

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 4/26/2024

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

The Church has frequently been perceived as not in tune or up to speed with modern technology. I have even heard people talk about bringing the Church kicking and screaming into the 19th Century. Generally, church people get comfortable with how we do things and prefer that things stay the same. Some even focus on going back to the “good old days” of how they remember things having been. This often happens when the perception is that, because things were “better” then (better attendance, greater faith, more children, etc.), returning to those practices will cause things to return to the way they were then, despite existing in an ever-changing world.

In the past few weeks, I’ve had several conversations about the way the Church has adapted to the technology of the day to try to better reach people. Sometimes this has been by choice. Sometimes by necessity. Sometimes new technology has been thrust upon the Church.

In Luke 5, JESUS is standing by the lakeshore when a crowd of people comes to listen to him. JESUS gets into one of the boats there and asks Peter, the owner of the boat, to put out a bit from shore. Then JESUS teaches from the boat. JESUS does this because the water will act as an amplifier for HIS voice, and everyone will hear HIM. JESUS is using the “technology” of HIS day to get HIS message to a larger number of people than would have happened if HE had spoken from the land.

Our church council has been reading Inspired by Rachel Held Evans. This month we read a fictitious story about a long-ago group of Christians receiving a letter from the Apostle Paul. The Christians, men and women, masters and slaves, all come together in one house to share a meal and hear the reading of the letter. At the time Paul supposedly wrote this letter, he was in prison. Nevertheless, by writing a letter and having it delivered and read, he can reach a group of people who live some distance from his location. The group listening to the letter is radical for the time because men and women, and masters and slaves didn’t normally socialize with each other. But the Christian Church is different than the culture of that time and views one another as equals. And Paul’s letter later will be carried and read in another community like this one, spreading his message further. This was the technology of the First Century.

In 1517, Martin Luther posted what has come to be identified as “The 95 Theses” on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany. Luther was a professor at the university in Wittenburg, teaching the Bible and theology to those studying to become priests. As part of their education, these students would have to pick a thesis statement and either challenge or defend it to the professor who posted it. Such statements were nailed on the community bulletin board for students and others to review. In Wittenburg, the community bulletin board was the side door of the Castle Church. Luther, being the over-achiever he was, wrote ninety-five statements, rather than the two or three or four that most professors would. Luther’s statements were directed at what he believed to be errors and incorrect interpretations of scripture by the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. Luther believed that only students and the few people who lived in Wittenburg who could read would see these. However, a new technology, the movable type printing press, had recently come onto the scene. Someone copied Luther’s statements and had them printed and distributed, touching off the Reformation.

When the pandemic hit our world in 2019, many churches were printing paper copies of their Order of Worship, called a bulletin. Some churches were moving into using methods of projecting the service on the wall for people to read, saving the congregation the cost of paper and printing, and allowing people to look up instead of down. The pandemic, however, forced technology upon the Church so that new ways of doing things quickly developed. Live-streaming services and meeting online via ZOOM or similar means helped to keep people safer when it was risky to meet in person. (Our Pacifica Synod Assembly this year will be an a-ZOOM-bly which will include more people from Southern California and Hawaii than would be able to attend if we met in person.) We send our information weekly and daily to members rather than the monthly newsletters of previous days while recognizing that some need to receive this information by mail for lack of internet connection. Email, phone calls, and Facetime connections allow information to be shared quickly and conveniently to accommodate the needs of busy people today.

Technology is a wonderful tool given to us by GOD. Embracing it and finding new ways to utilize it is helping the Church quickly and timely reach individuals who might otherwise have been overlooked. There are always tradeoffs; some have used technology to avoid important face-to-face gatherings. For others who cannot attend, technology connects them in ways that previously would not have happened. Lately, I've been encouraging people to "like us" on Facebook as this increases our presence on the internet and makes it more likely that those using that technology to seek out a church might find us. We can be grateful to GOD for the innovations that come to us. Rather than resisting them and the changes they bring, we can see them as new tools for accomplishing what JESUS called us to do 2,000 years ago—to make disciples of all nations.

In CHRIST's name,
Pastor Jeffrey