



Faith and the Internet

by Rev. Richard Chrisman

When I'm on the T and about to get off the train, and looking down the length of the car at everyone working their cellphones, I am so tempted to say, "It's nice to see everyone's head bowed in prayer!" But I never do, although that's sure what it looks like. If only.

But seriously, coping with the internet and all our devices is a spiritual matter. We just have to get a hold of ourselves or go crazy. Infinite news, infinite entertainment, infinite facts, infinite socializing, infinite work—we are bound to ride this Niagara right over the falls.

It may just come down in the end to old-fashioned self-discipline. But we know how hard it is to curb guilty pleasures. We will have to enlist God on our side. I think it is that serious.

What are the chances of that happening?

Well, is this where church might come in? That's why this

issue of *The Columns* is dedicated to faith and the internet.



Technology Teaser

by Rev. Richard Chrisman

Which invention has had the greatest impact on human life?

- Gunpowder
- Printing press
- Antiseptics and Antibiotics
- Combustion engine
- Telephone
- Television
- Contraception
- Internet

Teen Voice

by Henry McPherson

In the modern world, social media provides people the opportunity to communicate with each other in ways previously unavailable, but social media alone have their assets and liabilities. Here are some thoughts about social media according to a teen, and ways that parents can help set their minds at ease as it pertains to social media.

At its core, the purpose of social media is to bring people together—people can gather and discuss their shared interests or ideas, or ask questions and contact people who can answer them on the basis of lived experience; or people can establish an online

persona, filling the need for human contact that everybody craves.

The insidious detriments of social media are the result of misuse of its benefits. You can pick the perfect name for a baby or discuss a video game, but the internet can also serve to isolate the kinds of opinions that one consumes,



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trapping them in an ideological bubble that warps their perception of reality and gives rise to extreme ideas. While social media puts you in contact with some very helpful people, the same online anonymity helps criminals from the other side of the world or right in your neighborhood blackmail you with no fear of repercussion. While physical bullying is at an all-time low, cyberbullying has served to make up for that particular statistic, just in a different form.

Social media is truly a dangerous place. For children nowadays, the internet is more dangerous than ever. However, as children get older, they are going to inevitably use the internet and meet people through it at some point. If you are a parent, you may hear other parents advocate for monitoring systems and draconian policy. As a teenager, I must warn you: this will never work. Parents under the misconception that they know exactly what their child is doing online are the easiest to circumvent, and supposedly airtight parental restrictions will always have faults that any tech-savvy child can exploit to access things you prohibit. If you trust yourself as a parent, that you've raised your kid to be the type of person you want them to be, you need to establish a relationship of trust when it comes to the internet. The only feasible way to know what your child is doing online is to tell them the following: "I'm not going to police you, but if you find anything you don't like, know that

you can come to me, and we can process it together."

“While physical bullying is at an all-time low, cyberbullying has served to make up for that particular statistic, just in a different form.”

The best thing a parent can do about a tech-savvy kid is to make sure that the child knows that their parents are a resource they can use if they ever feel trapped or afraid on the internet. Kids know more about the technology than you do. As a force looming over their heads, you aren't going to learn anything. As a resource they can reach out to, you're going to learn everything you need to.



The internet—is it good for youth?
Points that surfaced in Rev. Rick's conversation with the Rev. Amy Clark Feldman, Waban Union Church.

Considering the waters they're swimming in, our children need totally safe harbors with trusted adults and tools to quiet. Church can be that harbor.

Church was supposed to be counter-cultural. Now's our chance

to push against the trends. We are not alone—others want support in limit-setting. We get our parents together once a month for support.

"Tools to quiet" are as simple as leave phones behind, or stow them. We provide a basket for that, even on overnights. They love it; they want to be present in the experience. We begin and end youth events with a "singing bowl" and lengthen the time gradually from one to two or three rings. Candle-lighting is big.

School bullying has always been around, but kids used to escape it at home. No more—the cyberbullying and the drama of teen chit-chat follows them. There's no break from it.

Age dictates a watershed when it comes to tech controls. It seems to be somewhere around age 13 for the iPhones. But it's hard to manage when they clamor for what everyone else has.

Children, in their own drive for competence and coolness, underestimate savvy predators. Often, unwelcome sites intrude unmasked.

We don't want to underestimate youth in our time. We may think they are swamped, but they just may be more mature than we were, having to make sense of the good, the bad, and the ugly.



**Future Topics for
The Columns:**
February—**Climate**
March—**Lent**

A Family Internet Policy

by *Dr. Elizabeth Windsor*, Interim Director of Christian Education, Eliot Church

Parents want the best education for their children. In the age of the internet, that education must include technological mastery that allows children and teens to access information, content, research, teachers and fellow students online. Becoming media literate is a primary goal for both students and parents, but there are some important caveats to remember!

Keeping up with the demands of our own media lives is exhausting, never mind having to monitor what our students are doing online. But there can be serious penalties for abuse of internet privileges that not only apply to students, but to their parents as well.

Most schools have an “Internet Usage Policy” included in their Student Behavior Handbooks. The rules and consequences of abuse are laid out explicitly (you can find the Newton Public Schools Internet Usage Policy online). Many area school systems require that parents review the policy at the beginning of the school year and ask that both parent and child sign it.

As children move through the grades, it is normal for tweens and teens to want to push for more online access to spaces that are not connected to school and just as normal for parents to worry about how the internet is being used by their children. An “at-home”

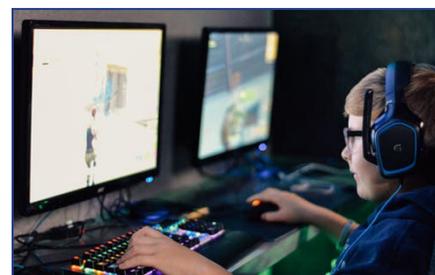
written and signed agreement is a good idea for families to negotiate their way together as children grow. Here are some ideas to include in your “Family Policy”—feel free to add your own!

- What content is age appropriate?
- How much time is allowed for being online?
- What are the rules around devices—can they be brought to the dinner table? Are family members allowed to have their devices at night in their rooms (that includes parents too!)?
- What do you agree together is the appropriate amount of sharing about your family online? Many children aren’t given the chance to opt out of their parents’ Facebook posts. Sharing a sibling’s information and news may not be acceptable to the sibling. Everyone’s privacy has to be respected; including Mom’s and Dad’s.
- How do kids and parents address issues that may come up regarding the inappropriate use of the internet by your child?
- How will you as a family deal with one of your family members being bullied online?

Sitting down together and creating a policy for your family will foster conversation about online use that can further the trust between parents and their children. Be sure to build in an annual review of the policy and give kids the

opportunity to renegotiate with you as they reach milestones or birthdays, so that their use develops in appropriate ways as they grow.

The more discussions you have and the earlier those discussions begin will make it easier for you to trust your children and give your children clear boundaries while making it safe to share with you any difficulties or concerns they may have along the way.



Program with Matt Carriker in the Spring (Date TBA)

Pastor, Agape Spiritual Community Waltham Protestant Chaplain, Brandeis University (www.agapewaltham.org)

There is an illusion of connection with social media. What is the balance in our lives between us using our technology and our technology using us? How can we tell? How can we be more conscious and interrupt compulsive behavior with technology? In this event reflecting on a spiritually healthy relationship with technology, we’ll explore addiction, connection, and freedom.

Millennial View

by *Torrence Chrisman*, a graduate of UMassBoston and the Old South Sunday School.

As a kid growing up in the '90s, the concept of the smartphone was still a dream in the mind of Steve Jobs. I couldn't ask my friends Siri or Alexa what the weather was outside. The desktop computer in my bedroom didn't have internet, and television shows were on an actual television. I didn't receive my first cell phone until the end of my freshman year of high school. Mind you, the only thing I could really do with it was call and text friends and family.

It's astonishing to see kids nowadays and their usage of technology. Numerous times on the subway, I notice a kid in a stroller, a car holder for a cellphone attached. The kid's eyes were glued to the phone screen playing a show or movie. The parent/guardian/babysitter would be nearby and in some cases focusing their attention on their own phones.

When I was young and in a stroller, I vividly remember being engaged with the adult I was with and that was what was keeping me engaged. I fear that as kids come in contact with technology and the internet at such a young age, their dependency will only increase.

I think technology and the internet are great tools only if they are used in moderation. There are easy ways to help limit the exposure. Growing up, my parents put on limits. Today when I go out and socialize,

I keep my phone in my pocket. This way I can give the person(s) I am with my undivided attention. So as long as it is used in moderation, humans and technology will be able to coexist. Rely on it too heavily, and it will set humanity on a collision course with catastrophe.

For self-managing apps: www.spyzie.com/

To learn about internet activism: www.STOP5Ginternational.org



YOUTH RELATED LINKS FOR PARENTS

Rev. Feldman, Waban Union Church

Fuller Youth Institute (FYI): fulleryouthinstitute.org/category/technology is a link to a number of Technology-related articles/posts coming out of FYI that may be helpful.

Also from FYI - this is a Parents' Guide to navigating Tech. They encourage you to buy the book and package, but there are also free resources: fulleryouthinstitute.org/technology

Screenagers - Tech Talk Tuesdays: screenagersmovie.com/tech-talk-tuesdays. This is a secular weekly blog that can spark some interesting conversation.

Yale Youth Ministry—Andy Root and "Ministering to Youth Growing up in a Screen-based World." This is a little dated and it's been a while since I've watched it fully, but I always appreciate Andy Root's perspective and relational approach to youth ministry: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLd8AZSL0LG2MsERvrIFZyZ8M7_DbVCvi

Pew Research offers some good background data: pewresearch.org/topics/teens-and-technology/

Danah Boyd is another interesting writer about teens and tech. To see an interview, visit "On Being with Krista Tippett": onbeing.org/programs/danah-boyd-the-internet-of-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-jul2017/