

I want to offer my take on the Computer Age, talk a little about our Church's efforts, what paths are open, and speculate a little about the future. My direction goes toward machine-aided discipleship.

In the Old Testament lesson Jeremiah prophesized that God would Bring The Articles Of The Lord's House And The Exiles Back From Babylon. Today, I see information technology comprising the source of new vessels, and and those imprisoned as unchurched souls and non-believers. The forbears of the metaphorical exiles lived in worlds vastly different from ours.

Scientific breakthroughs, realization of technology, and fragmentation in Society generate new walls between church goers and the others. Making disciples probably gets more difficult as each decade passes. A simple fix is hard for me to conceive, though tech is, for me, intrinsic.

All churches are not created equal to utilize of advances in technology for growth. The demographics of OSUMC present more difficulties than those in the diminishing number of congregations whose members are younger. I began programming mainframe computers in 1966, and since the 1990's my capacity to grapple with

the nitty gritty of major innovation decreases. Yet, I still get a rush after a few days of work and the machine bends to my will.

When I arrive in Ocean Shores, one of the surprises is the lack of enthusiasm on the part of many parishioners regarding the internet, email in particular. Today, the net is more a part of our lives, but the march of the arising Wows (and hassles) thrusts into our midst yet more complexity when we add this or that app.

Our interactions with the network are to become better and worse. The results by the pioneers in Artificial Intelligence during this early phase imply the our world beyond the here and now gets both easier and scarier, and soon.

Over the past decade, this Church has exploited a range of tech tools for the web site, our social networking pages, and video transmission of Sunday Worship.

The web site and Facebook pages have been available for a decade. The social network site and [oceanshoresumc.org](http://oceanshoresumc.org) have informed visitors and newcomers to Ocean Shores about time, location, and more. Messaging has seen more than modest use.

In the month of May 61 individuals accessed the web site, though I was counted twice or three times. In the same period 44 people

asked for directions, and there was one click to initiate a phone call. Other months see more phone calls from our home page, but I have processed very few voice mails from prospective visitors in the last year.

Feedback about usage on the social pages about messaging and viewership seems hard to come by.

United Methodist Churches put up thousands of websites and pages in many styles with varying forms of content. The bureaucrat in me wants and marketing (ugh!) orthodoxy suggests online materials of individual churches and the denomination have a defined look and feel. Such formatting direction would imply little about content. However, I must admit the usefulness of common look and feel does not quantify.

Quality and quantity concerns dissipated with the emergence of COVID. Church communities all of a sudden made congregations into online worshipers, and the network, to my astonishment, provided enough capacity for any and all organizations to conduct business via Zoom or, in our case, Sunday Services. With the pandemic a thing of the past (almost), the convenience of worship at home or outta of town remains a fixture in interactions. If Sunday turns outward again,

improved tech would see Bible Study move seamlessly to online interactivity.

Does any one know how online worship adjusts to promote community? The research is solid that worship in the Lord's house promotes what we want to promote. Financial implications also exist.

Leaping into the past is computer support to age old traditions for welcoming newcomers. Once upon a time, walking to Church was common and driving distances were short. When a new family moved into the neighborhood, a member knew or heard, and Christians were organized to welcome. Whether a mere Hello, longer introduction, or goody drop off, visitation was standard or the norm in the old days.

In my early days in Ocean Shores I checked into obtaining information about new arrivals. For many decades such data on buyers have been updated to computers that kept tax records, and much information is public. I went on to discover where to find prospective visitors and members. After considering how to proceed, I concluded doing a data acquisition project would consume too considerable resources and money. Then, the Ocean Shores Halloween Party needed attention.

A decade has passed, and, as with all computation, the process of getting new addresses has theoretically gotten easier. In general, across the checkered board of states, one or fifty-one apps would serve well growth processes.

It may be the Welcoming Visit is obsolete, mimicking the passing of evangelism from mainline to fundamentalist churches a hundred years ago. I hope not. John Wesley might observe that if public preaching is a thing of our past, discipleship remains front and center.

The concept of making disciples seems simple, but the doing is, I believe, for nearly all of us, very hard. Only within the past few years have I been able to Talk Christianity to someone outside our Church community. Each interaction was difficult, and, so far, for me a high level of difficulty remains.

Artificial Intelligence has huge potential for organizing personal witness, but the ease of doing demands experience. My first fantasy about harnessing AI to our purpose is a conversation between me and AI advisor. One makes the machine aware of his or her personhood and tells the app about the other individual or pair of them.

Smart robots already have the capacity to inquire about you, your characteristics and the other and more or less understand.

Information about everybody is spread over the internet if the inquirer knows where to look and can check many, many sites. The canned AI with which one interacts will produce amazing guidance on how to motivate a church visit or other objective. The machines may not be capable yet, but the Large Language Models are much bigger sponges for information than children. Their capacity to be trained is phenomenal.

During my reflection on a Discipleship Advice Robot, machine learning, et cetera, I felt uncomfortable with my finding. Perhaps the feelings emerged from my general lack of enthusiasm for new tech. But, I questioned the ethics of such AI encounters and follow ups.

I didn't get very far into ethics, though lying to the machine is surely a sin. And, given everyone lacks self knowledge and deludes self about self, the whole truth and nothing but the truth may be a bridge too far. Truth telling about the friend, friends, or acquaintance is easier, but the disciple is subject to interference by his or her psychology.

How would the interaction work?

The software knows a lot about you from sources and prompts from the past. A prompt is your question, and the response to first

prompt almost always elicits another inquiry. Prompting, as for a Google or Bing search, is more art than science. The user tells what he or she believes relevant—data about both individuals, the environment, and circumstances of the anticipated interaction. Getting the machine to understand what one is after takes a Q and A session, assumedly relatively quickly.

Then, the questions begin for the disciple. A few questions will be irrelevant or inappropriate, and the gadget will listen to criticism. After the colloquy, the specifics of our discipleship parameters and gathered and heard information go through the critical process. Almost immediately, your phone, tablet or PC emits a How To.

My app would offer provide suggestions on good environments for an interaction, and notes on locales the machine perceived as unhelpful. Then, a general idea of the story, some specifics, possibly down to conversation. The output forms from the answers, other relevant data, and the UMC defined or described procedures for process.

Then the hard part.

When I ruminate on a future of technology and apply what I see to my world, Mind is fertile with possibilities. And I talk to others and

frequently find their thoughts and mine are similar. In the late sixties, the talk became how paper would disappear. Every year until 2000, usage went up and up. In the run up to Y2K, in car pooling a librarian and I spent many trips figuring out when books would disappear. We finally, after much arguing and change of positions, concluded few, if any, books would be printed after 2050. We are probably wrong. The specifics always are—though some commentators are prescient.

Skepticism is warranted about what the future brings, but the velocity of change has been increasing ever since 1800 and still picks up steam. The coming of Artificial Intelligence is plenty scary, even though The Sky Is Falling folks are hopelessly wrong. We should expect outrage or outrages brought on by the electronic minds that lack mindfulness.

The response of secular authorities will produce information and, possibly, guidance that facilitates Church use of the scary new. Ultimately, AI will aid Christians Toward Contemplating The Life Of The Eternal King. The huge Ambiguity Of Follow Me declines as one is moved by the spirit.

The reading from Jeremiah was the alternate selection in the Lectionary. The primary verses, from Genesis 22, ends with The Lord



Will Provide. In this holy place, He has and will. We shall do, by taking the opportunities on the horizon to the work of here and now.