

A photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone in front of a laptop screen. The person is wearing a dark watch. The background is a wooden desk. A large black circle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title and subtitle.

Discipling in a Digital Age



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



Discipling in a Digital Age

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DISCIPLING IN A DIGITAL AGE**Leader's Guide**

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Leadership Journal, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

Pastors and church leaders will find this theme useful in understanding how to disciple a "digital native" generation. Advancements in the understanding of neuroscience and the way technology impacts our brains and our relationships enhances the pastoral approach to a generation feeling increasingly disconnected from the church.

For an overview of the specific issues of a digital-native generation, see "Discipling the Hyper-Connected" by Chris Maxwell (pp. 3–5). To think more deeply about what it means to live an embodied life in a digital world, you will find "Engaged and Incarnate" (pp. 11–13) helpful. Both "Neuroscience and Discipleship" by John Ortberg (pp. 6–10) and "Communicating with the Brain in Mind" by Charles Stone (pp. 14–16) take a look at how new scientific information about how our brains work impacts the way we disciple. And "Wasting Time Well" (pp. 19–22) will give you practical tips on discipleship challenges presented by technology and the culture we have built around it.

This theme recognizes that technology is changing the way people think, interact with each other, and communicate with God. We hope you find this material helpful as you disciple a digital generation toward fullness in an unchanging Christ.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.
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Discipling the Hyper-Connected*How to move a distracted generation toward Christ.*

1 Peter 5:1–5

Dismissing my spiritual formation class, I walked to the window and gazed across the campus. I noticed five students sitting together—three on a bench and two on the quad’s grass. But they weren’t talking to each other. They made eye contact only with their phones. They were so close, yet so far apart.

So I decided to enter their world. I texted one of them, “I can see you.” Then another, “I am watching.”

From my perch on the third floor, I watched them. They began laughing and looking around—and telling the others about the texts. They had a common goal: to find me. When they did, I waved and came downstairs to join them. They put aside their devices, and we enjoyed a time of conversation and laughter together.

In making disciples, it isn’t enough to glance from the window and notice. We must teach relationships. We must design groups for growth and apprenticeship. We mentor and coach. But how can we meet this multi-tasking audience right where they are, while also guiding them toward deeper interaction with Christ and each other?

We welcome modern technology but we dare not end our connections there. Is there a way to reach Millennials through digital media while guiding them gently toward stronger relational ties?

A Spiritual Father

Digital natives still desire mentoring. My friend Josh knows the pain of seeking a father. His earthly father was enslaved by addiction and eventually left his family, but Josh still looks for an example, a servant leader, a mentor. Josh says, “The absence of a father is like a handicap; it leaves members of my generation broken. We’re constantly in search of that love and acceptance we didn’t get from our fathers. Many have looked for it in things like sex. We build relationships out of lust instead of love. Spiritual fathers are crucial. They teach us how to love, how to live in community, how to be in a family. Those things are almost impossible to learn alone. Some never get it, so they turn into absent fathers like they had.”

Josh and I began our conversations through email and text. We engaged in brief conversations in group settings. But we needed to move from a third floor window view to level ground, to dialogue, to togetherness. Josh says, “Chris and I began talking at a campus restaurant. Soon I opened up and told him about my struggles. From there, we continued meeting for food and conversation. Trust was built over time; I saw that he was genuine. Now he continues speaking over my life. His influence has taken root and helped changed me from the inside.”

A New Status

Though face-to-face interaction is best, I still use modern means of communication. By engaging social media, I can connect with a 20-something that may tweet if he’s depressed or just facing overwhelming challenges. When we read words of sadness or deep hurt, we might be tempted to simply dismiss them as just another Facebook friend working through their problems. Paradoxically, in our high-tech world, we are better able to broadcast our feelings, yet there’s also a tendency to ignore these hard realities.

After reading one such post, I didn’t respond on Twitter or Facebook. Neither did I call; I’ve found phone calls don’t have the same effect on today’s young people. I needed to initiate the conversation correctly. So I sent a simple text, asking if I could pick him up and drive him to church. His response? “I’ll be ready in 10.”

Once in the car, driving through the north Georgia cool breeze on a cloudy Sunday morning, I asked him questions. I needed to meet him where he was and slowly move him toward growth and development. “Hey, I saw your tweet about wishing you were back home in New York,” I said. “But I know the hurts you carry from your years there. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t know, PC [Pastor Chris]. I just don’t know,” my young friend answered. His uncertainty revealed something that was certain: he needed someone with him.

After a little silence, I quoted one of his tweets. More silence. Then he spoke—not with words, but with tears slowly falling from his eyes. This is a language spoken by every generation—to release, to let go, to refuse to

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hold on any longer. I wanted to talk, to at least say something. But I didn't. He began adding words about feeling like a failure, about fearing the future, about wishing things were different.

Then he said something that surprised me: "I just need to get to church and worship." I asked, "What has helped you through your pain?" He answered with the title of a popular praise chorus. I asked him to confess three lines from that song over and over as we continued driving. His words, aloud, came from deep within. Like a confession. Like a healing. Like a Psalm from David in a cave.

We parked to enter church. Or, maybe we'd just had church. We left the car to walk into the auditorium, but now my friend had a new status: healing.

Perils of Friending a Prof

Blake Rackley, a professor and psychologist, is one of those tech-savvy professors who uses his iPhone and Mac in class. Students often "friend" Blake on Facebook to connect outside the classroom. He says, "It's a touch point, a way to make the first contact. It is a path, not a destination. Social media has become a modern version of shaking someone's hand and saying your name."

Instead of being bothered by the potential distraction, Blake can laugh as he connects to the tech-addicts:

"I use my iPhone in class as a remote to change the slides on my PowerPoint and Keynote. As I was lecturing on a rather boring topic one day, my phone vibrated in my hand. I looked down at what just popped up on my screen. 'Caleb N. has requested to be your friend on Facebook.' I looked up from my phone to the back of the room where—yes—Caleb N. was sitting with this laptop open, fully engrossed in what was on his laptop's screen.

"I looked back to my phone. Do I correct him for not paying attention, or do I take this opportunity to connect with this student? I looked up from my phone and said, 'Thanks for the friend request, Caleb!'

"He turned red. His Facebook status later read, 'Note to self: Never friend request your professor on Facebook while sitting in his class!'

"I made a connection. I digitally shook his hand and introduced myself that day. It is the first step to meeting this generation, letting them know about you and your relationship with Jesus."

Free-Ranging Thoughts

Blake reminds ministers that the first connection isn't the final goal: "Social media is a great starting point. It's about getting their attention. It is width not depth. A friend request, a text, a tweet are ways to reach wide to draw them in, but the goal is not to end there. We reach wide so with some we can go deep.

"Students sometimes are hesitant to get to know me beyond the classroom. But I've bridged some of these gaps by using social media as a stage for my hobby, photography. Students know that I take my camera nearly everywhere. I like to catch real emotions, laughter, and surprise. Once I have their picture, I post it online (with their permission of course) and make the next step. There is something innately connective when another person takes the time to take your picture.

"Once I've become a student's Facebook friend, I take the time to ask about their status updates. I see how they are doing. I stop them in the hall and say, 'Hey, I saw your status this morning. I'm praying for you.' Or, 'Your status made me laugh!' Or, 'I love the picture you posted.' From this, I've been able to forge deeper relationships with these students. They come to my office, seeking direction, advice, a listening ear, a place to vent. It allows me to minister to them in a way that I would not be able to if I didn't have social media.

"Their world is a lot more open than that of previous generations. They allow their thoughts and feelings to roam free through cyberspace. When someone takes the time to notice them, ask about those thoughts and feeling, it opens the door to their hearts."

"Students spend countless hours in my office talking about life, love, and their relationship with God. Social media is their way of shouting to the world, 'Hear me! Notice me! I am someone! I have a voice!' Social media has helped me form relationships with students that have lasted for years. Commenting on a post, a picture, or a video shows you care about what they are doing. It draws them to you.

"Social media gives you an opportunity to step into their world, form a relationship, and change their life. Interesting—that's exactly what Jesus did."

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From Flaky Kid to Maturing Man

Recently, I met with Jonathan Lampley, a college senior. I wanted to review his years of college life and personal development. Noticing Jonathan staring again at my bookshelves, I said, “Four years ago you sat in this office and asked why I had so many books. Now you’re asking for book recommendations.”

Jonathan, typing a few book titles into his phone, said, “Yeah, I hated the books then. I couldn’t understand why you read so much. Now I can’t read enough.”

We had sat in this office for personal guidance and pre-marital counseling. We had been together in the classroom for spiritual formation, the convention center for convocation and chapel, and the small room next door for an accountability group. I asked, “How have you grown in your spiritual adventure?”

Jonathan couldn’t stop talking about his changes, calling it an “evolution of boys to kings.” He said, “Mentoring is the missing link in the chain of evolution that takes childish, mudslinging, tree climbing boys and transforms them into husbands, fathers, and world-changers. Young men spend greater time and effort playing video games and making YouTube videos than building successful careers and families.”

I wanted to interrupt and ask for more details, but Jonathan didn’t slow down. He raised his voice and continued, “There is a remedy to this atrocity: mature men standing up and taking intentional steps to train the next generation. I am a product of multiple men mentoring me in the ways of the Lord and manhood.”

I asked for specifics. What had worked best for him?

“Through my time with you and other spiritual leaders,” he said, “I’ve learned the ins and outs of being a man in everyday life, relationships, and ministry. Your class taught me spiritual disciplines through which I could better communicate with the Lord. Our counseling sessions challenged me to take bolder stances on purity and love. Your mentoring has taken me from a passive, flaky, selfish child to a maturing man who walks with the confidence that he will succeed—and make a difference.”

We sat a moment in silence—a rare experience for us both. I thought about him playing music, riding his motorcycle, proposing to his sweetheart. I thought about those times we talked about emotions and questions and pain. I remembered honesty, confessions, and pursuit of redemptive love.

Finally, we prayed, we hugged, we smiled. I’m excited to watch his development continue.

From Third Floor to The Quad

Relationships like these don’t happen automatically. LifeWay Research reveals that only 42 percent of churchgoers say they are intentionally helping others grow in their faith. We need intentional work.

I’m still learning from my glance out that third floor window. I seek to relate to students, to guide them gently, lovingly, honestly. Not to earn their applause or approval. But to meet them where they are and hear their stories, seeking to walk with them through their life journeys.

From the third floor to the quad, from tweeting to counseling, from global Facebook to friends and family by a fireplace, from a joke to a prayer, from a loud worship set with videos playing on a large screen to a calm pause in one-on-one conversation, today’s leaders can accept the honor of this calling: gently guiding young people toward Christ-likeness.

—CHRIS MAXWELL is director of spiritual life at Emmanuel College in Franklin Springs, Georgia; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2013 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. What has our attitude been toward social media?
2. How can social media and technology serve as an entry point for the type of relationship described here?
3. Why are leaders sometimes tempted to ignore social media, or rely on it too heavily?

DISCIPLING IN A DIGITAL AGE**Neuroscience and Discipleship***Understanding brain science helps us disciple others.*

1 Corinthians 2:16

For an article about ministry and neuroscience, it seems only right to begin with Scripture. So we start with one of the great neurological texts of the Bible: “David put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slang it, and smote the Philistine in his forehead, that the stone sunk into his forehead; and he fell upon his face to the earth” (1 Sam. 17:49, KJV).

Neuroscience has gained so much attention recently that it can seem like we’re the first humans to discover a connection between the physical brain and spiritual development. But way back in Bible times, before EEGs and HMOs, people had noticed that putting a rock through someone’s skull tends to inhibit their thinking.

For those of us in church leadership, information about “the neuroscience of everything” is everywhere. How much do we need to know about it? What new light does it shed on human change processes that those of us in the “transformation business” need to know? Does it cast doubt on the Christian view of persons as spiritual beings who are not merely physical?

Why is Neuroscience Exploding?

Neuroscience studies the nervous system in general and the brain in particular. Neurobiology looks at the chemistry of cells and their interactions; cognitive neuroscience looks at how the brain supports or interacts with psychological processes; something called computational neuroscience builds computer models to test theories.

Because the mind can be directed to any topic, there can be a “neuroscience” of almost any topic. Neurotheology looks at the brain as we believe, think, and pray about God. Researcher Andrew Newberg has shown the brain-altering power of such practices as prayer by looking at changes in the brain-state of nuns engaged in the practice for over 15 years as well as Pentecostals praying in tongues. It turns out that intense practice of prayer means their brains are much more impacted by their prayer than inexperienced or casual pray-ers. To find out who the true prayer-warriors in your church are, you could hook everybody up to electrodes, but it might be a little embarrassing. Paul Bloom pointed out that we shouldn’t be surprised by this; the surprising thing would be if people experience a profound state without their brains being affected.

Brain studies made steady progress through the twentieth century; my own original doctoral advisor at Fuller Seminary was Lee Travis, who pioneered the use of the electroencephalogram at the University of Iowa in the 1930s. But for a long time, no one could actually look inside a working brain to watch it in operation.

That changed in the 1990s with functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), which allows researchers to track the flow of oxygen-rich blood (a proxy for neuron activity) in real time. Now it became possible to find out what part of the brain is involved in any given sequence of conscious activity, and how brain functions of liberals versus conservatives or religious versus non-religious people may differ from each other. It also became possible to find out if that guy in the second row whose eyes are closed when you’re preaching really does have something going on in his brain during the sermon.

Why I’m Thankful for Neuroscience

“All truth is God’s truth,” Augustine said, and a deep part of what it means to “exercise dominion” is to learn all we can about what God has created. And there is very little God created that is more fascinating or more relevant to our well-being than our brains.

Neuroscience has immense potential to relieve human suffering. Already neuroscientists have found ways to alleviate symptoms of Parkinson’s and create cochlear implants. Our church had a baptism service recently and several of those being baptized were young adults who suffer from cognitive challenges. In each case their parents were in tears. For those of us doing ministry to be aware of advances in brain science is part of caring for those in our congregation.

Research into the teenage brain made clear that the human brain isn’t really fully developed until people are well into their twenties. Previously it was thought that the teenage brain was just “an adult brain with fewer miles on it.” It turns out that the frontal lobes, which are associated with choosing and decision-making as well

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as with impulse-control and emotional management, are not fully connected—they lack the myelin coating that allows efficient communication between one part of the brain and another.

This helps explain the ancient mantra of parents and student ministry leaders everywhere: “What were you thinking?” Churches can help parents of teenagers understand why a practice as simple as insisting their teenage children get a good night’s sleep is so necessary. They can also help parents set expectations for their teenagers’ emotional lives at an appropriate level. They can also remind church leaders who are doing talks for teenagers to keep them short!

Neuroscience can also teach us compassion. For too long people who suffered from emotional or mental illness have been stigmatized. Churches—which should have been the safest places to offer healing and care—were sometimes among the most judgmental communities because it was assumed that if people simply got their spiritual lives together, their emotions should be fine.

Rick and Kay Warren noted after the death of their son: “Any other organ in my body can get broken and there’s no shame, no stigma to it. My liver stops working, my heart stops working, my lungs stop working. Well, I’ll just say, ‘Hey, I’ve got diabetes, or a defective pancreas or whatever,’ but if my brain is broken, I’m supposed to feel shame. And so a lot of people who should get help don’t.”

Pastors can offer great help to their congregation when we simply acknowledge the reality that followers of Jesus do not get a free pass from mental health problems. Christians have brains and neurons that are as fallible as atheist neurons and New Age neurons.

Beyond that, I’m thankful for neuroscience because it is helping us understand better how our bodies work, and that enables us better to “offer our bodies a living sacrifice to God.” Knees that spend long hours in prayer change their shape. So do brains.

The Limits of Neuroscience

One of the reasons it’s important for pastors to be conversant with the topic is that neuroscience is being accorded enormous authority in our day—not always for good reasons. I joke with a neuroresearcher friend of mine (who helped a lot with this article but wants to remain anonymous) that the easiest way to get an article published today is to pick any human behavior and . . .

Show which parts of the brain are most active when thinking about that topic;

Explain why evolutionary psychology has shown that behavior is important to our survival;

Give four common-sense tips for handling that behavior better—none of which has anything to do with #1 or #2.

Precisely because neuroscience has so much prestige, those of us who teach at churches need to be aware of its limitations as well as its findings. It’s one thing to say that our brain chemistry or genetic predisposition may affect our attitudes or beliefs or behaviors. It’s another thing to say we are nothing but our brain chemistry.

Sometimes writers make claims in popular literature that would never make it into a peer-reviewed academic journal. One example is a recent book, *We Are Our Brains*, which makes the claim that there is no such thing as free will, that our brains predetermine everything including our moral character and our religious leanings, so there is no good reason to believe God exists either.

People may be under the impression that “science” has proven this. This is sometimes called “nothing buttery”; the idea that we are “nothing but” our physical selves.

Yet let’s be clear: we are not just our brains.

No one has ever seen a thought, or an idea, or a choice. A neuron firing is not the same thing as a thought, even though they may coincide. A brain is a thing, a human being is a person.

God doesn’t have a brain, Dallas Willard used to say, and he’s never missed it at all. (Dallas actually used to say that’s why for God every decision is a “no-brainer,” but I will not repeat that because it’s too much of a groaner, even for Dallas.)

Neuroscience can help us understand moral and spiritual development. It shows the importance of genetic predispositions in areas of character and attitudes—from political orientation to sexuality. But it has not shown

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that personal responsibility or dependence on God are irrelevant. It does not replace the pastor or trump the Bible.

The Neuroscience of Sin and Habits

Neuroscience has shown us in concrete ways a reality of human existence that is crucial for disciples to understand in our struggle with sin. That reality is this: mostly our behavior does not consist of a series of conscious choices. Mostly, our behavior is governed by habit. Most of the time, a change of behavior requires the acquisition of new habits. Willpower and conscious decision have very little power over what we do.

A habit is a relatively permanent pattern of behavior that allows you to navigate life. The capacity for habitual behavior is indispensable. When you first learn how to type or tie a shoe or drive a car, it's hard work. So many little steps to remember. But after you learn, it becomes habitual. That means it is quite literally "in your body" (or "muscle memory"). At the level of your neural pathways. Neurologists call this process where the brain converts a sequence of actions into routine activity "chunking."

Chunking turns out to be one of the most important dynamics in terms of sin and discipleship. Following Jesus is, to a large degree, allowing the Holy Spirit to "re-chunk" my life. This is a physical description of Paul's command to the Romans: "... but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Habits are enormously freeing. They are what allows my body to be driving my car while my mind is planning next week's sermon.

But sin gets into our habits. This is the tragedy of fallen human nature. Self-serving words just come out of my mouth; jealousy comes unbidden when I meet someone who leads a larger church or preaches better; chronic ingratitude bubbles up time and again; I cater to someone I perceive to be attractive or important.

Neuroscience research gives us a clearer picture (and deeper fear) of what might be called the "stickiness" of sin. It is helping us to understand more precisely, or at least more biologically, exactly what Paul meant when he talked about sin being "in our members." He was talking about human beings as embodied creatures—sin is in the habitual patterns that govern what our hands do and where our eyes look and words our mouths say. Habits are in our neural pathways. And sin gets in our habits. So sin gets in our neurons.

Like so much else, our neurons are fallen, and can't get up. They need redemption.

The Neuroscience of Discipleship

You can override a habit by willpower for a moment or two. Reach for the Bible. Worship. Pray. Sing. You feel at peace with God for a moment. But then the sinful habit reemerges.

Habits eat willpower for breakfast.

When Paul says there is nothing good in our "sinful nature," he is not talking about a good ghost inside you fighting it out with a bad ghost inside you. Paul is a brilliant student of human life who knows that evil, deceit, arrogance, greed, envy, and racism have become "second nature" to us all.

Sanctification is, among other things, the process by which God uses various means of grace to re-program our neural pathways. This is why Thomas Aquinas devoted over 70 pages of the *Summa Theologica* to the cultivation of holy habits.

It's why 12-step groups appeal, not to willpower, but to acquiring new habits through which we can receive power from God to do what willpower never could.

Neuroscience has helped to show the error of any "spirituality" that divorces our "spiritual life" from our bodies. For example, it has been shown that the brains of healthy people instructed to think about a sad event actually look a lot like the brains of depressed people.

"Spiritual growth" is not something that happens separate from our bodies and brains; it always includes changes within our bodies. Paul wrote, "I beat my body to make it my slave"—words that sound foreign to us, but in fact describe people who seek to master playing the cello or running a marathon. I seek to make the habits and appetites of my body serve my highest values, rather than me becoming a slave to my habits and appetites. What makes such growth spiritual is when it is done through the power and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul's language remains unimprovable: We offer our bodies as living sacrifices so that our minds can be renewed.

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One of the great needs in churches is for pastors and congregations to experiment with discipleship pathways that address the particular context that we face. Pornography (and misguided sexuality in general) has always rewired the brain. But now porn is so incredibly accessible that men and women can be exposed to it any time they want for as long as they want as privately as they want. Each time that connection between explicit images and sexual gratification is established, the neural pathway between the two grows deeper—like tires making ever-deepening ruts in a road.

Simply hearing that sexual sin is bad, or hearing correct theological information, does not rewire those pathways. What is required is a new set of habits, which will surely include confession and repentance and fellowship and accountability and the reading of Scripture, through which God can create new and deeper pathways that become the new “second nature,” the “new creation.”

At our church not long ago, one of our members spoke openly about many years of shame around sexual addiction. His courageous openness stilled the congregation, and it led to the formation of a recovery ministry that is one of the most vibrant in our church.

The Neuroscience of Virtue

Kent Dunnington has written a wonderfully helpful book, *Addiction and Virtue*. He notes that many federal health institutes and professional organizations assume addiction is a “brain disease” purely “because the abuse of drugs leads to changes in the structure and function of the brain.” However, playing the cello and studying for a London taxi license and memorizing the Old Testament also lead to changes in the structure and function of the brain. Shall we call them diseases, too?

Dunnington says that addiction is neither simply a physical disease nor a weakness of the will; that to understand it correctly, we need to resurrect an old spiritual category: habit. We have habits because we are embodied creatures; most of our behaviors are not under our conscious control. That’s a great gift from God—if we had to concentrate on brushing our teeth or tying our shoes every time we did that, life would be impossible.

But sin has gotten into our habits, into our bodies, including our neurons.

Partly, we may be pre-disposed to this.

For example, people with a version of the Monoamine oxidase A (MOA) gene that creates less of the enzyme tend to have more troubles with anger and impulse control. (If you have that version of MOA, you’re feeling a little testy right now.) This means that when Paul says “In your anger, do not sin,” some people are predisposed to struggle with this more than others.

That doesn’t mean that such people are robots or victims or not responsible for their behavior. It does explain part of why Jesus tells us to “Judge not”; none of us knows the genetic material that any other person is blessed with or battling in any given moment.

This also shows that the people in our churches will not be transformed simply by having more exegetical or theological information poured into them—no matter how correct that information may be. The information has to be embodied, has to become habituated into attitudes, patterns of response, and reflexive action.

The reason that spiritual disciplines are an important part of change is that they honor the physical nature of human life. Information alone doesn’t override bad habits. God uses relationships, experiences, and practices to shape and re-shape the character of our lives that gets embedded at the most physical level.

A few decades ago scientists did a series of experiments where monkeys were taught how to pinch food pellets in deep trays. As the monkeys got faster at this practice, the parts of the brain controlling the index finger and thumb actually grew bigger. This and other experiments showed that the brain is not static as had often been thought, but is dynamic, able to change from one shape to another. This is true for human beings as well. The part of violinists’ brains that controls their left hand (used for precise fingering movements) will be bigger than the part that controls their right hand.

But wait—there’s more. In another study, people were put into one of three groups; one group did nothing; one exercised their pinky finger, a third group spent 15 minutes a day merely thinking about exercising their pinky finger. As expected the exercisers got stronger pinkies. But amazingly—so did the people who merely thought about exercising. Changes in the brain can actually increase physical strength.

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No wonder Paul wrote: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Every thought we entertain is, in a real sense, doing a tiny bit of brain surgery on us.

Here’s a thought worth contemplating: what must Jesus’ brain have been like? Imagine having neural circuits honed and trained to trust God, to respond to challenge with peace, or to irritation with love, or to need with confident prayer.

Here’s another thought worth contemplating: We have the mind of Christ.

That’s worth wrapping your brain around.

—JOHN ORTBERG is pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2014 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. How can we balance understanding of brain chemistry with personal responsibility? Why are these things sometimes dichotomized?
2. What role does habit-forming play in discipleship? What does this look like?
What does it mean to have the mind of Christ? How does this concept play into discipleship?

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Engaged and Incarnate*Interview on embodiment with Michael Frost.*

John 1:9

“The core idea of the Christian faith is the incarnation,” writes Michael Frost in the opening chapter of his most recent book. But Frost, the Vice Principal of Morling College and the founding Director of the Tinsley Institute (a mission study center located at Morling College in Sydney, Australia), is worried that we’ve lost the rich implications of that doctrine in a “rootless, disengaged, and screen-addicted” world. He spoke with *Leadership Journal* associate editor Paul Pastor on this topic.

You begin *Incarnate* talking about the “defleshing” nature of modern culture. What do we lose when we lose embodiment?

In the book I suggest that we find ourselves in an age where an excarnate experience of life is increasingly common. The term excarnation means to deflesh, and is the opposite of the much more commonly used term, incarnation, which means to take on flesh.

The use of web-based communication and social media, the existential homelessness of much of modern life, the sorting of people into tribes (political, theological, socioeconomic), have all played a part in defleshing the human experience. This is also apparent in the church. We are as capable of treating people as disembodied objects as anyone. And yet as philosopher Charles Taylor says, “Christianity, as the faith of the incarnate God, is denying something essential to itself as long as it remains wedded to forms which excarnate.”

In *Incarnate* I explore the dire need for the Christian community to embody faith more obviously than ever, inviting Christians to take seriously the calling to en flesh biblical values in action in context. Excarnation makes engagement with the poor and the lost much more difficult. It contributes to the sense of dislocation experienced by many in suburban neighborhoods. It fuels the steady stream of unseemly Internet-based debates, and it only increases the pervasive impact of pornography and violent video games.

You make a sharp connection between disengagement and “objectifying” others. How does the Western church objectify our neighbors? Please be painfully specific.

When we’re disengaged from people it is much easier to objectify them as “other.” We saw that in apartheid South Africa and in the American South prior to the civil rights movement. We see it daily on certain television news networks which regular decry the “other” as liberal or conservative and dismiss them summarily on the basis of that label. The church has been equally affected by the excarnating impulse that separates us from the other and then allows us to either disdain them (at best) or attack them (at worst).

The most extreme example of this would be something like Westboro Baptist Church. By completely disengaging from the world it is easier for them to objectify homosexuals as “fags” or to picket the funerals of servicemen and women. But even in less extreme cases, we all know what it’s like to objectify others by applying cover-all labels to them such as “liberals,” “conservatives,” “Muslim extremists,” “the undocumented,” etc. In many instances our impulse to objectify emerges from a deep-seated fear that the world is unravelling and history is out of control. This fear leads us to scapegoat others as the cause for the dystopia or disintegration we are observing. When we don’t know any Muslims personally it’s easier for us to objectify them as all being extremists and scapegoat them for the world’s ills. If we don’t ever meaningfully engage with the people we call liberals then it’s possible to blame them for the church’s woes. And when these discussions or accusations are hurled across the Internet, disconnected from personal connection and the rubbing of life against life, the objectification of the “other” can be white-hot.

How do you respond to pastoral sentiments like “Not Tweeting? Repent!”? Can tech ever be incarnational in its posture? Doesn’t it depend on how you use it?

Like any tool, technology is all about how you use it. I was at pains in *Incarnate* not to suggest we should completely abandon social media, but that we should take care in ensuring that it is not shaping us in ways we’re not comfortable with.

Do an inventory of your daily or weekly tech usage to ensure it’s not consuming you and wrenching you from meaningful face-to-face engagement with others. Don’t check texts or websites while you’re connecting face-

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to-face with someone else. Limit your usage of digital communication, as a spiritual discipline. To your specific question about tweeting, when limited to 140 characters much of our communication can lack nuance. We need to be careful about how we use it. Yes, it can be relational in its posture. But the term incarnational literally means to do something “in the flesh.”

So talk to me about the spiritual disciplines related to ... smartphones, for example.

That’s a good example. Folks with smartphones need to be smart about their use. Utilize them for meaningful connection with others, but consider adopting a few spiritual disciplines when using technology. Why always text someone when you can call? Sure, it takes a little longer to call, but engaging someone with your voice is step toward deeper connection than simply sending a text. Take regular sabbaticals from your phone. Develop a daily or weekly rhythm that frees you from the screen. For example, only check social media before lunch, or take Lenten fasts from technology or social media. Take screen-free Fridays (or whatever day suits you). And we need to model such discipline to our children, by developing rhythms that ensure we’re using the medium, it’s not using us.

If the internet and associated digital culture vanished tomorrow, what would the church have lost? What would it have gained?

Look, Winston Churchill once noted that we build our buildings and then our buildings build us. A building is a tool, as is a car or a computer. We build them for various purposes, but we need to be cautious about how they in turn build or shape us. If the Internet vanished tomorrow much would be lost. There are many incredibly important uses for digital connection. I live in Sydney and I feel genuinely connected to friends, colleagues, and associates around the world because of the Internet.

My concern is that many people don’t think hard enough about whether they like the way technology is shaping them, and in particular how it is shaping interpersonal relationships. We need to live a fully embodied existence, in community, and in place. Of course, having global connections is a wonderful aspect of 21st century life, but if technology wrenches us out of a meaningful sense of embodiment, away from connection with neighbors, and out of the place in which we live, we lose something precious and important. Using web-based tools is great, but so is walking your neighborhood, hosting dinner parties, volunteering at community gardens, sharing a table at a soup kitchen, playing with children, gardening, sports, games, and sex. You can’t phone those things in.

What’s your advice to leaders struggling to disciple a digital, disembodied generation? How can we craft a compelling vision for incarnation?

Sometimes it feels like a lost cause. The effects of excarnation are like a cultural tsunami breaking over us. But I suspect many of us are tired of turning on the TV and hearing a newscaster blaming “liberals in the Democratic party” or “Republican conservatives” for all our woes; or checking Facebook and reading ill-informed people making grandiose criticisms of others; or reading tweets telling us to buy chicken from a certain fast food outlet in solidarity with their owner’s theological views; or getting emails that insist we change our profile pictures as a protest against, well, whatever. Leaders should teach about the importance of embodiment, community, and place.

God has revealed himself most sublimely through exactly these things and he invites us to live a rich, physical, communal life in relation to the neighborhood in which we reside and the earth upon which we live. And leaders should also model this vision. We should know our neighbors’ names. We should shop at local stores and know where our food comes from. We should befriend the outsider and take the stranger into our homes. We should practice hospitality, generosity, neighborliness, and place-making. The Internet can be used to contribute to this end, but ultimately it cannot achieve this goal alone. That happens primarily “in the flesh.”

—MICHAEL FROST is Vice Principal of Morling College and the founding Director of the Tinsley Institute in Sydney, Australia; adapted from our sister publication *PARSE/Leadership Journal*, © 2014 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

DISCIPLING IN A DIGITAL AGE**Discuss**

1. What does “objectifying others” look like in your church? In your life?
2. What does an incarnational posture to technology look like?
3. How can we be more aware of how technology is shaping us? How can we help make others aware of how it is shaping them?

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Communicating with the Brain in Mind*How neuroscience can help us engage people in an age of distraction.*

Romans 12:2

It all began in a kid's high chair. It was Christmas Day, 1987, in Laurel, Mississippi, in the kitchen of the home where my wife's family lived. As Tiffany, our one-year-old, sat in her pink high chair, I fed her pureed peaches. As I lifted the spoon to her mouth, I noticed that her left eye quivered like Jell-O. That didn't seem right. My anxiety immediately jumped.

The next day we got an appointment with a local doctor who recommended we see a specialist. After we drove back to our home in Atlanta we saw a neurologist who assured us it was probably nothing to worry about. However, to be safe he wanted to take a CAT scan of her brain. A week later our neurologist gave us the news that changed our lives: "Your daughter has a brain tumor."

I don't recall the rest of the conversation, but even now I can feel the pain that flooded me after hearing those six words. Anger grew in my heart in the subsequent days. One-year-old babies weren't supposed to get brain tumors. Especially not mine.

That phone call began our 25-year journey to save Tiffany's life. After six brain surgeries, multiple hospitalizations, seeing the best medical doctors schooled in neuroscience, and much prayer, Tiffany is doing remarkably well today. We believe God used his healing power through men and women who knew the science of the brain.

Because of Tiffany's illness, I spent a great deal of time thinking about the brain. Living in the world of neuroscience gave me questions about how the burgeoning field might impact my speaking and teaching. My search for answers led me to pursue graduate-level work in the neuroscience of leadership and to teach and write a book on the subject.

The Bible supports (albeit, indirectly) learning about how our brains work. Scripture often refers to the mind (over 140 times) and to functions of the mind like memory (over 175 times). God tells us to renew our minds (Rom. 12:2) and think a certain way (Phil. 4:8-9). Jesus even tells us to love him with our minds (Matt. 22:37). He also commands us to honor him with our bodies (1 Cor. 3:16-17, 1 Cor. 6:19-20), which of course includes our brains. It makes sense that we would seek to understand our brains and use our insights about it to become better communicators.

Attention Deficits

There are so many things competing for our listeners' attention. Today several factors work against us. Here are just a few.

Brains are easily distracted. The brain is rather lazy. Your mind would rather wander than pay attention because it takes more energy to focus. As I write this article, I sit in a local McDonald's (free Wi-Fi and free refills of Diet Coke). To help me focus, I face a wall to block out visual distractions and listen to the sound of a babbling stream through my sound-suppressing headphones. Yet I constantly battle to maintain focus. I sense people moving behind me, hear the muffled sounds of screeching kids, and feel tempted to check email. For my brain, distraction is easier than focus. Your listeners face the same challenge when you speak.

We live in a hyper-connected world. Lack of attention in our 24/7 media-saturated world has become one of the biggest challenges communicators face. Linda Stone, a leadership consultant, describes our current distracted culture with the phrase "continuous partial attention," a semi-attentive state in which people continuously "scan for opportunities, activities, and contacts." This distraction doesn't disappear in our churches and classrooms. It's no longer the fussy baby that distracts us. Smart phones provide instant access to other distractions like Twitter, Facebook, and texting. At my church we live-stream our services. I recently learned that some people in our church watch me online while I preach, even though they are sitting *in* the auditorium listening to me live at the same time. And the feed is delayed by seven seconds. Go figure!

Rampant dopamine addiction: Dopamine addiction is fast becoming a major obstacle to maintaining attention. Dopamine is one of the main chemicals in our brain involved with attention, reward, and motivation. Over 100 of these chemicals called neurotransmitters traffic in our brains and nervous systems. Dopamine gives us that

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nice sensation when we put the final touches on a sermon or see an uptick in our blog followers. It makes us feel good when we accomplish a goal or consume an energy drink. Dopamine provides a pleasant emotional kick. However, when the brain becomes addicted to it, it leads to other destructive addictions and harmful habits. We constantly seek these small “feel good” kicks. It could be as seemingly innocent as constantly checking email or Facebook hoping to see something positive or interesting or as destructive as drug or sex addiction. When people are accustomed to regular dopamine hits, it can be incredibly difficult to sustain their attention when we speak.

Increasing Density

Jeffrey Schwartz, a Christian neuroscientist, coined a term that captures an important idea to consider in sermon prep. The term, *attention density*, refers to mental focus and concentration. At a neurological level, the greater the attention density, the more brain real estate gets involved. And here’s the crucial thing: the higher the attention density, the more people remember. So if we want listeners to remember our sermons, we not only have to concern ourselves with good exegesis and sound hermeneutics; we must also include ways to increase attention density.

Some brain-based densifiers (sounds strange, I know) include application, humor, testing (asking listeners to repeat your point), and spacing (breaking up your talks with other elements like music or drama). Below I suggest a few other principles that can help *densify* your listeners’ attention.

Nudge with Novelty

Neuroscientists have discovered that novelty can increase attention and aid learning. Be sure to begin, illustrate, and deliver your sermons creatively. When we surprise our listeners with a new way of explaining a point, say, the brain feels rewarded with a burst of dopamine. I’ve heard church people effuse about a new speaker they heard on a podcast or at a conference. I don’t tell them, but much of the impact from that new speaker is due to novelty. If they heard the speaker every week, like they do me, he probably wouldn’t pack the same punch he did the first time they heard him. Novelty excites.

In each talk, illustrate or highlight a point in a different way. It can be as simple as using a flip chart to write out a point rather than counting on the standard power point slide. Or you can use an object lesson. Object lessons work so well because one-third of the brain circuits are involved with visual perception. I once spoke on how small decisions we make can sap our passion for life. I used a heart-shaped, helium-filled balloon and poked a few pinholes in it. Throughout the talk it slowly lost buoyancy and vividly illustrated how our slow loss of passion can result from small poor decisions, like the pinholes in the balloon.

At the same time, guard against placing too high a premium on novelty. Novelty grabs attention best when used sparingly. If you constantly employ novelty, it won’t be novel anymore.

Stir with Story

We all love stories. The most popular TED talks often revolve around stories. When we only use abstract concepts, we only engage the language centers of our brains. However, when we tell stories, we engage many more parts of our brains. For example, when we tell stories that include motion (“I ran at breakneck speed from the charging bear”) our motor centers light up. Or when we tell a story that includes something about food (“the seafood buffet had the largest shrimp I’ve ever seen”) our sensory cortex lights up.

When we share a story, it’s as if the listener vicariously experiences it as well, engaging many more parts of the brain than story-less talks. The more parts of the brain that get engaged, the more your listeners’ attention increases and the more likely it becomes he will remember what you say. Story works like a symphony conductor. When she raises her baton and leads an orchestra, all the instruments become engaged at her direction to make a coherent sound. Storytelling does the same thing for our brains.

One caveat: don’t tell complicated stories. The simpler, the better. And remember the popular writing maxim: show, don’t tell. In other words, great storytellers paint verbal pictures by vividly describing scenes rather than merely giving the facts about what happened. Sharing stories in this way will enable your listeners to not only remember your talk but enjoy it as well.

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Engage with Emotion

We remember emotionally-charged experiences better than those experiences we don't associate with emotions. For example, you probably remember where you were when you first heard about the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The visual and emotional experience seared the event in your memory.

The emotional center of our brain, the limbic system, and specifically two almond-shaped clusters of brain cells in it called the amygdalae, use emotion to stamp memories into our brains. Although some speakers can wrongly use emotion simply to make people cry, when appropriately used emotion can powerfully help listeners remember and absorb your talk's crucial points.

Recently I spoke about staying committed in marriage, especially through tough times. At the end of my talk I showed a two-minute video clip about a well-known college president who made the difficult decision to resign his position and take care of his wife full-time when he discovered she had Alzheimer's. The tastefully-done video reinforced marriage commitment by connecting emotionally to the viewer.

Be cautious about using too much emotion because it can overload the brain and become a distraction itself. After using emotion, pause or slow down to give your listeners time to process their emotional reaction. Linger at that moment or they will miss what you say next.

That fateful phone call 25 years ago started an incredible learning journey about how the brain profoundly impacts, life, leadership, and communication. I pray that this brief look at neuroscience and communication will spur your own learning journey about God's incredible gift to us, the brain.

—CHARLES STONE is pastor of West Park Church in London, Ontario, and author of *Brain-Savvy Leaders: The Science of Significant Ministry* (Augsburg Press, 2015); adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2014 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. Which of these are most effective for you as a listener? When have you seen them used well?
2. What impact does the “dopamine effect” have on those you lead? How have you seen it demonstrated? How can you adapt your style to address this?
3. How can you harness the hyper-connectedness of our world to lead people more effectively? What would this look like?

DISCIPLING IN A DIGITAL AGE**Leading Distracted People***5 ways to de-clutter ministry without losing impact.*

Ephesians 2:14

In the 1990s, I was introduced to a new technology that only required my attention every three days or so: the Internet. I would plug the phone cord into my computer and sit through a sequence of bings, bongs, and white noise until I heard those three exciting words, “You’ve got mail!” I was instantly connected to the world through my desktop, and the possibilities were endless and fun. Then something changed. Today the Internet is not so fun. It mostly represents work and obligation and distraction, as attested by my return from a recent vacation, when I was greeted by more than 700 messages. The thought of more email now makes me cringe.

Like most church leaders, I try to maintain the crumbling margins in my life against a world of Facebook posts, phone calls, tweets, text messages, 24/7 news coverage, and constant connection.

Analysis of this colossal shift in culture is not new. Thousands of articles, books, and blogs have been written on how the pace at which we are living is chipping away at our already thin boundaries. A recent *New York Times* article states that 20 percent of Americans are taking some type of psychological drug to cope with the pressures of our brave new world. Our stress and inability to disconnect for rest and reflection is leading us to early graves.

How has constant connection and endless distraction changed the church’s task? How are we to advance our ministries without compounding the problem? How do we shepherd overwhelmed sheep?

How Followers Have Changed

Possibly the biggest transition since the onslaught of media-saturated culture is that the church’s trajectory is being shaped less by where church leaders are trying to direct it and more by the responses of their followers. A leader’s course matters less when those being led won’t or can’t follow due to an avalanche of distraction, competing messages, and overly stressed lives.

Most of the training we receive focuses on the ways of a leader. Allow me to suggest a more pertinent question: How do digital-age believers follow? They are now showing at least three significant traits.

Resistance to Commit

Overwhelmed people don’t commit, at least not long-term. Sure, recruitment has always been an uphill battle, but now the grade is steeper than ever. People don’t search for ways they can be involved; they focus on what they can avoid. The default answer of those we lead is “no” or at best, “maybe.” They’re looking for subtraction, not addition.

This dynamic has hobbled many key events that churches have used for years to shape the lives of their members. Take for example my church’s yearly men’s conference. I’m regularly told that these events are life-changing, but these verbal affirmations don’t match the statistics. Conference attendance has dwindled over the last seven years. By 2011, 70 percent of our attendees were not committing to the event until less than three weeks before the opening session began. Without advance commitments, the event was impossible to plan. It became too much of a fiscal risk to secure retreat center spots that might not fill, so this year we pulled the plug altogether.

I have heard many leaders blame this on the economy or some lack of spiritual fervency, but I could not disagree more. The culprit is not lack of money or spiritual merit, but lack of margin. These spiritual touchstone events have degraded into one more option in an already over-saturated calendar.

Think about it this way: how many causes or events were you invited to before the onset of Facebook, Evite, and other social media sites? And now? If you are like me, your invites to quality events have multiplied exponentially. People you may never have seen again after college or high school are suddenly thrust back into your life with a plethora of baby showers, concerts, birthday parties, and movie premieres about orphans in Africa.

The same is true for those you lead. As church leaders know all too well, it’s difficult to lead a group that is being called in a thousand directions.

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Inability to Focus

One of the Devil's greatest tools is distraction. It's a devastating weapon that often flies under a shepherd's radar. It can alter your course and hinder your purpose. The Devil may smile every time we disobey God blatantly, but he's just as pleased when he lures us into meaningless distraction. Distraction is the enemy of focus and clarity, two components necessary to lead a spiritual life.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape, a senior devil, trains his apprentice, Wormwood, in the art of demonic manipulation. Screwtape recounts a time when his patient—the man he is assigned to tempt—was moments away from a colossal spiritual breakthrough. Seeing 20 years of demonic work beginning to totter, the senior demon suggested to the man that it was time for lunch. Within moments, the patient was halfway across the street in search of the nearest pub, and the threat of a real spiritual breakthrough had passed.

These minor distractions—constant tweeting, text messages, calendar reminders, anxiety-laced news—take us away from the stillness needed to seek God.

Researchers suggest this environment actually changes the neural transmission systems in our brains; those you lead may no longer physically have the ability to focus for extended periods. This is a serious game changer!

Lack of Living Examples

Without examples, people can't follow. There is nothing more countercultural than living a deliberate life infused with margin. Unfortunately, in today's church culture, busyness for God masquerades as effectiveness in leadership. This threat and its spiritual consequences have gone unidentified by the bulk of religious leaders, so entire church cultures and staffs emulate their manic ministry models.

From the Hebrew idea of shalom to the ecclesiastical mandate of seasonal and balanced lives, the Word of God is clear: let your life flow from a divine center of peace. While pursuing this spiritual discipline is always a big topic at weekend retreats, rarely if ever will it appear on a leader's strategic planning sheet or daily calendar.

Instead we tend to cram our calendars and overwork our staffs, volunteers, and members to the point of exhaustion. Then we tell them to obey the Sabbath so that they can recover and rest. But we are leading and working at a pace that far exceeds a Sabbath's ability to restore. Christian leaders need to emanate margin and peace as a lifestyle before others will follow.

5 Keys to De-cluttered Ministry

Shepherding overwhelmed people begins with five elements.

1. Model margin and peace. Overwhelmed people need a place to rest, a shelter from the storm. By becoming people of margin, leaders maintain space so others know they can come to us in the midst of life's storms. When a pastor regularly displays an air of busyness and distraction, or is overwhelmed with too many spinning plates, he or she loses the ability to become a source of restoration for others.

So how do we do this? First by dismantling the two areas that clutter our lives: communication and scheduling.

Many leaders today communicate too much. They feel a need to answer every message that enters their inbox, even if this is an impossible task. Email and text messaging are cheap and easy forms of contact that provide a sense of accomplishment once answered. But a high-level leader shouldn't depend on these media to shepherd a flock. The more you rely on email or other digital contact points, the more you will be bound by them. The capacity of your communication devices quickly outstrips your own capacity.

Six months ago, I began to wean my leadership from digital connectivity. I traded my laptop for a tablet because the inconvenient in-screen keyboard and limited functionality tends to keep me off the Internet. For bigger projects I went back to a desktop system, as I tend to focus on my work better when I'm not in a coffee house. I also found that I managed my time more effectively with limited access to the Internet.

I try to answer fewer than 10 emails per day, only the most important. Otherwise I return emails with a phone call, a tactic that has given me many more pastoral opportunities.

If I know I am going to see a coworker later in the day, I will respond in person. Not only has this lessened my digital footprint, but it has also increased the quality of my communication with coworkers. I give myself a 48-

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hour window to respond to all emails and texts as long as they are not time-sensitive or critical. I have found that people are willing to accept my limited connectivity if I am fully present and engaged with them in person.

I also made a major shift in my scheduling paradigm. In the past, I felt guilty if every hour of my week was not booked with some meaningful activity. But I didn't have room for the unexpected delays and divine appointments God constantly brings my way. Now, I intentionally leave 25 percent of my weekly hours unfilled, a life-saving 10 hours per week. These hours are usually filled with the type of quality people-ministry that drew me to the pastoral vocation in the first place.

2. Do what you do best. The church needs to get back to majoring in what it does best. Modern church bulletins often blend essential church functions and an eclectic mix of opportunities ranging from Hikers for Jesus to Quilters for Christ. While I don't think these extra-curricular ministries are ineffective, they shouldn't be confused with the primary business of the church.

The average follower spends more time editing their socio-spiritual lives than filling them, and their discretionary time has not increased with these options. By providing a smorgasbord approach to church functions, you water down the importance of the events where the church truly shines. Praying together and discussing the Scripture together have suffered from the presence of too many optional activities.

This is something Costco, the warehouse superstore, figured out years ago. Unlike many of their competitors, Costco offers only a limited selection for their customers. At Costco you will only find one brand of ketchup. Average grocery store shelves are crammed with 40,000 products, but Costco only stocks 4,000. Costco found that consumers are willing to buy in greater quantity when they are offered fewer options. When their choices are focused, shoppers are willing to make deeper commitments.

There is certainly a place for social activities; they open doors to relationships with newcomers. But do pastors need to organize and execute them? I believe we should encourage our people to organize these events outside the church's walls, promoting them through word of mouth and personal social networks. In church communications, they can be listed secondarily to the primary activities. This keeps church functions to a minimum and trains people to take missional initiative.

3. Go deep, not wide. While today's distracted culture spawns shallow commitments to many things, people will make incredibly strong commitments to what they believe offers authentic relationship and spiritual impact.

Last year I struggled to get 20 men to attend our weekend men's conference, feeling more like a salesman than a pastor. But things are different with the Joshua Project, a nine-month discipleship journey that requires participants to commit nine Saturday afternoons, two four-day retreats, a 600-page reading list, and \$500 in cost. This coming Sunday, 16 men will show up to be considered for 10 spots in this year's project. I had to beg people to come to the men's conference, but we have a surplus for the Joshua Project. Do you see the difference?

Maximum impact will be found by going deeper, not wider. The ministry width you seek will come as you focus on digging deeper.

4. Share common vision. The larger the organization, the more difficult it can be to achieve common vision and synergistic scheduling. Churches that lack cohesion often overwhelm their followers with too many choices. Overwhelm today's digital followers, and they will just hit delete.

If your church's overall objective is intentional discipleship, then all ministries from children's to adults' should pursue this with a passion. You don't want the men's ministry promoting one theme, women's another, and children's a third. It's not that neighborhood outreach, social justice, and personal fitness are unworthy goals, but as the old hunter's saying goes, "If you aim at two rabbits, you're guaranteed to hit none."

Common vision also aids in synergistic scheduling. Before we began to pursue a more unified vision as a staff, it was common to find ministries training their volunteers on different days toward different objectives, a very overwhelming experience. This January's all-church volunteer training day attempts to unify vision between ministries at a single event.

If all ministries hold the same values, it is much easier to host multiple-ministry events, an important strategy for trimming the fat off flabby church calendars. A great goal in this area is for all individual ministries to

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partner with another ministry on 30 percent of all planned events. That can happen when they're aiming at the same goal. With fewer events on your calendar, those remaining benefit from synergistic partnering.

5. Set a pace. While I am not a great runner, I excel in one area: pacing. I know within three seconds the exact pace at which I am running. This ability allows me to run faster times and farther distances because I don't overexert myself in the first half of the race.

In the same way, the organization you lead has a rhythm and a pace. Knowing when you're moving too fast or too slow will help you to get the most out of yourself and the people you lead.

Mandate a leadership rotation. Limit small groups to eight-week sessions with four-week breaks in between. Shut down the lion's share of ministry gatherings during Advent and Lent so people can catch their spiritual breath. These tactics will actually quicken volunteers and leaders.

Clarity at the Core

The issue of ministering to an overwhelmed and distracted culture is one of the greatest challenges for today's church. The world is not slowing down anytime soon.

The church sits at a crossroads. Will we continue to align ourselves with the pace of this world, or will we pause and reflect on our ancient foundations and true calling? According to Ephesians 2:14, Jesus is our peace. If our lives don't reflect this, we are living apart from a divine reality. When divine realities become lived expressions, the kingdom of God is made manifest on earth. The church must overwhelm its people with only one thing: the peace and presence of God.

—ADAM STADTMILLER is associate pastor at North Coast Calvary Chapel in Carlsbad, California; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2013 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. What kinds of commitments do we ask from our leaders and volunteers? How could we go deeper, rather than wider?
2. List all the ministries in your church. What is the core value of each? How could you get these to more closely align? How would that change the way you do ministry at your church?
3. How do you know when your ministry is moving too fast? Too slow? How is ours moving? How could we ensure it's moving the right pace?

DISCIPLING IN A DIGITAL AGE**Further Exploration**

Resources for discipling in a digital age.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “Is Our Church Discipling?” Assessment Pack
- “Using Technology and Social Media in Your Ministry” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Building a Culture of Discipleship” Training Theme
- “Discipleship Pack” Training Track

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Click 2 Save: The Digital Ministry Bible by *Elizabeth Drescher and Keith Anderson*. Social media provide an opportunity for congregations to open the doors and windows to their congregational life before people ever step inside. It’s no longer all about “getting your message out” as if people are passively waiting for the latest news from the parish, diocese, or national church. Rather, it’s about creating spaces where meaningful relationships can develop. This book is a practical resource guide for religious leaders who want to enrich and extend their ministries using digital media like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and church or personal blogs. (Morehouse, 2012; ISBN: 978-0819227744)

Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World by *Adam Thomas*. This time in our society is unlike any other. People communicate daily without ever having to speak face to face, news breaks around the world in a matter of seconds, and favorite TV shows can be viewed at our convenience. We are, simultaneously, a people of connection and isolation. As Christians, how do we view our faith and personal ministry in this culture? Adam Thomas invites you to explore this question using his unique, personal, and often humorous insight. Thomas notes, “[The Internet] has added a new dimension to our lives; we are physical, emotional, spiritual, and now virtual people. But I believe that God continues to move through every facet of our existence, and that makes us new kinds of followers. We are digital disciples.” (Abingdon, 2011; ISBN: 978-1426712203)

Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith by *Shane Higgs*. In many of our Christian lives and ministries we understand that as long as our message stays the same, it doesn’t matter if our methods change. Higgs challenges this line of thinking by using the hidden power of technology to demonstrate that changing our methods always leads to the changing of our message. In looking deeper at the methodologies of today’s high-tech industries, he shows us that technology has the ability to shape our faith in unexpected ways. If we remain incognizant and uncritical of this undercurrent, the technologies we do use may in turn end up using us. Shane calls us to keep alive and awake in this modern digital age, as hidden things have far less power to shape us when they are no longer hidden. (Zondervan, 2009; ISBN 978-0310293219)