Digital Discernment: An Experiment in Developing Organic Anabaptist Practices of Social Media Use

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Abstract

In the North American church today, social media is both essential to effective ministry and detrimental to it. The author describes his experiment in applying more-with-less theologizing to whether and how to utilize social media, discusses how Amish Mennonite communities deal with selectively adopting and adapting new technologies, and explains "digital discernment," a practical approach to social media he developed based on clarifying means and ends. Challenges posed by COVID-19 contributed to his conclusion that such discernment cannot be a one-time experiment but, as it is with Amish communities, an ongoing process of negotiating changing circumstances together in community.

Introduction

During the 2019–20 academic year, I joined three colleagues at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS)—where I work part-time—in the annual Scribes for the Reign of God collaborate research group.[1] The topic of our collaborative research was technology—with a specific focus on newer and emerging digital technologies. As a bi-vocational pastor, I had more practical than theoretical interest in studying this subject. The question guiding my research was this: How can pastors discern when and how to utilize digital communication technology—and social media in particular—toward fulfilling their pastoral roles and the church's mission, while avoiding

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[1] I presented a draft of this paper at the Pastors and Leaders 2020 and Deep Faith conference on the theme Shaping Faith in a Digital Culture, held at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, on March 5, 2020. Many thanks to those in attendance who offered helpful feedback. Thanks especially to Beverly Lapp, Andy Brubacher Kaethler, and Brent Greber, who were invaluable conversation partners on these themes during the 2019–20 Scribes for the Reign of God research project, and to Jamie Pitts for directing it. For more on Scribes for the Reign of God, see https://www.ambs.edu/ims/faculty-projects.

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the pitfalls inherent in such technology? This question arose from my own experiences—and those of pastoral colleagues—of attempting to utilize social media for our ministries.

My impression as a pastor is that in the contemporary North American church, social media is both essential to effective church ministry and detrimental to it. Without engaging social media, it can be more difficult to stay apprised of what congregants are going through, much of which they share about only through tweets or Facebook and Instagram posts. Moreover, social media seems to be the most convenient way to stay connected to ministry colleagues, learn what issues other pastors are facing in their respective ministries and how they are approaching them, and stay informed about political, social, economic, and environmental issues that the church must engage as part of its public witness. Yet the reality is that every minute spent engaging social media is a minute *not* spent on embodied, face-to-face ministry—and, given the way social media is designed, a minute spent on social media can easily become an hour.

Rather than taking an all-or-nothing approach to social media, I was drawn to my colleague Malinda Elizabeth Berry's proposal for what she calls a "more-with-less theology,"[2] which she develops from her reading of Mennonite Central Committee cookbooks as a form of practical theology. Berry describes how *More with Less Cookbook* author Doris Janzen Longacre not only provides global Mennonite recipes but also calls Anabaptists to connect their theology of simplicity with their food purchasing and eating habits. Berry describes Longacre's form of theologizing as "organic" or "homegrown" theology. In contrast to conventional systematic theology that aims for doctrinal clarity, Berry describes "organic theologizing" as "a kind of God-talk that emerges from the living, breathing, organic grassroots of a faith community."[3] "The purpose of organic theology and homegrown God-talk," she writes, "is to help communities take stock of their shared

[2] Malinda Berry, "Extending the Theological Table: MCC's World Community Cookbooks as Organic Theology," in A *Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (Telford, PA: Cascade, 2011), 284-309. Cf. Malinda Berry, "The Five Life Standards: Theology and Household Code," in *Living More with Less*, ed. Doris Janzen Longacre, 30th anniversary edition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press), 36.

[3] Berry, "Extending the Theological Table," 288.

experiences and consider what kind of fruit they are producing, rather than viewing church as a place where we shop for unblemished fruits and vegetables plucked from the produce aisles without getting our hands dirty."[4] At the same time, Berry states that organic theology "contributes to the theology and ethics of simple living, a social movement that connects the politics of daily living with a concern for authentic connection with other people rather than things."[5]

In this essay, I describe my experiment in applying Berry's approach to homegrown, organic, more-with-less theologizing to the question of whether and how to utilize social media for ministry. Rather than looking to Mennonite cookbooks as my resource for such theologizing, I turned my attention to the discernment practices of Amish Mennonite communities regarding the adoption and adaptation of new technologies. Informed by these homegrown practices, I then developed a practical approach to social media use that I call *digital discernment*. This approach involves intentionally modifying and repurposing this technology so that it can be used as a means to one's ends rather than becoming an end in itself.

Amish Technological Discernment

Instead of adopting (or rejecting) new technologies as they emerge, Amish communities engage in intentional practices of discernment about whether and how to adopt and adapt them.[6] As computer scientist Cal Newport describes, "At the core of the Amish philosophy regarding technology is the following trade-off: The Amish prioritize the benefits generated by acting intentionally about technology over the benefits lost from the technologies they decide not to use. Their gamble is that *intention trumps*

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 286.

[6] By speaking of Amish communities in the collective, I do not intend to minimize the differences among various Amish groups. My purpose is to identify the implicit theo-logics of Amish discernment practices as described by scholars of the Amish, though how these theo-logics are applied will often differ among the communities—with some taking a more permissive approach to adopting new technologies and others taking a more restrictive approach. Similarly, some Amish communities take a more communal approach to discernment around technology adoption, while others adhere to a more hierarchal or even authoritarian approach. I am indebted to an anonymous peer-reviewer for raising these important qualifications.

convenience—and this is a bet that seems to be paying off."[7] Approaching all new technologies with intentionality can lead to uses that differ from those of mainstream culture. For example, many Amish communities prohibit the ownership of automobiles but do not prohibit hiring a driver to transport them via an automobile. Many Amish communities prohibit having a phone in the home but do not prohibit having a phone booth at the end of the drive, and prohibit being hooked up to the electrical grid but do not prohibit the use of generators or solar panels.

Communications professor Kevin Miller writes that the Amish's "selective use of technology can seem maddeningly inconsistent to outsiders." But, he explains, "there is logic behind it—and one that makes increasing sense to modern Americans as we grapple with our relationship to technology and its hegemonic tendency in our lives. Whatever the apparent inconsistencies, the Amish have managed to keep technology in check, and in doing so they have fostered a sense of community that many of us yearn for our electronically tethered and frenetically paced lives."[8] Below I tease out the logic that seems to function implicitly in discernment around technology in Amish communities.

Distinguishing Means from Ends

Miller writes that Amish communities' discussions around technology adoption are guided by "the *ultimate interest* in keeping sacrosanct the form of community the Amish see as mandated in Scripture and which has been handed down to the present from their European Anabaptist forebears of the sixteenth century."[9] In other words, the Amish begin their discernment around technology by clarifying their *ends* and then work backward to consider whether and how a given piece of technology might serve as a *means* to those ends. Miller discusses the Amish's selective use of the telephone as a case in point: "A plastic rather than rigid posture toward innovations allowed [Amish] groups to successfully leverage the telephone as *a tool for*

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[7] Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019), 53, emphasis in original.

[8] Kevin D. Miller, "Technological Prudence: What the Amish Can Teach Us," *Christian Reflection* 20 (2011): 20.

[9] Ibid., 26, emphasis added.

maintaining community rather than ripping its fabric apart."[10]

Historian Steven M. Nolt observes, "As a consumer community the Amish believe that *moral discernment comes first* and that power arrangements—batteries for clocks, naphtha gas for lamps, propane for refrigerators, and so on—can follow later for those things deemed worthwhile."[11] Once the theological and moral discernment about *ends* is in view, the Amish then have considerable latitude and variety in their discerning over how a given technology might serve as a means to those ends. As Karen Johnson-Weiner describes, "Technology itself is not a threat to the Amish. Rather, *technology is an outcome of particular decisions that favor one way of life over another*. . . . Amish communities are making different choices about technology and about how to be Amish in an increasingly technological world."[12] Amish discussions around technology are not primarily about the technology itself but are about a way of life: what it means to be faithfully Amish. As Newport describes, "The Amish, it turns out, do something that's both shockingly radical and simple in our age of impulsive and complicated consumerism: they start with the things they value most, then work backward to ask whether a given new technology performs more harm than good with respect to these values."[13]

Weighing Costs and Benefits

Even if an Amish community deems a new technology useful as a means to the community's ends, that does not justify adopting the technology. New technology must pass a higher bar of providing more benefits than it does costs. As Donald B. Kraybill and Steven M. Nolt explain, "Although they selectively use new technology, the Amish worry that its use may erode communal life. A given instrument or mechanical device, while harmless in itself, might trigger broader social consequences. *The production value of a new piece of technology is often weighed against its potential impact on the traditional patterns of work and community*. Their cautious use of technology

[10] Ibid., 25, emphasis added.

[11] Steven M. Nolt, "'You Hold the Whole World in Your Hand': Cell Phones and Discernment in Amish Churches," *Vision* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 29, emphasis added.

[12] Karen Johnson-Weiner, "Technological Diversity and Cultural Change among Contemporary Amish Groups," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 88 (2014): 21, 22, emphasis added.

[13] Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 51-52.

. . . hinges on an implicit assessment of its long-term impact on community life."[14] Thus, in addition to the practical discernment of means and ends, the Amish engage in practical discernment around costs and benefits. It is not enough for a new technology to be useful as a means to an end or for it to provide some identifiable benefit. Rather, it must be able to provide a benefit without also costing the community something that it values. As Kraybill and Nolt observe, "Technology that improves efficiency or reduces physical labor is generally accepted *if it does not compromise basic social arrangements*."[15]

Modifying and Adapting New Technologies

Even if a new form of technology has an identifiable use as a means to an Amish community's ends, and even if the benefits justify taking on some costs of adopting it, an Amish community still might not adopt it wholesale. Instead, they often modify, adapt, or selectively appropriate a new form of technology to receive its benefits while minimizing its costs. This discernment practice in many instances requires the community to be *more* tech savvy than the average tech adopter. It takes technological expertise and innovation to take a new technology and modify it to bend toward your desired ends instead of the desired ends of the developer.

Being counter-cultural when it comes to technological use need not mean being anti-technology. As Nolt writes, "Amish dissent from the mechanical mainstream is not a straightforward all-or-nothing proposition. Instead, it reflects complex patterns of discernment that have produced neither a flight from technology nor an uncritical equation of new and improved."[16] And Charles Jantzi summarizes, "Amish generally do not consider technology evil in itself. . . . Thus, rather than opposing all change, the Amish tend to reject what is likely to be harmful to the community; new technology that can be adapted or modified to fit into the existing regulations of the community is accepted."[17]

[14] Donald B. Kraybill and Steven M. Nolt, "Taming the Powers of Technology," in *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 106, emphasis added.
[15] Ibid., 106, emphasis added.
[16] Nolt, "'You Hold the Whole World in Your Hand,'" 27.
[17] Charles Jantzi, "Amish Youth and Social Media: A Phase or a Fatal Error?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91 (2017): 71-72.

While these discernment practices have allowed Amish communities to selectively adopt and adapt new technologies for their ends of community for generations, the question is whether they can be applied to digital communication technologies. Both Nolt and Jantzi describe how discernment over cellphone and social media use is ongoing within Amish communities, and it remains unclear how these communities will be able to adapt these technologies toward their ends without being radically transformed in the process.[18] Kevin Miller thus emphasizes the importance "in Amish-and-technology discussions to avoid falling into a common false dichotomy—to either romanticize as ideal or dismiss as hopelessly compromised." Instead, he proposes asking what we "might learn from the Amish and their attempts to control technology, and then re-contextualize those principles for our habitus."[19] In the next section, I describe how I attempted to do just that in my experiment with selective adoption and adaptation of social media for my purposes in pastoral ministry.

My Experiment in Digital Discernment

As a Mennonite pastor, I share a common religious lineage and many theological convictions with my Amish Mennonite faith-siblings. I thus turn to the Amish as a resource for organic theologizing in the Anabaptist tradition. At the same time, however, I recognize that the social location of my pastoral context in an urban Mennonite congregation radically differs from traditional Amish communities. In my context, social media use is a given for most people, whereas in traditional Amish communities it remains the exception to the rule, despite increasing use of social media among Amish youth.[20] Moreover, despite a Mennonite emphasis on community, my context remains largely individualistic, whereas traditional Amish communities tend to prioritize the needs of the community over those of the individual. These differences and others necessitate the kind of re-contextualization that Miller proposes for any appropriation of Amish technological discernment to my own discernment around social media use. Below I describe how I attempted to apply these discernment practices in my context.

[18] Nolt, "'You Hold the Whole World in Your Hand'"; Jantzi, "Amish Youth and Social Media."
[19] Miller, "Technological Prudence," 21.
[20] See Jantzi, "Amish Youth and Social Media."

Identifying the Ends of Ministry

Whereas the ends of Amish life are the maintenance and preservation of the community itself, the ends of ministry are not a given. In order to identify whether social media could be a means to my ministry ends, then, I first had to identify what those ends are. Newport recommends taking a thirty-day "digital declutter" in order to begin the process of discernment about what one's desired ends for social media use are. During this thirty-day period, one stops using all social media possible without jeopardizing employment. This time is not a "social media fast" *per se* but a time to begin the process of discernment over which tools might serve as means to one's desired ends and how best to use them (or not use them) to achieve those ends.

I underwent the thirty-day digital declutter in January and February 2020. During this time, I took an inventory of the ends of pastoral ministry that might or might not benefit from social media use. Here is the list I developed through personal reflection and conversation with other pastors:

1. *Pastoral care*. Pastors care for congregants or parishioners.
2. *Proclamation*. Pastors proclaim the gospel in their contexts.
3. *Pedagogy*. Pastors teach their congregation how to understand the gospel and its implications for their lives.
4. *Prophetic speech*. Pastors speak truth to power—including the powerful within the congregation.
5. *Prayer and piety*. Pastors cultivate their own spiritual life in order both to minister from a place of orthopathy (right emotions) and to provide an example for the congregation to emulate.
6. *Personal well-being*. Pastors tend to their own emotional, physical, and relational well-being in addition to their spiritual well-being.
7. *Professional development*. Pastors continue to grow and develop in the profession of ministry—to learn new ideas and practices that keep their ministry fresh and relevant.
8. *Parishioner engagement*. Pastors regularly communicate with the congregation keep them updated on the activities

of the church, how they can volunteer, and so on.

9. *Public communication*. Pastors communicate with the wider community regarding church ministries and activities in the community where the church is located.
10. *Partnerships*. Pastors communicate with other churches, nonprofits, social justice organizations, local governments, schools, and so on, in order to collaborate on ecumenical, interreligious, and community initiatives.

With this alliterative list of the ends of ministry (to which more could certainly be added), I returned to examine each social media platform to assess its usefulness in achieving those ends. For each tool, I asked the first questions for discernment: Can the platform be used to help achieve my ministry ends? In most instances, the answer was *yes*, which led me to move to the second mode of discernment: weighing the costs and benefits of adopting the social media platform as a tool for ministry.

Weighing Costs and Benefits of Social Media Use in Ministry

While I discerned that social media platforms could be a useful means toward achieving my ministry ends, I also recognized that they present significant costs. Not only can they waste significant time, they also facilitate the illusion of having achieved ministry ends when the reality only distantly approximated those ends. Instead of providing pastoral care, for example, I might simply click a *like* or *love* or *sad* reaction on a congregant's Facebook post. Instead of speaking truth to power, I might simply "rage tweet" about the latest outrage of a politician or religious leader. These minimal quotients of online pastoral activity might make me feel like I was performing my duties, when in reality I was shirking them.

At the same time, if I removed social media from my life entirely, I would lose the significant benefit of maintaining important connections to ministry colleagues or engaging key aspects of congregants' lives that in many cases are shared *only* through these technologies. As I weighed the potential loss of the benefits against the potential costs of social media use, I had difficulty determining whether the benefits outweighed the costs. I therefore cautiously concluded that I could begin reintroducing social media

into my life but *only if* I could modify and adapt it in such a way that I could maintain the benefits while minimizing the costs.

Modifying and Adapting Social Media for Ministry

In order to benefit from social media platforms without incurring their costs, I had to radically repurpose them. This essentially involved *breaking* their intended primary functions in order to make them *less* enjoyable.[21] Below I describe the specific modifications I made to Facebook, though I made similar modifications to other platforms as well.

First, I "unfollowed" everyone. Facebook distinguishes between befriending people and following them, though following occurs automatically when befriending. It is therefore possible unfollow people and still be their Facebook friend, and friends are not notified when they are unfollowed. By unfollowing everyone, I was able to virtually eliminate the unfiltered feed that normally appears when signing in to Facebook, which I found to be its most addictive aspect and therefore its biggest time waster. By unfollowing everyone and eliminating the feed, I made Facebook an incredibly boring communication tool, while maintaining its usefulness. I could still check on friends' and congregants' posts without encountering the endless, unfiltered feed of distracting information that I was not seeking out intentionally.

In order to make it easier to check on friends, family, and congregants, I created "friend lists" and utilized Facebook groups. The friend list is a little-known tool that allows one to organize friends into categories. By clicking on a particular friend list, one can view a feed of only friends on that list. I created one such list for my congregants and one for the AMBS community, so that in a matter of a couple minutes I could see what my congregants and colleagues are sharing and determine whether there is anything I need to

[21] Following Augustine, I distinguish between use (*uti*) and enjoyment (*frui*), where the former identifies means and the latter ends. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine writes, "There are some things . . . which are to be enjoyed, others which are to be used, others still which are to be enjoyed and used. Those things which are objects of enjoyment make us happy. Those things which are objects of use assist and (so to speak) support us in our efforts after happiness, so that we can attain the things that make us happy and rest in them." Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* I.3. I suggest that social media can be used to attain the things that make us happy but in themselves should not become the things that make us happy.

follow up on directly. Likewise, Facebook groups are a place for people of shared interests to gather, so I joined groups where I could meet with fellow pastors, for example, to offer support and share resources and ideas.

In order to ensure that I followed up in an intentional and personal way after reading a friend's or congregant's post on Facebook, I followed Newport's advice to stop reacting to posts (e.g., clicking the *like* emoji). By removing the ability to provide the minimum quotient of empathy to my congregants and friends, I forced myself to find other, more meaningful ways to engage them. I found that the bar has been set so low by social media that even a personal email or text—to say nothing of a phone call, card, or personal visit—conveys that you care in ways that a *like* on Facebook never could.

Finally, I thought more intentionally about the kinds of posts I made. I decided to primarily post only new information—often through the church's Facebook page instead of my personal one—rather than using Facebook to provide my commentary on society and current events. This decision allowed me to continue utilizing Facebook to keep congregants and friends up to speed on the church's happenings as well as new information about me. But it removed the temptation to use my Facebook wall as a substitute for prophetic speech. When I felt the need to speak into a social or political issue, I had to determine whether it rose to the level of writing a long-form blog post, opinion piece for the local paper, or article for a periodical. If I did not have the time and energy to invest in a more thoughtful piece, then I concluded it was probably something my spouse and I could simply complain about to each other over coffee. If I did put the time and energy into saying something meaningful and substantive enough for a venue beyond Facebook, then I allowed myself to share on Facebook whatever I produced after it had been published or posted elsewhere.

In general, these modifications made Facebook into a boring but useful tool for gathering and sharing information rather than a substitute for human communication and enjoyment. I could use it to quickly see if any of my congregants had a birthday, for example, and, if so, rather than adding to the chorus of friends posting on their Facebook wall, I would take a few minutes to write them an e-mail or card or give them a call. If I saw that a congregant's grandparent passed away, then rather than adding a *sad* emoji

or comment to the post, I would make a note to try to attend the viewing or funeral—or at least to check in with the congregant in person. These may seem like small adjustments. But after implementing them, I noticed that I engaged Facebook much less but with much greater intentionality. Doing so gave me more time for ministry and made me more attentive to the needs of my congregation. In the words of Doris Janzen Longacre, I found that with social media, I got more with less.

Conclusion

Much has happened in the two years since I conducted my experiment. Within weeks of concluding my digital detox, the world went into quarantine after the outbreak of COVID-19. Suddenly, many of the non-digital forms of communication that I had taken for granted during my experiment became impossible. These changes led me to reintroduce forms of social media that I had eliminated or drastically modified. Even such fundamental ends of pastoral ministry as preaching and pedagogy became next-to-impossible without a livestream on Facebook. My reliance on other digital communication tools, such as Zoom or Google Meet, to facilitate personal communication increased dramatically as well.

At the same time, social media platforms became implicated in spreading misinformation regarding election processes and the safety and effectiveness of vaccinations. In addition to increasing attention on these platforms' business practices and environmental impact, such revelations drastically changed the relative weight of the costs of utilizing such technology to the point where the benefits may no longer justify their use, even given modifications and adaptations. These considerations point to the reality that digital discernment cannot simply be a one-time experiment but must be, as it is with Amish communities, an ongoing process of negotiating changing circumstances together in community.*

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