tinder; gluttony is Instagram; greed is LinkedIn; sloth is Netflix; wrath is Twitter; envy is Pinterest; vanity (or pride) is Facebook.⁷⁷ We may prefer to assign sinful blame to social media tools and their designers. We may even point to our many social media contacts and announce, “They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom. 1:29–31). But the apostle’s list of sin is not merely intended for *other* people; it is a mirror of our own lives.

Read Rom. 2:1-11. What does the apostle Paul say about our attempts to point out the faults of others? Consider how you might practice “patience in well-doing” in all areas of life. How might you exercise such patience in your use of social media?

We must examine our own use of social media, realizing that, as the apostle says, we are without excuse. The mirror of God’s Law produces far more accurate selfies than any smartphone. Consider, for example, the sins of idolatry, slander, disrespect for authority and lust.

Idolatry

Discussing false gods in his Large Catechism, Martin Luther comments, “To have a God, as you can well imagine, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box.”⁷⁸ Given that description, we might conclude that our smartphone cannot be an idol. Yet social media use itself may become a false god, especially as it encourages an idolatrous worship of self. The apostle Paul writes, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4). We may covet what others have (a form of idolatry; see Col. 3:5) or promote ourselves and our opinions on social media at the expense of others, especially those with whom we disagree. We may become the people described by the apostle as “lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive ... swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:2-4).

Read Is. 44:17-20 and Is. 45:20. *The prophet mocks the idol-worshipping craftsman who cannot recognize his own foolishness — cooking his dinner over half of the wood and using the other half to carve an idol. Have you ever become so caught up in your social media use that you are unable to ask yourself, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?”*

Slander

We know God’s commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16). Yet social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter provide space for gossip and slander — and a place to hide. We can write whatever we like about another person without ever coming face to face with the target of our posts. Lies and rumors are easily and widely spread.

Read Ex. 23:1-2. *When have you “joined hands” online with other social media users to spread malicious reports? Have you ever sided “with the many” online to pervert justice? **Read Eph. 4:15-16.** We may sometimes try to excuse our gossip or slander with the claim that we are simply “speaking the truth in love.” How is our gossip harmful, for ourselves and for others, as we seek to “grow up” into Christ?*

Disrespect for Authority

In his explanation to the Fourth Commandment, Luther writes, “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.”⁷⁹ Social media provides a handy platform to express our opinions about elected officials or church leadership and related issues. We may claim that we are simply expressing our opinions, political, theological or otherwise, when we are really “joining hands” with other users to bear false witness. One author believes, for example, that social media distorts the way we view politics and may, over time, make us “less rational and more impulsive. ‘We’ve habituated ourselves into a perpetual cognitive style of outrage, by internalising the dynamics of the medium,’ he says.”⁸⁰ Yet those with whom we disagree and those who are the subjects of angry online exchanges are people created in the image of God, people for whom Christ gave his life. “Political narratives (they are really a thing), ministry narratives, and ideological narratives abound. And a temptation is to boil ideas, or even people, down to a narrative. (i.e. If they say this, or don’t say that, they fit this narrative that I’ve adopted.) Are image bearers of God really reducible to simple tag lines and hashtags alone?”⁸¹

Read 1 Peter 2:11-17. *When have you used social media as a platform to show disrespect to leaders in church and state? In our nation we have the freedom to disagree with one another and with our leaders. How can you disagree and at the same time “be subject”? How will you, on social media, “keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable”?*

Lust

We may sin against God and against others on social media, not only with our words, but also with the images that we post or view. Christian author Douglas Groothuis writes, “Many Facebook users recklessly post photographs of themselves in immodest and/or narcissistic poses. Even innocent photographs may be misunderstood given the often-ambiguous nature of the image. Facebook comments and images have come back to haunt their authors, as when potential employers assess the Facebook pages of those they are considering hiring.”⁸²

Young people are especially at risk through image sharing. Nancy Jo Sales, author of *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, comments, “Everything we’re seeing [sexting, nonconsensual photo sharing and specific poses in selfies] has to do with the access to pornography that children have. I’m saying *children* because children do see pornography whether on purpose or by accident, since social media is used to promote pornography. It’s having a huge effect on their idea of what it means to be a man or a woman, on their understanding of sexuality. It’s absolutely a destructive factor, influencing how boys think about girls and how girls think about themselves. Sexting is sometimes dismissed as innocent, but it can be hurtful, damaging, and in some states, the sexting of images is considered a crime. It’s not being talked about at the level of seriousness that it deserves.”⁸³

Read Matt. 5:27-32. *How do Jesus' words here apply to the images you see or send on social media? What can you do to protect children from such images, or warn them away from such social media use? How does the Lord indicate the seriousness and eternal consequences of these offenses?*

Read Gal. 5:19-26. *Where do you find yourself involved in the "works of the flesh" in your social media use? Consider which apply to your circumstances and repent of such use. How will you instead put the fruit of the Spirit into practice online?*

Called to Repent

In our worship services we often confess together: "Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment. For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways to the glory of Your holy name."⁸⁴ You may be thinking, as you speak that confession, of a variety of sins — family disagreements, problems at work or difficult relationships. Does your social media use come to mind as you confess your sins?

Groothuis suggests, “Since social media can induce ‘out-of-body experiences’ (digital interactions apart from personal presence), we should monitor ourselves in the midst of using Facebook or similar technologies. What are we feeling and thinking? How are we responding to this world? Given the hyper-connectedness that Facebook affords, it is easy to get swept into the data flow without being mindful of what is happening on the screen and in the soul.”⁸⁵

In the rush to do more with less time, our attention spans have grown shorter, leading to multitasking and depending on short bits of information instead of digesting the entire topic. Taking a break from the digital barrage is a way to “reset,” and impact bodies and souls in a positive way. When Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha, Martha is distracted with serving. Jesus reminds her not to be anxious and troubled about many things, but to focus on the one necessary thing (Luke 10:38-42). Through the regular reception of Word and Sacrament our attention is turned from out anxious and troubled thoughts to the gracious and necessary gifts of our God and Savior.

A variety of apps and software programs are available to help us become more mindful of our attraction, and possible addiction, to social media use. Apps and programs such as Toggl, AntiSocial, Offtime, or Moment allow users to block certain apps or track time spent on social media, encouraging personal accountability in the amount of time spent — or wasted — online. Parental control software, such as Bark, Qustodio, Norton Family, or Net Nanny, can also promote individual accountability by setting limits, managing use and blocking harmful content. Programs such as these may help users to develop self-control and “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8).

Read 1 Cor. 10:12-14. *How might you use online tools, as well as the help of brothers and sisters in Christ, to avoid and escape temptations that might arise as you use social media?*

For all of our efforts at self-control, we may still try to make a name for ourselves on social media, hoping to be remembered for our political insight or clever remarks. We seek attention for ourselves, our experiences and our opinions. While these appear to be harmless desires, we would do well to remember that “desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:15). It is important to know that we already *are* remembered. Our heavenly Father remembers us, but not for our posts or pictures or tweets. He remembers us with a Father’s love and, for the sake of Christ Jesus, he remembers us with compassion. “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:12-14).

The Ten Commandments

Consider the Ten Commandments and their explanations from Luther's Small Catechism.⁸⁶ God's commandments address our trust in God, our identity as His chosen people and his will for our lives as individuals and in community. God's Law serves as a mirror to accurately reflect our sin and as a guide to holy living in our technology-driven world. Use the commandments as a guide to recognize and repent of your sins in social media use. Look for ways that you might use social media in a God-pleasing manner according to the commandments. Some questions to consider are included below.

The First Commandment

You shall have no other gods. *What does this mean?* We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Questions to consider: How might social media become an idol? How does it create an idol of self? Does the device (tablet, smartphone, computer, etc.) itself become an idol? How will you express "fear, love and trust in God" in your social media use?

The Second Commandment

You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that

we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.

Questions to consider: Does the abbreviation “OMG” take the Lord’s name in vain? Do you misuse God’s name in your conversations and arguments? How can you use social media to join fellow believers in praying, praising and giving thanks to the Lord?

The Third Commandment

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

Questions to consider: In what ways does social media distract you from worship or from the study of God’s Word? How might such tools and technology help you in your study of Scripture?

The Fourth Commandment

Honor your father and your mother. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.

Questions to consider: How might your use of social media lead you to show disrespect for those in authority (parents, church leaders, government leaders)? How might blogs, podcasts or other online avenues for communication be used to encourage respect and honor for authority figures?

The Fifth Commandment

You shall not murder. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.

Questions to consider: "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15). How might your social media use lead you to hate others, even your brothers and sisters in Christ? When might social media use lead to physical violence? How could you use social media contacts to provide for those in need?

The Sixth Commandment

You shall not commit adultery. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we lead a sexually pure

and decent life in what we say and do, and husband and wife love and honor each other.

Questions to consider: Has social media use led you away from a “sexually pure and decent life”? How might your social media use impact a relationship or a marriage in negative ways? How can you help young people avoid online temptations to sexual impurity?

The Seventh Commandment

You shall not steal. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor’s money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.

Questions to consider: How is the internet used for theft? When you post or share items online, do you become involved in the theft of “intellectual property”? How can your social media use help others protect their possessions and income?

The Eighth Commandment

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander

him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

Questions to consider: When have you become involved in sharing or repeating false testimony, lies and slander in social media conversations? How will you defend and speak well of others when you are involved in online discussions?

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not scheme to get our neighbor's inheritance or house, or get it in a way which only appears right, but help and be of service to him in keeping it.

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not entice or force away our neighbor's wife, workers, or animals, or turn them against him, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

Questions to consider (for the Ninth and Tenth Commandments): How does the internet lead you to covet what others have? How can you avoid that temptation and instead encourage others in a life of honesty and contentment?

The Ten Commandments show us our sin and guide us in service toward our neighbors. You might also review the Table of Duties on pages 33-40 of Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation or on page 328 of the Lutheran Service Book.⁸⁷ The Table of Duties lists specific verses from Scripture that address the way we are to act within our daily callings, or vocations. These verses, too, can serve as a call to repentance and a guide to the godly use of social media.

Bearing Fruit

The Lord Jesus said to his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:16). The information we post and the identities we share on social media never really "go away." It can be difficult, if not impossible, to remove what is shared online. It is a kind of fruit that "abides," even when we wish that it would not. We repent of our sins and seek, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to have our thoughts, words and actions, including our online presence, "be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27).

Scripture says of the saints in glory, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them'" (Rev. 14:13). In his commentary on the book of Revelation, Louis Brighton writes, "Those who are entering this eternal rest are accompanied by their works ... the saints *are* separated from their guilt and shame but *are not* separated from their godly works, for those

works follow them.”⁸⁸ The apostle Paul encourages us, as he points to the great hope of resurrection on the Last Day, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58). In our daily vocations, or callings, our godly works, done in faith and with the help of the Holy Spirit, display our love for God and our neighbor. How can we serve our neighbor in love through our use of social media?

#RoyalPriests: Vocation and Social Media

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27)

Callings

Through social media we can establish online relationships with people in our own communities and across the world. In and through every relationship, whether online or face to face, as people born anew in Christ Jesus we are to carry out our callings, our vocations, according to our Lord's command: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Our vocations are the tasks and relationships to which God has called us, and it is in our vocations that our life in Christ intersects with our life in this world. Vocations certainly involve our careers and daily work, but God also calls us to many other relationships — for example, as brother or sister, husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter — and these various vocations may change over time as our lives change.

Martin Luther spoke of loving our neighbor in our vocations: "You see, now we are talking about a Christian-in-relation: not about his being a Christian, but about his life and his obligation in it to some other person, whether under him or over him or even alongside him, like a lord or a lady, a wife or children or neighbors, whom he is obliged, if possible, to defend, guard, and protect." ⁸⁹ Luther also gave specific examples of the ways in which our various vocations

are carried out as we serve God by serving our neighbor in the places and relationships to which God has assigned us. “When it is recognized that God is gracious, placable, and kind, then I go out and turn my face from God to human beings, that is, I tend to my calling. If I am a king, I govern the state. If I am the head of a household, I direct the domestics; if I am a schoolmaster, I teach pupils, mold their habits and views toward godliness. These works are rightly called a worship of God. For in all of them we serve God, who wanted us to do such things and, so to speak, stationed us here.”⁹⁰

In our vocations we follow in the footsteps of Christ Jesus as we, in our daily relationships, serve our neighbor in love. Luther wrote, “Each of us is to examine himself according to his station in life and is to find what is the best way for him to fulfill the work and purpose of his baptism, namely, to slay sin and to die in order that Christ’s burden may thus grow light and easy [Matt. 11:30] and not be carried with worry and care.”⁹¹

Read 1 Peter 2:9-12. *What purpose do you have in your calling as God’s royal priest? How might you carry out that purpose in your online conversations? You may have contact with both believers and unbelievers on social media. Sometimes “the passions of the flesh” may tempt you to say regrettable things in your social media conversations. How will you “keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable” in those conversations?*

Our relationships also provide opportunities to share the good news of salvation. Luther commented on this task assigned to us in our foremost vocation as God’s royal priests: “You must, says Peter, exercise the chief function of a priest, that is, to proclaim the wonderful deed God performed for you to bring you out of darkness into the light. ... Thus you should also teach other people how they, too, come into such light. For you must bend every effort to realize what God has done for you. Then let this be your chief work to proclaim this publicly and to call everyone into the light into which you have been called. Where you find people who do not know this, you should instruct and also teach them as you have learned, namely, how one must be saved through the power and strength of God and come out of darkness into the light.”⁹²

Read Eph. 2:4-10. God, in His grace, made us alive in Christ Jesus. We are created anew as His workmanship to walk in the good works He has prepared for us. What are some of the good works in which you might walk in your online relationships?

In our vocation as baptized, royal priests of God, we have opportunities online to connect with our neighbor and express our love and care in Christ in ways never before possible. “Rather than simply letting technology change and sometimes control the way we think, act, learn, and believe, we must be proactive, not only in how we use technology, but also in how we view its role in our lives. What kind of environment — both offline and online — do we want to be a

part of and even create? Where do our Christian beliefs and practices fit in and affect what we do with our use of technology? ... As Christians, our identity and most important citizenship is in Christ.”⁹³

Let Love Be Genuine

We do not always walk within the good works God has prepared for us. We tend to stray, and we do so online also. Abusive, attacking and harmful words have no place in our online lives. “We must remember that even though we cannot see actual people on the other side of our screens, we are interacting with real people who have real, God-given souls.”⁹⁴ Within online communication it is all too easy to give offense and to take offense, even — perhaps especially — when we are discussing matters of faith. As one writer comments concerning the scandalous truth of the good news, “The Gospel is offensive enough on its own [1 Cor. 1:23]. Don’t let the way you treat your neighbor online add to that offense!”⁹⁵

Read Rom. 12:9-21 and James 1:19-21. In your use of the internet and social media, how can you “abhor what is evil” and hold fast to the good? Is it easier to show genuine love online or in face to face relationships? Why?

Even as they attempt to proclaim Christ, believers may undermine the good news of salvation by causing (or supporting) division or conflict in their online conversations

with fellow believers or with unbelievers. Social media is not good or evil in and of itself; it is a tool for communication. Yet we can use it for good or for evil. An author commented that “Christians are not exempt from the dangers of social media. Just like anyone else, we can make mistakes. But our mistakes can hurt the cause of the gospel, even while we’re trying to promote the message of Jesus.” Such mistakes include the use of unverified facts, being smug or condescending in our comments, equating the Christian faith with politics and considering the sins of others as worse than our own.⁹⁶

Church leaders and members may feel that they *must* engage in online discussions and make use of social media in other ways. We are not required, however, to use social media. “There is no biblical command to be active on social media discussions. As a Christian, you are free to engage or walk away. ... If loving the neighbors in your digital proximity proves too difficult, it’s okay to focus on loving the neighbor in your physical proximity instead.”⁹⁷

Read Col. 4:2-6. *How can you be watchful and thankful in prayer through your social media use? What are some ways in which you can use social media to support pastors, teachers and missionaries as you pray that God would open “a door for the word”? As God’s royal priests, online or face to face, we should remember that our speech is to be graciously “seasoned with salt.”*

Social Media Salt and Light

The Lord Jesus tells us that we are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13–16). We reflect the light of Jesus, but our social media tools produce their own light. Studies have suggested that exposure to the blue wavelengths of light from electronic screens and other forms of lighting can disrupt sleep patterns and possibly contribute to health concerns.⁹⁸ Yet even without help from our glowing screens, we have reason to stay alert.

Read Rom. 13:11-14. Why, according to these verses, are we to be awake and alert, dressed in the armor of light? How might we be tempted in our online conversations to “make provision for the flesh”? As we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” how might we respond to unkind comments posted online?

There is a significant amount of darkness on social media — inappropriate content, angry arguments or gossip and lies. Such darkness is not produced by social media; the defiling darkness comes from within the human heart (Matt. 15:18). Within our calling to serve our neighbor in love, social media conversations, blogs or videos may provide opportunities to bring the light of Christ to those lost in the darkness of unbelief. We not only put on the Lord Jesus Christ, as the apostle Paul tells us, but we also put on our neighbor, so that we might understand our neighbor’s needs. Luther wrote, “See, according to this rule the good things we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all, so that everyone should ‘put on’ his

neighbor and so conduct himself toward him as if he himself were in the other's place."⁹⁹

Read Gal. 6:1-10. *Is it possible to bear the burdens of another through social media? How might that be done? Which of the instructions in these verses are especially helpful when considering our social media use?*

In social media conversations we can listen and ask questions to understand different points of view. At times it may be more important to listen than to make points of our own. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29). The people with whom we are in conversation, the people who read what we post or watch our videos, are people for whom Christ died. They are created, as we are, in the image of God. We are also called, as we have opportunity, to witness to the truth of God's Word. Luther wrote, "Certainly we are not compelled or obliged to let every insolent person run rampant all over the place and to take it silently without doing anything about it — not if we can follow orderly procedure in defending ourselves ... We must not sanction a wrong, but we must testify to the truth."¹⁰⁰

Read Phil. 2:1-7. *You may not always be "in full accord and of one mind" with your social media*

contacts. How can you still “count others more significant than yourselves”? Do you ever respond in your conversations “from selfish ambition or conceit”? How might you respond instead with the mind of Christ?

The Harvest is Plentiful

Before he was confronted by the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, the apostle Paul (then still known as Saul) “was ravaging the church” in Jerusalem (Acts 8:3). During the persecution, believers fled into the surrounding regions and “those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). As we today are “scattered” across various social media platforms, we too have opportunities to share the saving Word of the Gospel.

A survey by the Barna Group asked: “Has talking about faith become harder or easier in the digital age? How do our online habits impact Christians’ opportunities to speak about their beliefs or to share the gospel?” Survey results indicated that Christians recognize that there are barriers to personal conversation because of our dependence on digital devices, yet technology also provides new ways to witness. Of millennials (ages 20–34 for the Barna surveys) 69% agreed with the statement: “It’s harder to have a private, one-on-one conversation now than in the past because people are so busy with phones and technology.” But 59 percent of millennials surveyed also said, “Technology and digital interactions have made sharing my faith easier.” Of millennial respondents, 61 percent were concerned that talking about their faith would be seen as offensive. The most popular strategies for witnessing online include writing posts, sharing others’ posts and commenting on what others have said. Such proclamation does, in fact, reach others.

Survey results indicated that “58 percent of non-Christians said someone had shared their faith with them on Facebook and another 14 percent through other social media channels.”¹⁰¹

Read John 4:27-38. *Social media provides a wide view of the harvest fields. How might it happen, in witnessing to Christ on social media, that “one sows and another reaps”? What opportunities have you had on social media to enter into the labor of others in the harvest fields?*

A new teaching module for the “Preach the Word” program of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is titled “The Use of Technology in Preaching.” The video-based teaching program is presented by Rev. Matt Peeples, who says of communication technology, “We have not seen a ... shift this drastic since the Reformation. Today the average person can literally broadcast a message to the world.”¹⁰² Blogs, conversations, podcasts and videos can be avenues for sharing with others the good news of salvation.¹⁰³ An online community might also be useful for that purpose. “There are endless reasons for creating an online community. It might be a group of Christian business people who want to build online support and encourage one another in modeling Christian ethics in the workplace. It could be a group of people going through a shared struggle. It might be a network of pastors or church workers working toward a common goal who can benefit from sharing ideas and resources. It could be online Bible study communities

for those whose work and life situations make it challenging to participate in the face-to-face equivalent.”¹⁰⁴

Social media provides unique opportunities for love, service and witness as we live in the places and relationships to which God has called us. Luther comments, “I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.”¹⁰⁵

Holy to the Lord

Commenting on Matt. 7:12, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets,” Luther wrote, “Just look at your tools — at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure — and you will read this statement inscribed on them. Everywhere you look, it stares at you. Nothing that you handle every day is so tiny that it does not continually tell you this, if you will only listen ... All this is continually crying out to you: ‘Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you.’ In this way, you see, this teaching would be inscribed everywhere we look, and engraved upon our entire life, if we only had ears willing to hear it and eyes willing to see it.”¹⁰⁶

The prophet Zechariah speaks of another engraved inscription as he foretells “a unique day” when “the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (Zech. 14:5, 7). On that very unique day, even the most ordinary things will be set apart for service to God and inscribed with a different label than that suggested by Luther. “And on that

day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, 'Holy to the LORD.' And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar. And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 14:20-21).¹⁰⁷

The high priest of ancient Israel wore a turban to which was fastened a golden plate engraved with those words, "Holy to the LORD" (Ex. 28:36-37). In Christ our Great High Priest, that engraved dedication is ours now, as we await the arrival of the Lord's unique day. Born anew in Christ Jesus as God's royal priests, we too are marked "Holy to the Lord," set apart for service to Him and to our neighbor (2 Tim. 2:20-21). Although we may not actually get out an engraving tool, we can — for our neighbor and for the sake of the Gospel — put our smartphones, tablets and computers to good use, envisioning on each digital device the inscription "Holy to the Lord."

Additional Resources

Books

Boche, Ben and Jake Hollatz. *Faithfully Connected: Integrating Biblical Principles in a Digital World*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018.

Bull, Bernard. *Digitized: Spiritual Implications of Technology*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018.

Crouch, Andy. *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.

Websites

Concordia Technology Solutions: Technology and Your Ministry concordiatechnology.org/blog/topic/social-media

Insights @ Faith Lutheran: Digital Teenagers, Parts 1 and 2
(a resource offered by Faith Lutheran, an LCMS middle

school and high school in Las Vegas, Nevada)

blog.faithlutheranlv.org/digital-teenagers-part-1

blog.faithlutheranlv.org/digital-teenagers-part-2

Higher Things: Dare to Be Lutheran (a resource for cultivating a distinctly Lutheran identity among youth and young adults) media.higherthings.org/

KFUO Radio

kfu.org/

LCMS Social Media

lcms.org/resources/multimedia/social-media

LCMS Youth Gathering

lcmsgathering.com/

LCMS Youth Ministry

[lcms.org/how-we-serve/national/youth-ministry](https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/national/youth-ministry)

Lutherans Engage the World (a quarterly publication about LCMS works of witness and mercy around the world)

engage.lcms.org/

Resources for LCMS Church Worker Wellness and Congregational Well-being [lcms.org/how-we-serve/mercy/church-worker-wellness](https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/mercy/church-worker-wellness)

Lutheran Women's Missionary League [lwml.org/social](https://www.lwml.org/social)

¹ Theodore Graebner, *The Lutheran Witness*, December 19, 1922, 407, quoted in Douglas Rutt, “Embracing Gospel Technology,” *The Lutheran Layman*, January/February 2018.

² Information on KFYO programs and listening options can be found at *kfyo.org*.

³ Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1.

⁴ *merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media*.

⁵ References and context reflect the time of the original document in early 2019, but with the fast pace of technology, some references may quickly become outdated and other contexts may become more pertinent.

⁶ Questions and concerns such as these were raised in an overture referred to the CTCR by the 2016 convention in Omnibus Resolution A (2016 *Convention Proceedings*, 267). This overture urged the Synod to ask the CTCR to “study the use and benefits of social media among and in the LCMS” (Ov. 5-08, 2016 *Convention Workbook*, 345). As evidenced by the preparation of this report, the CTCR responded positively to this overture’s suggestion in light of the CTCR’s responsibility to “provide studies of contemporary issues, including current social issues, as they affect the church and as the church may affect such social issues” (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.1[c]).

⁷ Aaron Kheriaty, “Dying of Despair,” *First Things* (August 2017): 3, *firstthings.com/article/2017/08/dying-of-despair*, accessed March 21, 2018.

⁸ Ceylan Yeginsu, “U.K. Appoints a Minister for Loneliness,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2018, *nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html*, accessed March 14, 2018.

⁹ Kheriaty, “Dying of Despair,” 6.

¹⁰ Mark Bauerlein, “Prayer in the Facebook Age,” *First Things* (December 2014): 2-3, *firstthings.com/article/2014/12/prayer-in-the-facebook-age*, accessed March 21, 2018.

¹¹ Bauerlein, "Prayer in the Facebook Age," 4.

¹² Bernard Bull, *Digitized: Spiritual Implications of Technology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 30.

¹³ Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 75, xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/DETOC/assoc/bowling.html, accessed March 26, 2018. Social capital refers to the connections we have with family, friends, neighbors and the institutions of society. Also see, "Virtual Communities: Bowling alone, online together" concerning the social aspects of virtual communities like social media at worldcat.org/title/virtual-communities-bowling-alone-online-together/oclc/320895376/viewport.

¹⁴ John Shinal, "Facebook Can Play a Role That Churches and Little League Once Filled," *CNBC Tech*, June 26, 2017, cnbc.com/2017/06/26/mark-zuckerberg-compares-facebook-to-church-little-league.html, accessed March 7, 2018.

¹⁵ Bull, *Digitized*, 64.

¹⁶ Roger McNamee, "How to Fix Facebook—Before It Fixes Us," *Washington Monthly*, Jan/Feb/March 2018, washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january-february-march-2018/how-to-fix-facebook-before-it-fixes-us/, accessed March 7, 2018.

¹⁷ Julie Carrie Wong, "Former Facebook Executive: Social Media is Ripping Society Apart" *The Guardian*, Dec 12, 2017, theguardian.com/technology/2017/dec/11/facebook-former-executive-ripping-society-apart, accessed March 26, 2018.

¹⁸ Third Article, The Apostles' Creed, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 159.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 319.

²⁰ Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet* (Vatican City, February 22, 2002), II.9,

vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html), accessed March 28, 2018.

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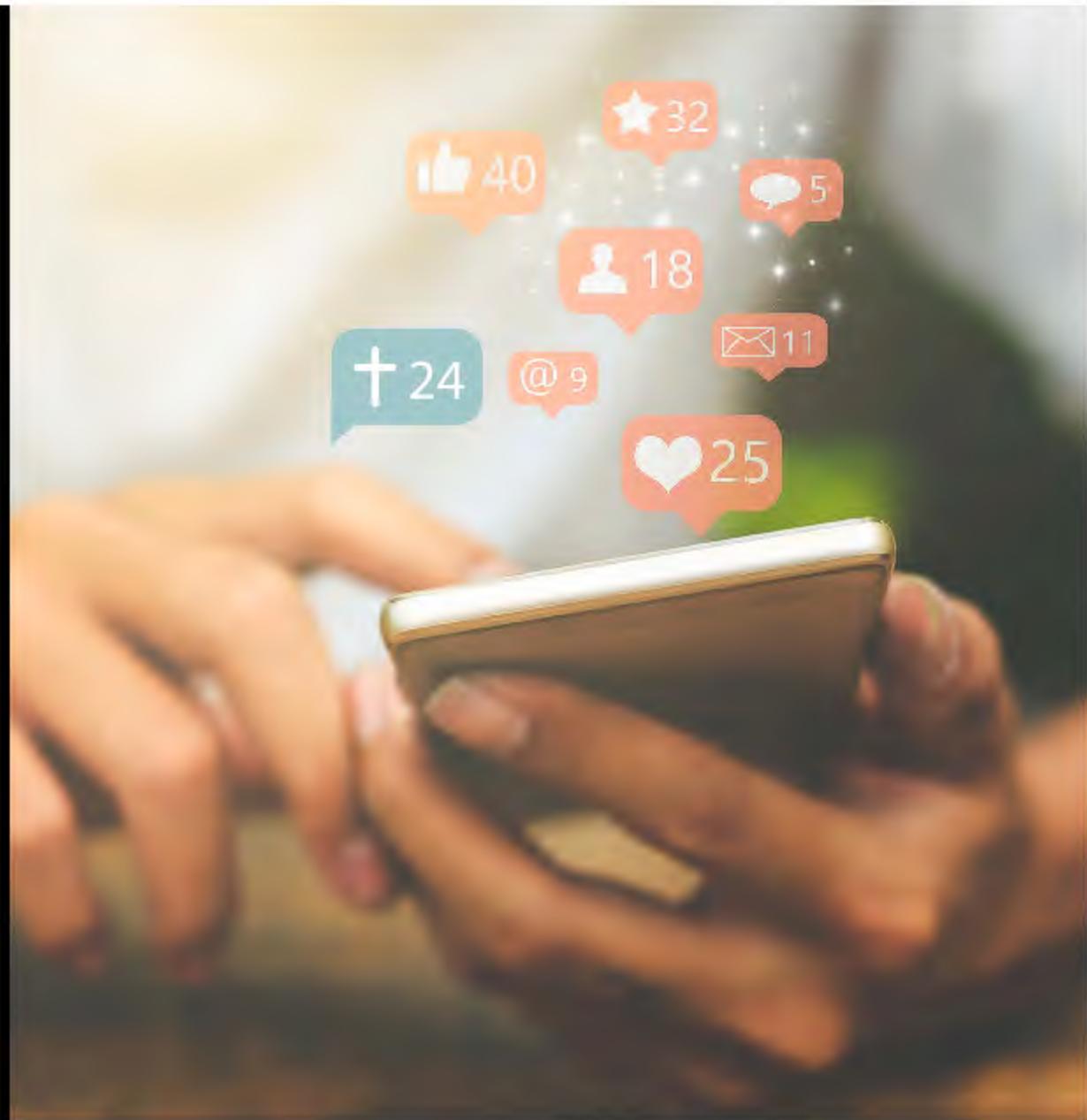
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A SNAPSHOT OF TRENDING TOOLS
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