



A Community Formed Around Jesus:
A Round Table Conversation on Digital Technology
July 22, 2026

Adam Borneman: Hi friends, this is Adam Borneman with the Ministry Collaborative, and I'm really eager to jump into a conversation today with my colleagues Beth Daniel, Jennifer Watley Maxell, and Mark Ramsey – eager because it's a topic that we've been circling around in a lot of different ways and over the past several months as a staff, but also in blog posts, and – from time to time – off to the side in our podcast conversations. And that's a conversation about social media, and its connection to, just, broader digital technology and AI and other things. The reason we're eager to talk about this is we wonder what the church's role is as we see local municipalities, but even countries, develop policy around social media use, particularly bans for people under a certain age. I know that where I live, in the state of Georgia, a rapidly growing number of counties are now banning phones in schools.

A lot of this, in some ways, driven by Jon Haidt's work that's been a bestseller, *The Anxious Generation*, and people have really taken a lot from that. But we do wonder: what is the role of the church in this? What comes to mind for me is something Martin Luther King said, saying about on so many issues, the church being the taillight to when it should have been the headlights. And I wonder if this is another one of those where the church has a particular role where it should be leading. Obviously, the Pope's recent encyclical comes to mind, too. So, opening up to you all to see where we want to jump in with this, and what your gut reaction to the current situation is.

Jennifer Watley Maxell: Adam, I think this is a really important conversation, particularly as someone who has what would be considered, probably, a small to mid-sized church plant, and a pretty young church membership. Social media is one of the few tools that a lot of churches have to get themselves out there, and to keep connected with their membership, and to do very vital work of ministry. I think, done well, we can definitely use it for evangelism and discipleship. And it is very problematic. And I think part of the challenge for, I would say, most pastors is we don't have degrees in social media. We don't have this expertise. Most of us just get out there and do what we're told by media people, if we're lucky enough to have them, or we're just googling how to use social media for church, basically, and just getting out there. And so, it puts another burden of decision-making that, frankly, I think a lot of times, we don't feel we have.

I think the other thing is, when we look at the corporatization of social media, and how decisions are being made about what gets seen and algorithms, I think that presents another moral conundrum. Are we being complicit in some of these systems by using these things? And I do think it's a very, very complicated, very nuanced issue that a lot of us are not thinking about in terms of, I like the way you put it, in terms of the headlights and the brake lights. And I do think that it offers us some unique challenges. Like I said, we use it at our church, and frankly, it's one of the most effective tools that we've had, and cost-effective tools, to continue to stay in touch with our membership, and to get ourselves out there.

Mark Ramsey: I think we would all agree that we're approaching this humbly, knowing that multiple generations have different experiences of this, and also people who are in different socioeconomic locations, and even urban/rural, I think, treat this very differently. For some, some of the social

connections are lifelines. I'm thinking particularly of some older adults for whom it's important. So, we're not throwing a blanket over this.

I do recall a saying that's been around for a while that, "If you're not paying for it, you're not the customer, you're the product being sold." And I think we have kind of given ourselves over to that. We are the product, in a lot of ways. One of the things Jonathan Haidt in his book, and then also in his commencement address at NYU this spring, drew attention to the word "capture". All the media companies are looking to "capture" new audience. That's a dangerous word.

Beth Daniel: I think the important thing is we're not here saying, "You should do this," or "You should do that." I think having the conversation is, just, really important, because the culture is having a really serious conversation about this. Schools are having a conversation, governments are having a conversation, parents are having a conversation. And this, like everything else, is not going to be a one size fits all. But unless we have our eyes wide open on the benefits, but also the pitfalls, then we will once again be falling behind and trying to catch up.

And, it is really difficult, because many of us are in churches that are multi-generational. My last parish work was with particularly with older adults. And we had a new communications person come in, and basically, we went all digital. And it worked for so much of the church, and it's free. It's a lot freer than having volunteers coming and folding bulletins. So, there were benefits to the church. And the youth though it was great. And my people were completely lost and left behind. I've heard the saying, "Some free things cost more than they're worth." And I really do wonder if moving all digital, all social media, costs more than it's worth in terms of community relationships.

Jennifer: Yeah, I think you raise a really good point, especially when you consider that, right now, we are seeing some increase in young people coming to church, and longing for an environment that is different than the world. In our young adult ministry, one of the things that we've talked about is that, when they come to church, they're looking for something different, that the whole world is linked in this very specific way through social media and technology. And so, when they come to church, they're looking for a different type of experience.

I think the other thing is that, for them, the language of social media is their primary language. And so, even in terms of our ability to communicate is so influenced by social media. So again, we're not saying, "Don't use it. Don't do it." And the reality is, in our case, a lot of people find us because of social media. I think the question for me that comes up is: where is the line, then? What is our responsibility? Or: what are the things that we need to be paying attention to if we are going to continue to engage social media in an ethical way?

Adam: I want to, in some ways, reinforce this thread of conversation from both Beth and you, Jennifer, and that is, I've been really struck the last several months by a growing body of research from different organizations that shows younger people looking for quiet places in churches. The Fuller Youth Institute just published something a few weeks ago that basically corroborated some other research that had already come out. I was with a Bible study group a few months ago that I meet with regularly. This is mostly a group of men my age with kids ranging from infants to college. At some point, someone said something like, "Well, what if the church just had a quiet space during the week where phones weren't allowed?"

And what was interesting to me is how many of them said, “My kids would love that. My kids in high school would love to have a place on the campus of the congregation somewhere where they know that that’s not an option, because of how much of a distraction it is in the rest of their life.” So, I think we’re on to something with that.

And by “onto something” there, I mean also just the intergenerational dynamics of that. It’s not the same for everyone, which makes it more complicated, but also worth our attention, since we’re talking about the attention economy.

Mark: What I find compelling about that is it’s a kind of basic theory of change. You cannot take something away without offering something that’ll be generative in life and in flourishing. So, if we say, “Should we put some limits on this?” The question rightly to the church is: What are we going to offer? And we are back in our wheelhouse, if we’ll allow ourselves to be: one-on-one connection, small group connection, centering around a concept, an idea, God, that is larger than us, to pull us out of ourselves and bring us together. We know these are things which this culture is yearning for, but they don’t know how to get to. So I think – and, I say this often – I think the church is well-equipped for the living of these days in the ways that God has equipped us to be the community formed around Jesus.

Jennifer: I think you’re right, Mark. And I just want to name that I think one of the things that impedes us walking in that is this extreme anxiety that we have in the church about irrelevance, and people not coming or showing up, because of our past and our experience. But I think you raise a good point, in that part of the challenge I see is we have allowed ourselves to become irrelevant, because we’ve been chasing culture. And so, to be able to jump to the front of the line, if you will, and start being a culture-creating, culture-leading force that really champions this idea of spaces of not just quiet and contemplation, but of deep personal connection.

Social media is great for keeping in touch with people. Our seniors are on it, because a lot of them are homebound and can’t get out. And so, they’re on Facebook, interfacing and seeing what’s going on in people’s lives, and posting what’s going on in theirs. But when it comes to deep connection, that’s a completely different thing. And I think we have to start differentiating, instead of lumping all contact in one bucket and all connection in one bucket, to really start differentiating and being intentional, even in our gatherings. What is the point of this particular gathering that we’re having? Is it for us to, just, connect with one another, see faces? Is it for us to really touch deeply the Scripture, and really give people a chance to deep dive? And I think, in that intentionality, we might find some freedom even to do what you said, Mark, and really is go back to our wheelhouse, and do what we do best.

Adam: And name it up front as the risks that it is. Just like anything else in congregational life, being able to go right at it and say, “I understand that there’s a risk here that we might be feeling anxious about, with irrelevance or different generational dynamics we might run into.” But, I have to say, it comes back to the blog piece I published earlier this week. Some of these things just deserve a decision. Just make a decision, and name the risk, and shrink the number of choices you have to make, especially around this sort of issue. I totally agree.

Beth: I think the important thing to keep in front of us is that social media and the digitization of pretty much everything is not going away. But it is a tool. And like all tools, if it’s used carefully and with understanding, it can really work in your favor. But it can be very dangerous if you really don’t know what you’re doing, or if it starts becoming the thing. It’s supposed to point to the thing, when we’re talking about church. And so, if you are a small church and your bread and butter is Bible study,

hospitality, you want to use the tool to point to who you are. And I think the danger is when we use it, it becomes so all-encompassing that it actually distracts you from who you've called to be and where your gifts are as a congregation.

And so, that's why I think it was said at the very beginning: this is not an all-in or all-out. It's: How does the church use this wisely, and how does it not try and become super tech savvy? Some small churches should never be super tech savvy. They're doing good work, but this is a great tool to point to that good work, not to distract from it; or, if you see a shiny thing over there and you think that's where you need to be, that's the problem, I think.

Jennifer: I think you're right, Beth. And, similarly, along that same line, I think it's also us recognizing that we have responsibility beyond safe use; that these technologies have dark sides. They have shadow sides. I was just reading an article about Snapchat, and how, the minute somebody signs up on Snapchat, even though they're designated as a child, they are inundated with all types of inappropriate content. And so, if we are using those types of technologies, we have a responsibility to make sure that we're using them in safe ways.

But also, when it comes to AI, I see that there is a push for us as faith communities, as AI is being created, to have our thoughts and our ideas and our theologies as a part of this creative, generative process. And I think that's right. And the fact that these data centers are, particularly for rural churches and small churches that are at risk of extinction, that these data centers are being put in places that are putting some of our communities at risk, and we can't just turn a blind eye to that. We have to be able to speak to that and, I would even say, advocate for that. And so, I think, again, that's that tension that we have to navigate. As the church, we always have a moral and ethical foundation upon which we stand.

Adam: Jennifer, I'm really glad that you've shifted us in this direction, because I didn't want to leave this conversation without noting the bigger picture critique that's needed by the church in some of these ways. I really can't recommend highly enough Johann Hari's book, *Stolen Focus*, which I had blogged about some months ago (if folks want to go see what I think about it). But one of the things I took about it that was most important is he says, "This is not just about personal self-discipline with your phone. This is about policy on a much larger scale that needs to be engaged with."

You're mentioning these rural communities that are in crisis, trying to fight back against large social media companies and larger tech companies establishing a data center that may or may not be polluting their land and everything else. So, I think the church has a role there, too, that goes beyond the typical social justice categories we typically operate in. We have an obligation to speak out against economic, political, corporatist trends that we see as well. So, I appreciate you raising that.

Mark: So, the twin pulls that we constantly return to as a ministry team, and with the really gifted pastors and congregations in our cohorts, is: How can we help you be a community formed around Jesus Christ and empowered by the Spirit? And: How do we turn ourselves up and out and serve those in need around us? I really appreciate this conversation, and I hope people get that we're just, kind of, step-by-step going into it without prescription or answers. But, in both of those senses, there are parts of technology, social media, that can help us either bind ourselves together as a community of Christ, and/or serve those around us; and, at the same time, both of those forces can pull us away from those two twin foundational pulls of being a church.

What I think we're saying – if I can summarize – what we're saying is: Faith communities need to be having this conversation. They need to be having it on their own terms in their own context with their own needs. But this is not something we can just say, "Well, we'll let others figure this out." A lot is at risk for every single faith community, and we hope that this has at least spurred a little bit of conversation about that.