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UNPLUGGED

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Are digital distractions—Facebook, Twitter, e-mail or texting—getting you down? Turn off the computer and try a “tech sabbath” to put it all in perspective.

Tech sabbath strengthens connection to God

By MARY JACOBS
Staff Writer

When a colleague suggested to the Rev. Melissa Meyers that she should abstain from Facebook and Twitter for a few days, she heard herself reply: “Dear God, no!”

That’s when the associate pastor of Faith UMC in Orland Park, Ill., knew she needed to unplug for a few days—no matter how scary it seemed.

“I’m not going to lie,” she wrote in a blog post, just before embarking on her media fast. “I’m freaking out about it a little. But I’m going to do it.”

Call it a tech sabbath, a digital detox or a day of unplugging—many United Methodists will follow Ms.

Meyers’ lead this year. As part of their Lenten observance, they’ll set aside periods for refraining from texting, surfing the Internet or using Facebook, e-mail or Twitter.

For anyone who relies on digital communications regularly, temporarily stepping away from the computer or silencing the cell phone can help create a sense of balance.

And finding that balance “is part of caring for our souls and spirits in the 21st century,” says Lynne Baab, author of *Sabbath Keeping* and the forthcoming *Friending: Real Relationships in a Virtual World* (InterVarsity Press).

When Ms. Meyers first abstained from social media for four days on a vacation retreat, it wasn’t easy. She re-

called feeling ‘phantom vibrations’ from the cell phone that was no longer in her pocket.

“The first time was the hardest,” she said. “But by the third day, there was this freedom in it.”

Tech sabbath

As someone who had, before, fallen asleep with cell phone in hand, the fast opened Ms. Meyers’ eyes.

“In the quiet of one evening, I heard God calling my name,” she said. “And I realized that I had forgotten what that sounded like.”

Lynette Hendricks, a member of Northaven United Methodist in Dallas, Texas, turns off the computer every Sunday.

“I can tell a difference in the way I’m ready to start Monday morning,” she said. “It’s soothing and gives me peace.” The quiet time also gives her a chance to mull what she’s heard in the sermon on Sunday morning.

“Most e-mail can wait until Monday morning,” she added. “We don’t have to be as connected as we think.”

The Rev. Shannon Karafanda, associate minister of two United Methodist congregations, The Well in Cartersville, Ga., and Sacred Tapestry in Marietta, Ga., adopted weekly media fasts during Lent last year, inspired in part from her experience of doing without a computer, TV or cell phone while on a mission trip.

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Q&A: Evolving debate on science, religion

As host of Wisconsin Public Radio’s nationally syndicated radio program, *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, Steve Paulson discovered that the debate over science and religion is far from over: Radio interviews on the topic generated more listener response than anything else.

Mr. Paulson has compiled 20 interviews with a wide range of thinkers—from outspoken atheists like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins to scientist and evangelical Christian Francis Collins—into a book, *Atoms & Eden: Conversations on Religion & Science* (Oxford University Press.) He spoke recently with staff writer Mary Jacobs.

From your experiences, can you offer some insights on how we might approach the question of “science vs. religion” more intelligently?

First of all I would say there’s no simple answer to that. It’s a really complicated subject, and you can look at it from a number of different ways.

■ See ‘Debate’ page 2A



Steve Paulson

■ SABBATH Continued from page 1A

"I realized that by the end of the trip, I felt really tired but relaxed and mentally happy," she said. "And I realized that from time to time I need to get away and just listen."

Ms. Meyers puts it this way: "Being connected 24/7 can just make you weary."

Soul damaging?

The idea of tech "fasting" comes at a time when many experts are beginning to worry about how the constant flow of digital distraction affects the mind, says the Rev. Taylor Burton-Edwards, director of worship resources for the General Board of Discipleship. He cited a Stanford University study which suggested that people who "multi-task"—including those who manage multiple forms of digital communications simultaneously—have impaired memory function and less ability to filter out irrelevant information and distractions.

Mr. Burton-Edwards thinks multitasking can fragment the spirit and soul, too. Constant interruptions affect our ability "to be attentive to people, and to be in the moment," he says. "They wreak havoc on our focus."

Mary Beth Coudal, a staff writer for the General Board of Global Ministries, has seen that in herself.

"Social media has contributed to

my short attention span," she writes in a blog. "I'm beginning to wonder if this constant social media chatter is drowning out my ability to listen to the 'still, small voice of God.'" She cited a co-worker who called the constant digital distraction "a traffic jam in my mind."

"We're in this period in which people are completely plugged in, and it's come to a crisis point," said Amelia Klein, program director for Reboot, a nonprofit Jewish think tank. "You come home from work, and you're still on the BlackBerry."

Experts are beginning to worry about how the constant flow of digital distraction affects the mind.

Others see the digital dilemma as a faith issue. Just as the way we spend our treasure reflects our hearts, the way we devote our attention does too, writes Joe Carter, a blogger for *First Things*. He cites the words of theologian J.I. Packer: "Whatever controls and shapes one's life is in effect the God one worships."

"When I look at how I spend my time, it becomes obvious where my

true devotion lies," Mr. Carter writes. "And like Jehovah, Technology is a jealous god."

Unplugging

Last year, Ms. Klein's organization initiated the National Day of Unplugging, a 24-hour fast from cell phone, e-mail, Facebook and Twitter, as a way of helping people reconnect. This year, it's set to begin at sundown March 4.

The day is part of a larger project called Sabbath Manifesto, an effort to re-envision the practice of sabbath in less legalistic, more inviting ways. The

to have balance, to take a break," Ms. Klein said. "Society has forgotten what it's like to not be plugged in. People struggle to have a connection when technology isn't involved."

Dr. Baab, a Presbyterian minister, notes that, in the Jewish tradition, fasting isn't allowed on the sabbath. Turning off the computer or cell phone shouldn't involve "giving up" so much as making room for celebration and joy.

"When we're not on Facebook, we might be able to spend time face to face with a friend or go for a walk in nature or fix a delicious dinner to eat with our family," she said.

Seeking balance

Unplugging isn't easy. For some pastors—especially youth pastors—Facebook, Twitter or other digital forms of communications serve as useful tools of ministry. Going offline presents a challenge, because that means disconnecting with the people they lead. The difference between diligence and addiction is often unclear.

"Facebook is a great way to connect with people," said Ms. Karafanda. "But you have to watch yourself and decide what kind of boundaries you are going to put on it." It's especially important for clergy members, already prone to burnout,

because the convenience of constant digital connection can also exacerbate the sense of being "on call" 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"Social media is blurring the lines between our personal, social and professional lives, and there's no easy way to keep it separate," said Corinne Weisgerber, assistant professor of communication at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas.


Dr. Weisgerber, who attends Oak Hill UMC in Austin, says she uses social media as part of her job. And her students count on her to be online, because that's how they communicate. "Young people are digital natives," she said. "They can't imagine life without social media."

But when her husband started calling himself a "social media widower," Dr. Weisgerber decided to step away from the computer for a "media fast" for a few days during the summer.

The experience was an eye-opener.

Without Facebook, e-mail or Twitter to check, "there is a lot more time for reflection," she said. "It made me realize how the time I spend—five minutes here, five minutes there—is really adding up."

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