

CHURCH UNPLUGGED

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“Church Unplugged” may sound like the name of a flashy megachurch, but in fact, it is a subject which the staff invites you to consider as we enter a new program year together.

Because the “point” of this article is otherwise buried deep under a layer of exposition, I will use it to bookend my writing:

The Church offers a place to make human connections, to explore beautiful things, people, and ideas, and to encounter Wonder, Mystery, and Love.

The great lie of social media is that it would bring us together.

Perhaps it does help us keep in touch with great-aunt Suzy in Ohio. However, social media’s greatest achievement has been to isolate us. How many of our waking hours are spent scrolling, scrolling, and scrolling some more? How might we have spent that time fifteen years ago? Twenty years ago? Forty years ago?

One activity that can’t compete with social media is book reading. In 1976, nearly 40% of high school seniors said they had read at least six books, for pleasure, over the last year, and only about 11% hadn’t read any books at all. Today? Those percentages have flipped.

Another casualty to screen time is something we all need to thrive: human connection. Screens of various shapes and sizes have steadily replaced front-porch conversations, family dinners, and spontaneous chats with friends and neighbors.

Just as reading books is becoming more and more challenging for even the brightest students at the most prestigious universities—just as our isolation has reached levels higher than ever before, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic—**BOOM!**

In walks *artificial intelligence*.



Nikki Walter and Betty Kopetz praying

AI can read the book for you and give you a 5-sentence summary; AI can do the math problem (and show its work); Artificial intelligence can be an artificial friend or romantic partner, right in your pocket.

Now, machines can read the book, do the math, write the article—even simulate relationships. Why bother doing any of it ourselves?

Our children’s brains are still being wired to think, ask questions, try hard things, and form relationships. For a young mind to develop these critical faculties, there can be no substitute for these activities.

Likewise, as we age, what better way to stay sharp than to stay curious, to read, to sing, to learn, and to be with others? One may therefore see a great benefit for people of all generations to gather as we do in the Church.

I don’t know about you, but for me, I feel fulfilled and inspired by being curious, by seeing beauty, and by being with others. These are things that AI and our screens cannot do for us.

The Church offers a place to make human connections, to explore beautiful things, people, and ideas, and to encounter Wonder, Mystery, and Love.

This year, our programming will seek to understand what we, the Church, can offer to a world hungry for human connection, and we invite you to join us in this journey!