

# Editorial

Andy Brubacher Kaethler

**F**ive years ago, at a workshop for pastors on relationships, mental health, and communications technology, those attending were asked to name ways communications technologies enhanced and diminished their quality of life. One pastor spoke appreciatively about being able to Skype almost daily with his young adult daughter who was in Europe participating in a yearlong cross-cultural program.

As it turns out, his daughter was one of the program's last participants. According to *Mennonite Weekly Review* (March 12,

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2012), the Intermenno Trainee Program ended in 2010 after almost five decades primarily because participants were less and less able to immerse themselves in a new culture and invest in new relationships. The Internet had made it too easy to be distracted by what was happening back home, thousands of kilometers away.

This story offers a window into the paradox and dilemma of technology: technology gives and technology takes away. Often, what it gives is immediately discernable. But what it takes away is more difficult to ascertain, because changes in practices and values are more subtle and long term, and because the most obvious harm caused by the adoption of newer technologies is to people and places distant from us.

While humans have always made and used tools, it is only within the last few decades that technology has come to so thoroughly permeate our lives and mediate our experiences. In *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Neil Postman urges us to be “two-eyed prophets,” paying attention not only to what technology *does* but also to what it *undoes*. Because what

technology undoes is more difficult to discern, he encourages us to “err on the side of caution.”

Following Postman’s call for a two-eyed approach and for caution, the guiding questions for this issue of *Vision* are: *What biblical, theological, and behavioural issues and factors should the church take into account as it discerns whether and how to use certain technologies, especially communications technologies? How might these technologies be positively and negatively affecting the life and practices of the church?*

Max Kennel helps frame the issues by contending that technology is worthy of the church’s deep critical reflection, because it affects spiritual formation, human attention, and our conception of time.

Four essays consider the use of specific technologies in the life and ministry of the church, two weighted toward recognizing what technology *does*, and two toward what it *undoes*. Hannah Heinzekehr advocates for blogging as witness, because it allows for broad communication of a multiplicity of messages. Dan Schrock compares in-person spiritual direction with direction via letters and e-mail exchanges, the telephone, and video. Steve Nolt

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relates how some Amish communities who had permitted cell phone use are engaging in rediscernment, now that smart phones are used for so much more than talking. Brendan Fong and Barry Wong recount one youth group’s attempt to be more present to one another by restricting use of phones at youth group events.

Two contributors explore specific practices of the church. Lydia Stoltzfus reflects on how some technologies have altered attitudes and traditions around getting married. Ryan Harker explains how reading the Bible on electronic devices alters our relationship with scripture, and he advocates for reading the Bible as a “focal practice.”

A number of ethical issues simply cannot be disentangled from the use of communications technology. Mikhail Fernandes exposes the dirty social and environmental realities of e-waste. Evan Knappenberger, a veteran, uncovers the inherent connection

between technology and violence. Steve Heinrichs engages Leah Gazan, Niigaan Sinclair, and Adrian Jacobs in a spirited conversation about the role technology has played in oppressing Indigenous peoples in Canada, eroding Indigenous identities and cultures, and harming the land. They also identify Indigenous and Western technologies that build community and affirm life.

My sermon proposes that the embodied presence of God in creation and the incarnation provides a central biblical lens for discerning how the church shares the good news.

Although a variety of perspectives on technology are represented in this issue, it does not give equal time to opposing views on the value of using digital media for the life of faith. What comes through with some consistency is the conviction that our faith requires us to participate in the work of reconciliation and strengthening relationships between humans and God, among humans, and with creation. In our engagement with this work, how we use technology matters.

### **About the editor**

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