

# Of posts, a parable, and Pentecost

## Using new media to foster faith community

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**T**his spring, I have been coaching a U12 girls soccer team. This means that every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday this spring, I've spent several hours out on a field with a passel of eleven-year-old girls. Getting to know these young women has left me feeling hopeful and at times befuddled. I have been reminded of all the ways that identity is shifting and changing and developing during these particularly fragile, fluid middle school years.

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During a recent practice, one of the girls approached me during a water break and said, "I've been feeling lonely lately, and I'm not sure why." We talked for a while about her friends and how she felt like some of them

were changing and leaving her out. In the midst of this conversation, one of her fellow team members came to join us. After listening for a bit, she said, "Oh, I know that feeling. Everyone has those days! When I feel like that, I just take a selfie and post it on Instagram, and all my friends tell me how talented and good I am. That always makes me feel better."

Needless to say, I was taken aback. Whereas what advice or wisdom I had to offer had been centered on probing the context and content of face-to-face interpersonal relationships, my young team member clearly saw online community as a place to be built up and to have her selfhood reinforced by a community of peers.<sup>1</sup>

There are at least two possible ways to view this interaction and advice. First, one could say that this girl is a true product of the digital age, a narcissistic millennial who unquestioningly adopts and uses technology to reinforce her sense of self, without thinking about the costs to or implications for her interpersonal relationships and her ability to live in community.

This would be a fairly standard mode of thought, especially among faith communities. In his article in this issue of *Vision*, Maxwell Kennel writes, “What we find in Christian community is a depth and richness that stands in stark contrast to the fragmentation and disconnection that we risk when we look for fulfillment in technology.”<sup>2</sup> And this idea that technological community is but a shallow shadow version of “true community” is a common trope when faith communities bemoan the fate of their young adults. Indeed, if you were to google millennials and church, you would be inundated with a host of blog posts, opinion pieces, and surveys unpacking the ways that culture, technology, and anti-institutionalism have colluded to produce a generation of young adults who are leaving church in droves and giving up on interpersonal relationships.

But as Christian cultural scholar Diana Butler Bass noted in a 2013 lecture, there is nothing unique about the questions that millennials are raising and the despair that older adults feel about the future of the church and its young adults. Bass said, “Rather than being particularly unique in their generational concerns, millennials have inherited three significant sets of questions that weave throughout American religious history with some regularity. These are questions related to doubt, disestablishment, and diversity.”<sup>3</sup> Bass would suggest that these questions are universal across generations and have less to do with the ways technology is unraveling our lives and more to do with what it means to be a young adult sorting out one’s identity, albeit in more public ways for millennials today.

To circle back around to my young soccer player and her advice, one could also note her description of the positive impact of technology in her life. Social networks are a place to go to be affirmed. They can be places where a community of friends reside and where you can seek out encouragement and advice.

Perhaps the real truth about technology lies somewhere between these two interpretive extremes.

### **What blogging has taught me about doing public theology**

As someone who has spent the past three years building a blog platform to reflect on the intersections of feminism, theology, and Mennonite identity, I can say that I have experienced technologi-

cal platforms as a mixed bag: an affirming and wonderful place to create a community of generative ideas, and also a time drain and a place for cynical debates that can get out of hand.

My blog was begun as an assignment for a class on becoming a public scholar. The premise of this class was that traditional scholarship is evolving, and those who want to work in academia in the future will need to promote their work on multiple platforms. For the final project for this class, we were required to carve out a niche and create a blog that highlighted our interests and scholarship. As part of the assignment, we were required to post on the blog every day for one month and to seek out ways to promote it. We were graded on our blog's reach and views, so we could not simply post in private.

I was sure that I would hate blogging, but to my great surprise I found myself invigorated by the response that came to my writing and by the new voices and thoughts that I was coming into contact with through these posts. As I look back over the past

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three years, I can see the ways that I have treated this platform as a thought journal. Since blog posts are often short and sweet, nothing like the papers I was writing as part of my master's program, the exercise allowed me to quickly synthesize thoughts or ideas rolling around in my head and fling them out into the world, where they would be responded to, wrestled with, and shared more broadly than any academic paper I've ever written has been. In many ways, having a blog allowed my voice, and the voices of others who shared their thoughts through posts and comments, to be heard far and wide without

waiting for a publishing house or church body to notice us and select our voices as worth amplifying.

I've also found friends through blogging: people whom I've e-mailed in depth, looked up in person at conferences, and gotten to know through phone and video chat conversations. I've helped other people launch their own blog platforms and amplified the voices of many guest writers, most of them from across Mennonite Church USA.

But I have always had a sense that there is a limit to what this burgeoning community can be. As part of an Anabaptist denomination, I am committed to an ecclesiology that emphasizes local incarnational communities as the center of our faith life. If one were to ask the question whether you could be an Anabaptist alone, the answer, in my mind, would be no. The most recent systematic articulation of Mennonite beliefs, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), states, “We believe that the

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church as the body of Christ is the visible manifestation of Jesus Christ. The church is called to live and minister as Christ lived and ministered in the world. . . . The church exists as a community of believers in the local congregation, as a community of congregations, and as the worldwide community of faith.”<sup>4</sup>

At its best, this Mennonite focus on discerning local communities has meant that members of congregations develop deep caring relationships with one another, and many members of the church are committed

to being active participants in the life, work, and decision-making processes of the church. But at its worst, Anabaptist emphasis on nonconformity and tight communities has been interpreted as exclusive or as an unattainable ideal we never can truly live out.

How then are we to understand the implications of these new technologies, which create communities that function in ways so very different from the ways we’ve understood church and learning communities to function? What is gained and what is lost through the use of these new media?

I believe that we must be cautious adopters, thinking through the ways each new technology that we take on shapes and forms us. But in the wake of so many arguments decrying technologies’ ruinous effects on our faith and our relationships, I would like to suggest that in fact technology might be a tool for communicating in broadly positive and perhaps even biblical ways. To explore this idea further, I want to look at two examples: the biblical parable of the sower told by Jesus and the implications of Pentecost for our communication and communities.

## Jesus and the parable of the sower

Mennonites have historically centered our work and witness on the narrative of Jesus Christ. While we hold the whole biblical story to be instructive, Jesus is the lens through which we interpret scripture. Therefore, as Anabaptists, we should seek to model our communication after Jesus as well.

In his book *Speaking into the Air*, communication theorist John Durham Peters contrasts the mode of communication that we see in Jesus's parable of the sower with Plato's vision of communication in the *Phaedrus*. Whereas Plato praises dialogue that grows out of specific love between two intimately connected people, Peters suggests that the parable of the sower praises broad dissemination as the privileged mode of communication.

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In this parable, a gardener goes out and sows seeds indiscriminately. Some of them are choked out by weeds; others fall on rocky soil and can't take root; others are eaten by birds; and some take root and grow tall, strong, and healthy. The gardener is not primarily concerned with controlling the delivery of each seed individually but rather sows seeds far and wide in the hopes that some will take root and grow. Peters writes, "The parable of the sower celebrates broadcasting as an equitable

mode of communication that leaves the harvest of meaning to the will and capacity of the recipient."<sup>5</sup>

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## Pentecost and a multiplicity of messages

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1–4, NRSV)*

According to the Pew Research Forum, Pentecostal movements are some of the fastest-growing segments of Christianity around the world. And although it could be argued that Anabaptists have perhaps focused more on the narrative of Jesus as the center of their theology, we do emphasize the importance of the Holy Spirit. Our confession of faith says, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the eternal Spirit of God, who dwelled in Jesus Christ, who empowers the church, who is the source of our life in Christ, and who is poured out on those who believe as the guarantee of our redemption and of the redemption of creation.”<sup>6</sup>

And indeed, as Mennonite Church USA continues to diversify,<sup>7</sup> it may be that the emphasis we place on the Holy Spirit and the gifts that it brings will continue to grow. When I was completing my master’s thesis, I interviewed Pastor Grace Pam of Los Angeles Faith Chapel, who said, “We were drawn to Anabaptist theology because it agrees with Pentecostal theology. Baptism is for those who have accepted Jesus Christ, so for adults and not a child, and the Spirit intercedes on our behalf daily.”<sup>8</sup>

But Anabaptists have done surprisingly little writing and thinking about Pentecost, one of the preeminent communication moments in the Bible and the moment when the Holy Spirit is sent to the disciples. In this passage from Acts, we see that the Spirit enables communication in multiple forms and in multiple languages. As we read this passage, we can imagine a cacophony of voices scrambled on top of one another. No one can understand all that is being said, but everyone can receive some message that is accessible to them. In a similar way, technology today allows us to carve out niches and to create communities who rally around specific mission and value sets. In many ways, this has been the case for as long as we have had self-selected church communities, but it is perhaps made more obvious by the multiplicity of options that technology offers us.

But instead of understanding these broad-reaching, sometimes incongruous messages as problematic, perhaps we should understand technology as simply another way that God’s good news can be translated and carried. Michael Welker explores the meanings of Pentecost in the book of Acts and makes two overarching observations: first, that “the miracle of understanding occurs not through a unified voice or language but through the cacophony of

many tongues and languages,” and second, that the Spirit finds ways to create new communities that are based on preserving “radical diversity.”<sup>9</sup> While the thread of God’s good news remains consistent throughout, the ways this message is interpreted, expressed, and heard are radically different.

Although we need to be aware of the implications of technology as we adopt it, I would like to suggest that new media forms have made it possible for unique voices to pick up and interpret theology and faith practices in new ways. Perhaps this is the continuation of the Spirit’s work of transforming our words and witness so that all who seek may find something of value to connect with.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are clearly times when social media use is not, in fact, affirming. Bullying on social media is a real problem that could be a subject for another piece.

<sup>2</sup> Maxwell Kennel, “Technology and the Church,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 8.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Butler Bass, “Leaving Church? Generation Next and the Future of Faith,” The Capps Lecture in Christian Theology, November 1, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/120102913>.

<sup>4</sup> “The Church of Jesus,” Article 9 in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), <http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/the-church-of-jesus/>.

<sup>5</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 52.

<sup>6</sup> “Holy Spirit,” Article 3 in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, <http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/holy-spirit/>.

<sup>7</sup> The most recent survey of Mennonites by sociologist Conrad Kanagy indicated that the only areas of growth within Mennonite Church USA today are among racial/ethnic and urban congregations. For more, read Kanagy’s *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Grace Pam, interview by Hannah Heinzekehr on LA Faith Chapel, December 9, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 235.

## About the author

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