ENCOUNTER

Oh, the joys of those who… delight in the law of the LORD….
They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season.
Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.

PSALM 1:2–3

LAIDLAW COLLEGE
TE WANANGA AMORANGI

Where Theology and Technology meet

BY DR ROD THOMPSON, NATIONAL PRINCIPAL

"We have to abandon the arrogant belief that the world is merely a puzzle to be solved, a machine with instructions for use waiting to be discovered, a body of information to be fed into a computer in the hope that sooner or later it will spit out a universal solution."

These are the words of Václav Havel (1936–2011), first President of the Czech Republic.[i] They challenge a prevalent belief, sometimes referred to as "technicism", which views technology as having the power to save humanity and to always improve the world.

This year, as one of a raft of new initiatives, the College is piloting video-conferencing technologies that allow us to connect students across our campuses with lecturers and tutors in multiple learning sites. How can we do this well? In light of the Scriptures and the good news of Jesus, what stance should be taken regarding the increasing influence of new technologies across all of life, particularly in the realm of education?

We must begin with the question, "How do we view the world?" The Scriptures use many images to picture the world as God's creation. For the psalmist in Psalm 19, it is a like a choir heralding the glory of God –

"God's glory is on tour in the skies, God-craft on exhibit across the horizon".[ii] In the book of Job, the creation is pictured as a glorious temple structure in which God lives" and for the apostle Paul, all things (including technology) find their meaning and purpose in relationship to God in Christ, for "from him and through him and to him are all things".[iii]

In his book *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, Quentin Schultze explores the impact of information technologies on humans. He nominates six "habits of the heart", for which we need to contend as we engage with the increasing challenges and opportunities presented by the use of technology. They are:

DISCERNMENT: Schultze claims we have become so obsessed with the "immediate," that we are losing the capacity to think deeply, weigh up information, critique mis-information, and undertake the hard work required to make sense of complex moral situations. Under the weight of information overload, we must nurture genuine discernment. We must recognise the difference between accumulating information and growing in wisdom.

MODERATION: Schultze asserts that information technologies are biased against the discovery of coherent moral wisdom and in favor of fragmented information. He argues that more and more people have the power to exchange messages and access databases, but fewer people seem to know what life means or how to live it well".[iv]

WISDOM: Schultze recognises that the story of the Bible inspires responsible living, creational stewardship, shared memory, caring practice and mutual accountability. These are themes throughout OT wisdom literature, the life of Jesus and the NT letters.

HUMILITY: Quick fixes and over-confidence in technique can breed arrogance. "Humility helps us to maintain

a healthy skepticism about experts who foolishly claim that information technology will eliminate the gap between the way things are and the way they should be".[v] Rather than the conceit promoted by the promise of mastery over nature through human engineering and ingenuity, humanity needs again to embrace a more modest engagement with creation, acknowledging its wonder and mystery alongside its order and diversity.

AUTHENTICITY: Schultze claims that cyber-communication reduces mutual obligations and interpersonal accountability. It allows for, and even encourages falsehood and pretence. "In a digital world, we desperately need to live authentically – to say what we mean and to mean what we say – and to hold our public and private institutions accountable for doing the same."[vi]

DIVERSITY: Cyberculture creates new cultural heroes – technical experts, media celebrities, internet columnists, technology book authors, and heralded convention speakers. It can promote a narrow world of authorities, whose influence is largely based on image rather than integrity, charisma rather than character, and technological skills rather than genuine wisdom. As an alternative, Schultze recommends breadth of dialogue between a range of contributors, the sort of diversity that "invites nonexperts and even critics of information technology to our discussion about cyberculture".[vii]

At Laidlaw, we seek to engage in the sorts of dialogue that Schultze is contending for. We seek to equip our students and staff with the virtues of the Gospel of Christ as they go about their teaching and learning, and their embrace of new technologies.

i. Speech given by Havel in 1992 and are quoted in Quentin Schultz in his book "Habits of the high-tech heart: Living virtuously in the information age" (2002), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, P.21.
ii. The Message translation of Psalm 19:1
iii. The words of Romans 11:36 in the ESV translation
iv. Schultze, Q. J. (2002). Habits of the high-tech heart. Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House. p.48; v. Ibid p.21; vi. Ibid p.23; vii. Ibid p.159
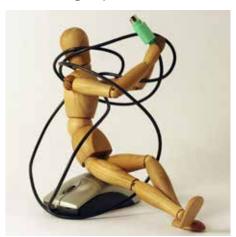
Following Christ while Wrapped in Media

STEPHEN GARNER | HEAD OF SCHOOL – SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Author William Gibson once described our society as being "wrapped in media." For Christians, who seek to live as the people of God and followers of Jesus Christ, a burning concern should be how to live wisely and faithfully in such a world. What approaches might we take so that we live in this world, individually and collectively, in ways that bring glory to God?

One approach would be to declare that technology and media are ultimately bad things that oppress something essential in the human spirit. This kind of approach tends to talk using terms of "playing God" or building a new Tower of Babel, and the demise of flesh and blood relationships. At its most intense it leads to a withdrawal from the world, which is ultimately fruitless if creating technology and culture are part of our God-given human nature.

So, should we wholeheartedly embrace our new technology and media world? After all, better technology enables us to feed more people, address more illnesses, proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and have a billion neighbours on Facebook or Twitter. Surely, if this is the case, then God "baptizes" our technology? Perhaps not. Technology and media accentuate essential human behaviors and values, both positive and negative, leading to simultaneous wonder and anxiety about our technological powers.

Perhaps then technology and media are just neutral tools? The answer to that is both yes and no. On one hand, the way we choose to use technology and media, and the effects of that, define whether we see these mediums as good or bad. But, on the other hand, technology and media are imbued with the values of those who create them. Television, mobile phones, dishwashers, social media, and pharmaceuticals all exist because certain individuals and societies valued them, and those values then permeate us. What might we, as people trying to authentically follow Jesus, do to live wisely and faithfully in this world? How can we find "appropriate" technology and media?

Ian Barbour's answer is this: "[we need] creative technology that is economically productive, ecologically sound, socially just, and personally fulfilling." These criteria are helpful when filtered through our relationship with Jesus Christ and our understanding of Scripture. Is the way we use technology and media economically productive in a way that builds not just material capital, but also social and spiritual capital in society? Do we use technology in a way that is sustainable for our communities, the natural world, and ourselves? Does the way we use technology and media build people up or marginalize them? And do we grow in Christ through its use, or does it become an idol drawing us away from God?

Asking these kinds of questions drives us to wise and faithful living in a technological world. We don't retreat from technology and media, but we aren't dazzled by it either. We look at what values and stories it tells about human life and the world we live in, and we strive to live authentically as the people of God, following Christ, wisely and faithfully each day while "wrapped in media."

Keep an eye on the Laidlaw website for details about becoming a **Student for a Day** & other **'EXPERIENCE LAIDLAW'** events happening in May 2015.

Going Global

SHELLY NEETHLING | COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING MANAGER

Janine Allen

In the last week of February we had the privilege of having Dr Janine Allen from Corban University (In Salem, Oregon) with us at Laidlaw. Janine is the Dean of Global Initiatives at Corban and her trip to New Zealand included conversations around a possible partnership with Laidlaw College. Janine was greatly encouraged to see how authentically and intentionally Laidlaw is living out the Gospel within the New Zealand context and genuinely seeking dialogue across cultures within New Zealand and around the world.

From an international point of view, Janine was also delighted to see how Laidlaw is embracing the use of technology, and is particularly excited about the introduction of video-conferencing to Laidlaw's pedagogy and what it could mean for global partnerships. Not only can video-conferencing dissolve the distance between Laidlaw classrooms in Manukau, Henderson and Christchurch, but it also has the potential to merge classrooms and meeting rooms that are oceans apart.

We are aware that this kind of new technology holds great significance when thinking about the potential for new national and international partnerships, as well as for our current partnerships, including Eastern University (Philadelphia), Christian Leaders Training College (Papua New Guinea), Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary (South Korea) and South Asian Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (Bangalore).

We pray for wisdom and creativity as we step further into an era where we are called to be good stewards of technology, and we pray for faithfulness in how we use it for the bringing together and equipping of God's people, for God's glory.

Missional Technology

ALISTER GILL | MASTER OF THEOLOGY STUDENT AT LAIDLAW COLLEGE

Technology has everything to do with what it means to be human, and this is true because technology has everything to do with the mission of God.

Technology is not just a bunch of tools or gizmos, it is in fact a whole way of thinking, and like many aspects of public life, it has become a force unto itself. More so than ever, we need a way to both understand what technology is and what it is supposed to be; we need to engage meaningfully with it rather than shying away from it.

A helpful place to start is seeing that our world needs the changes technology can provide, but more than that, it gives us a window into imagining a reality we long for and a means for bringing it closer to fruition. Technology is about how we create "imagined realities". After all, humans are creative beings made in the image of a creative God. The problem is not the power of creativity but the way in which humans use it. How then do we determine what realities we should create?

The answer, put simply, is mission. For mission is God's hope (God's own imagination) for creation. As humans, we are called to participate in this mission. If technology allows us to bring realities into existence not otherwise possible (the eradication of disease or saving instead of eliminating endangered animals), then how else should we determine the shape of those realities, and thus the shape of our technology, other than missionally? If we do anything other than this, our technology will fall prey, as it already often does, to the worse aspects of our broken nature.

In what ways, we must ask, can we thus have a technology shaped by the redemptive, peaceful and loving mission of God? How can we have a missional technology?

Theory becoming practice

WHAT DO OUR STAFF HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE NEW VIDEO-CONFERENCING EXPERIENCE?

NIGEL SMITH
Head of the School of Social Practice

"Video-conferencing allows us to move past the limitations of physical space in our teaching. Through this technology we can interact and relate with students located in different parts of New Zealand (and potentially the world) in a way significantly richer than was previously possible. While it does challenge us as teachers to re-learn some aspects of our craft, I'm excited by the possibility that we will be able to bring our courses effectively to more people than ever before. To make the most of this new opportunity, I probably need to re-think a whole bunch of things about how I as a teacher perceive what is going on for a student in my class. Being more intentional about seeking feedback may be one area where I know I can grow. I'm enjoying exploring this with the great team of colleagues I have here at Laidlaw."

WATIRI MAINA
Counselling Lecturer in the School of Social Practice

"Although adjusting to new ways of teaching and interacting is always challenging, I think that Laidlaw's new video-conference technology is a timely addition, given how accustomed our students are to technology and how many opportunities it opens up. Video-conferencing bridges the geographic distance between our campuses, not only saving us time and resources, but creating a sense of community and togetherness across Laidlaw's different learning sites."

LISA SPRIGGENS
Programme Leader and **Counselling Lecturer in the School of Social Practice**

"Using video-conference technology invites me to be more aware of how I welcome participation in my lectures. I want the students in the satellite classrooms to feel like their contribution is as important to the whole learning experience as any other student. It is exciting to engage with this new technology and I think it starts to position Laidlaw College as a modern learning environment."

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A celebration of research and publication achievements

Join us on Monday 4 May to celebrate and launch recent publications from the College, including books by Martin Sutherland, Linda Flett and Jacob Sawyer, as well as to preview upcoming conferences and events that characterise Laidlaw's commitment to research. Further details will be available on the website as the date draws nearer.

7PM, MONDAY 4 MAY | DEANE MEMORIAL LIBRARY, HENDERSON CAMPUS