



My Digital Voice

An Introduction to the Digital Conversation Pledge

by Don Everts & Rachel Legouté



rachel & don

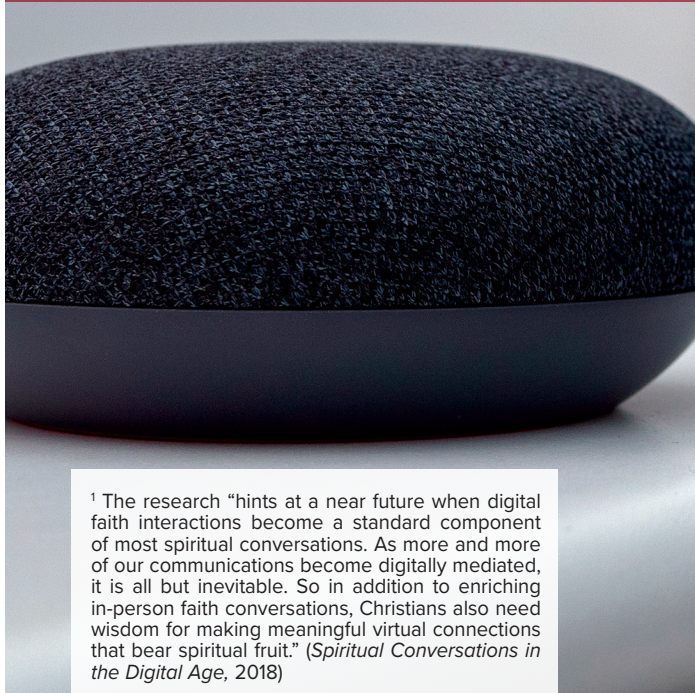
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87 likes

2w

*"You will be My witnesses
in Jerusalem and in all
Judea and Samaria, and
to the end of the earth"
(ACTS 1:8b).*

**I have a digital voice.
And my digital voice matters.
And so, I make these
seven pledges ...**



¹ The research "hints at a near future when digital faith interactions become a standard component of most spiritual conversations. As more and more of our communications become digitally mediated, it is all but inevitable. So in addition to enriching in-person faith conversations, Christians also need wisdom for making meaningful virtual connections that bear spiritual fruit." (*Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age*, 2018)

We're Rachel and Don. Something you should know about us is that we have digital voices. We have digital voices because we, like you, live in an increasingly digital world.

If you add up all our emails, posts, comments, texts, likes, DMs, emojis, and shares—*that's* our digital voice.

No one hears these digital voices when talking face-to-face with us. They only hear them if they spend time hanging out in our digital spaces.

Our family and friends and the people we work and study with hear our regular voices every day. But not everyone hears our digital voices.

But the truth is, real life happens in digital spaces more and more all the time.¹ And we're realizing our digital voices matter just as much as our face-to-face voices. It matters what we write, what we post, what we like, how we comment, which emoji we choose, and what we share. The digital world is real, and what we say with our digital voices matters because it affects real people.

We are called to "be witnesses" everywhere—even to the ends of the earth. Because this includes digital spaces, we invite you to join us in taking our digital interactions more seriously. It starts with acknowledging that you have a digital voice. And that your voice matters. The next step is taking a look at what research reveals about the unique nature of our digital conversations. Finally, we can consider what God's word reveals about how to faithfully engage in those conversations.

As for the two of us, we have decided to pledge ourselves to use these important and unique digital voices of ours in a way that pleases God, lifts others up, and makes a real difference in the world.

Will you join us as we explore some research and Scripture?

Join together with us in saying: I have a digital voice. And my digital voice matters. And so, I make these seven pledges ...

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1h

As a Christian I am called to live differently than the world around me. I know that.

The world flows around me like a strong, flowing river—influencing my thoughts, pulling my feet in a certain direction, carrying me along with the habits and temptations of my surrounding culture.

But I want the kingdom of God to exert an even greater influence over my life.

It's just like Paul put it in his letter to the believers in Rome: rather than be *conformed* to the world around me (just going with the flow), I am called to be *transformed* (allowing God to shape and influence my way of life).

This call to be transformed rather than conformed applies to my digital life as well, because it turns out there are unique ways I'm being influenced to act differently in digital spaces. I don't always stop to think about it, but I know it's true: I am being tempted to conform in certain ways online.

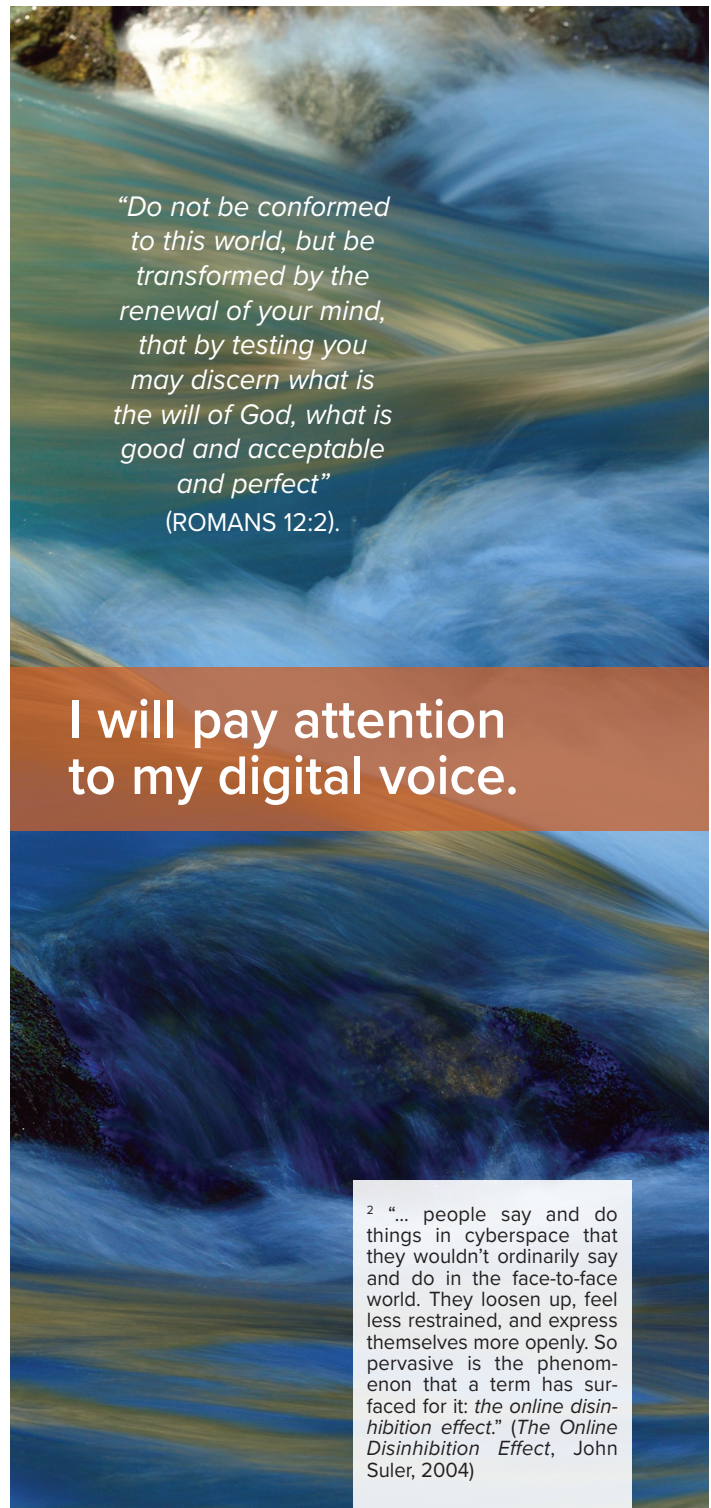
Researchers have started to notice and study how people behave differently in digital places than they do in real life. The technical term for this unconscious shift is "the online disinhibition effect."² It's a fancy term that simply means I am tempted to behave differently online than I do in real life.

Scientists are starting to understand why this happens, but what matters most to me is the sobering fact that I'm subtly being tempted to post, comment, write, and choose emojis in a worldly way.

But I don't want to be pushed around like that. My voice matters, and I won't let it be conformed without my say so. I want to use this digital voice of mine in a way that pleases God, lifts up other people, and makes a real difference in a hurting world. These new temptations may be invisible, but I'm not fooled. I won't let this river of influence pull me along without a second thought.

And so I pledge: I will pay attention to my digital voice.

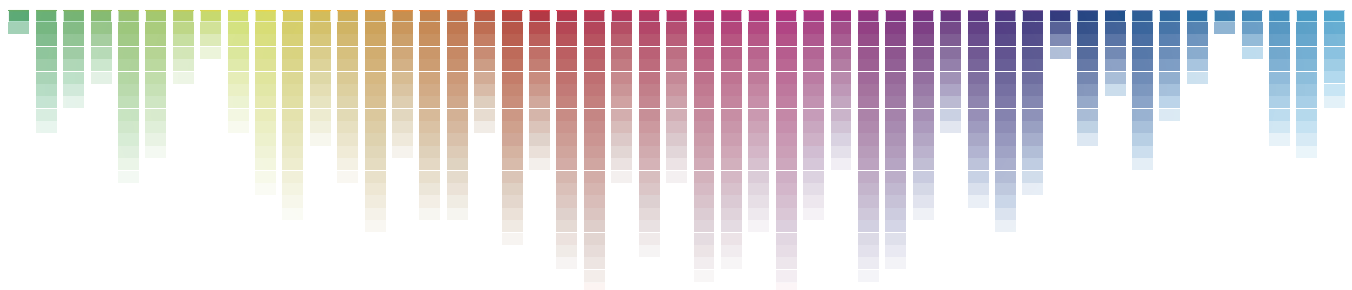
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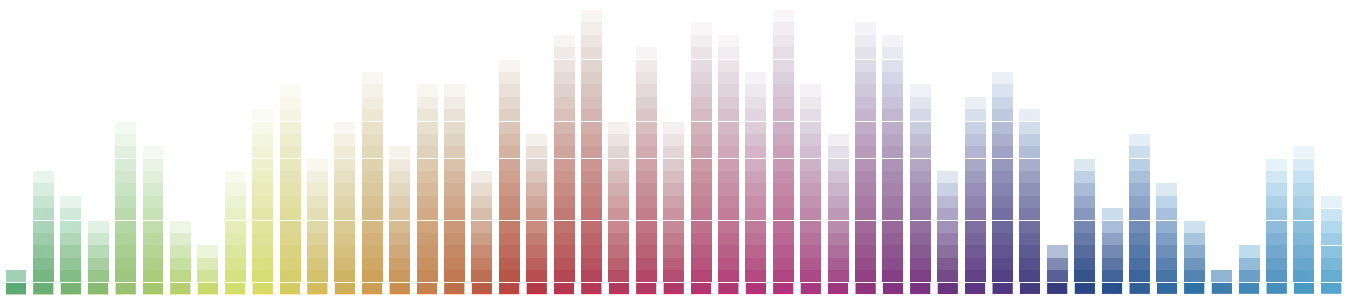


"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"
(ROMANS 12:2).

I will pay attention to my digital voice.

² "... people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly. So pervasive is the phenomenon that a term has surfaced for it: *the online disinhibition effect*." (*The Online Disinhibition Effect*, John Suler, 2004)





"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others"

(PHILIPPIANS 2:3-4).

I will lift others up.

³ "Appearing successful, appearing positive, never showing that you're vulnerable, never showing that you've failed at anything, never showing that you're sad. There's a kind of constant performance that's expected on social media." (*Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age*, 2018)

⁴ "For on our screens, we are tempted to present ourselves as we would like to be. Of course, performance is a part of any meeting, anywhere, but online and at our leisure, it is easy to compose, edit, and improve as we revise." (*Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Sherry Turkle, 2015)



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65 likes

4d

I know selfishness and vanity are not new problems. And I'm guessing people have been trying to make themselves look better since the dawn of time.

But I have to admit this temptation seems even stronger in digital spaces. I know my best selfie angle and which filter to use to show how attractive I am. It feels absolutely normal—expected even—to try and impress others with my digital voice. I've become my own editing expert, carefully curating my online personality. And I constantly feel the need to keep up with others and perform well.

This performance expectation³ is part of the cultural current tempting me and pulling me towards vanity and self-promotion. In real life I can only do so much to alter my appearance. But in my digital life ... well, that's a different story. I can revise, edit, filter, delete and carefully craft my thoughts and appearance. This is why I'm tempted to spend so much time and energy building up my reputation.⁴

This pull of digital vanity is real. But in God's kingdom I'm being remade as someone who doesn't have to strike a pose. Even if I've suffered a massive setback and my skin looks terrible and the lighting is bad ... I know that *I am enough in Christ*. Because of that, I am free to spend my energy lifting others up.

Paul's words in his letter to the Philippians resonate with me—rather than always worrying about how I appear to others, I can use my digital voice to lift other people up: celebrating others, complimenting others, showing an interest in their lives. It is astonishing to realize how much my likes and comments mean to others.

And so, I will lift others up. I will spend more time encouraging others, adding to civil dialogue and responding thoughtfully to other people's posts. And I will worry less about carefully shaping my digital appearance. I will be more authentic and less committed to an overly-filtered persona.

And so I pledge: I will lift others up.



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2d

Is it just me, or are people meaner online? It sure seems that way. When I'm honest, I have to admit my own digital voice can be a bit more rude than my face-to-face voice.

Why is this? Research shows that digital communication is unique. When I'm online, I can be anonymous, and even when I'm not, people can't actually see me. There's no eye contact. This is all a recipe for what's referred to as "toxic online disinhibition."⁵ Basically, science confirms that people are indeed tempted to be meaner online.

Including me. And since the overall tone online tends to be harsher, if my behavior gets a little toxic, it doesn't feel totally outrageous in the context of all those other digital interactions. There are plenty of people who are acting way harsher than I am.

But I can't be fooled into thinking that this harsh environment is okay. I know the things I say online matter. I know early Christians talked about the need to "tame the tongue." I like how James bluntly referred to the tongue as a "small fire" that can set a forest ablaze!

If my actual tongue is a small fire, what does that means about my digital tongue? What size fire am I starting or adding fuel to in digital spaces? I mean, I've seen how a harsh post, or a single negative comment can set ablaze a torrent of ugly behavior that can burn up someone's reputation or even life.⁶ Some people are literally ending their lives because of harsh digital voices!

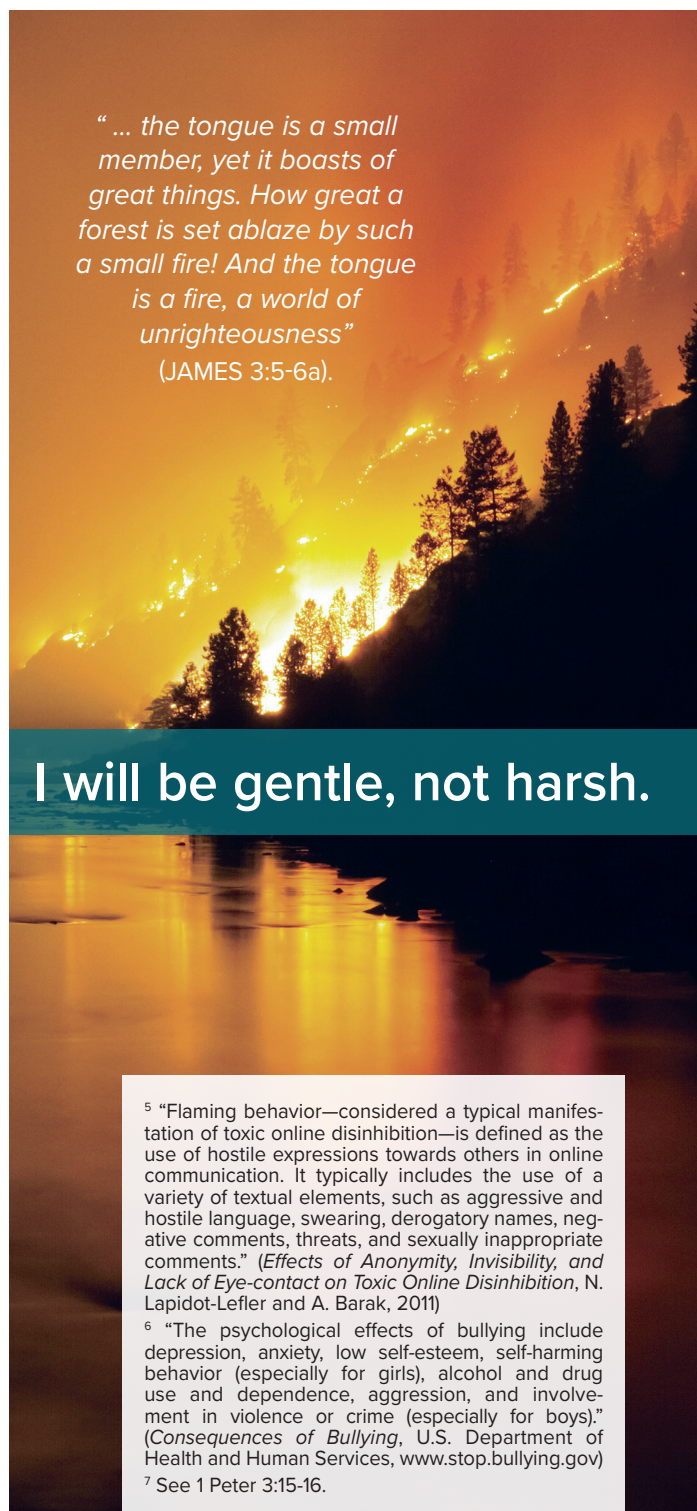
And so, I'm choosing to be careful with my digital voice. I will reply to people with "gentleness and respect," as Peter put it.⁷ I will repent and apologize when I've been harsh. I will pray for more fruits of the spirit like patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

People matter. That's why I will be careful with my digital voice.

And so I pledge: I will be gentle, not harsh.



Add a comment ...



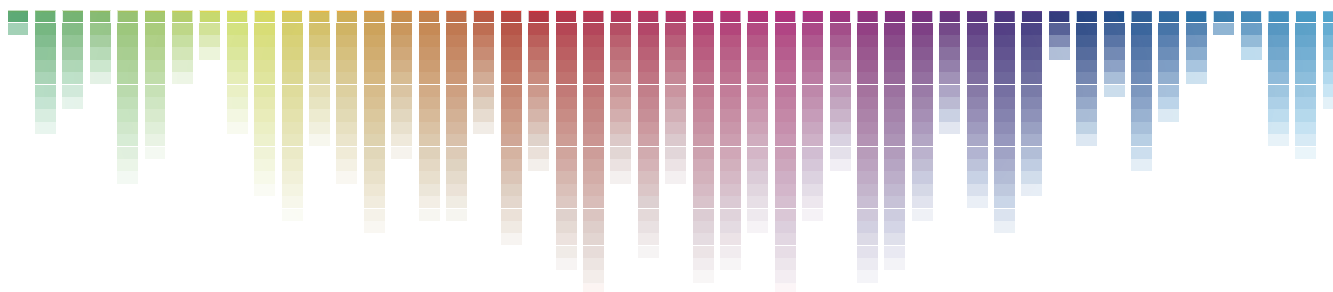
"... the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness"
(JAMES 3:5-6a).

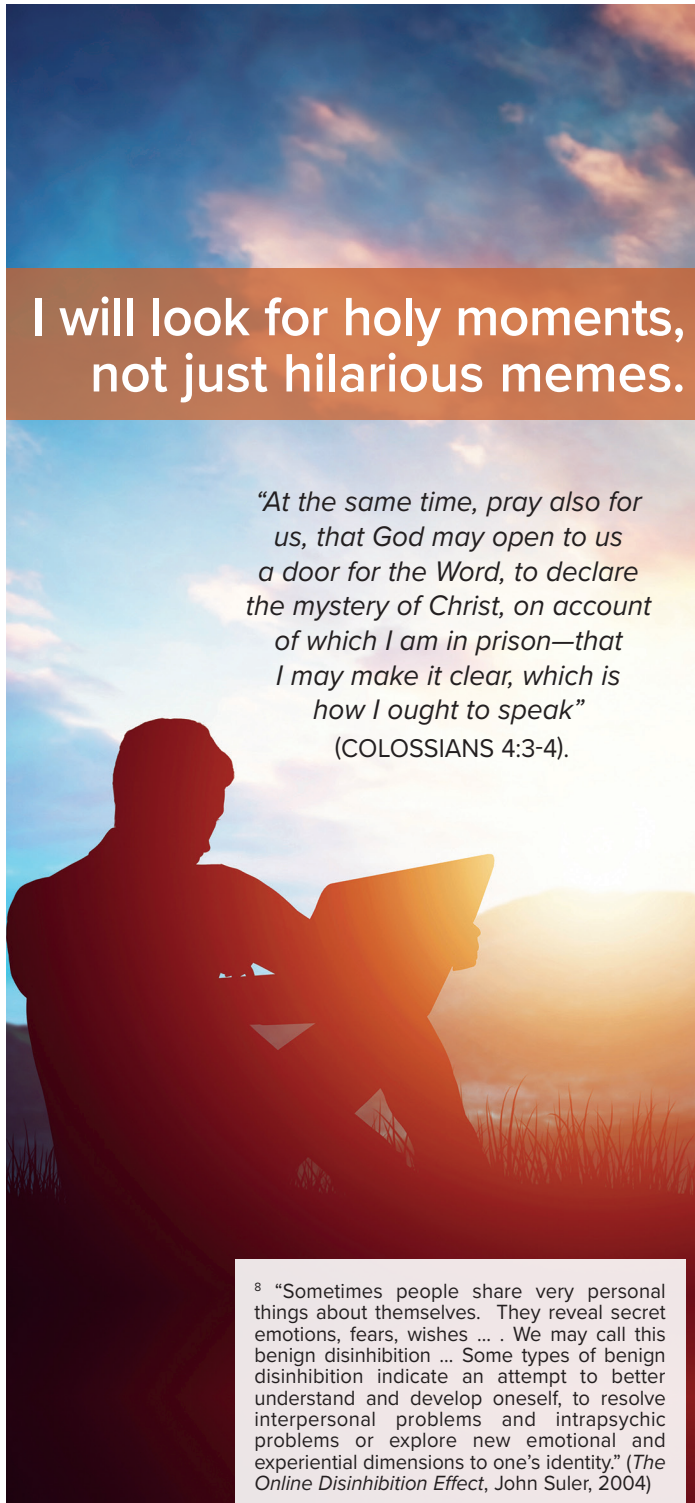
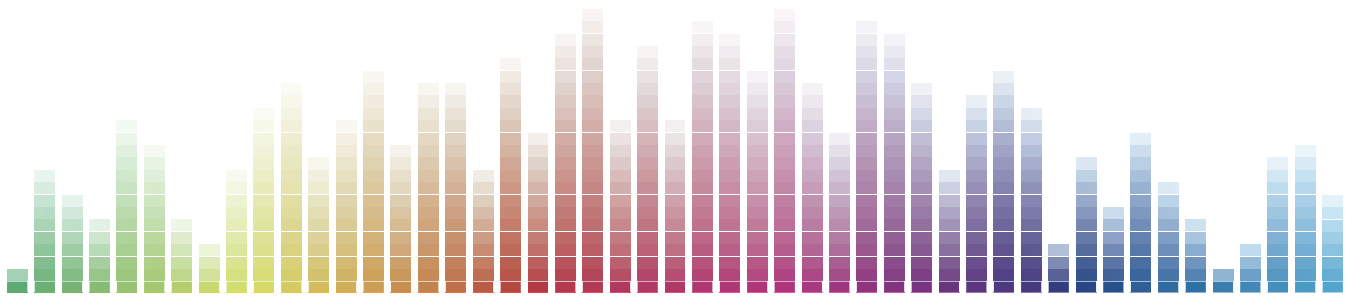
I will be gentle, not harsh.

⁵ "Flaming behavior—considered a typical manifestation of toxic online disinhibition—is defined as the use of hostile expressions towards others in online communication. It typically includes the use of a variety of textual elements, such as aggressive and hostile language, swearing, derogatory names, negative comments, threats, and sexually inappropriate comments." (*Effects of Anonymity, Invisibility, and Lack of Eye-contact on Toxic Online Disinhibition*, N. Lapidot-Lefler and A. Barak, 2011)

⁶ "The psychological effects of bullying include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, self-harming behavior (especially for girls), alcohol and drug use and dependence, aggression, and involvement in violence or crime (especially for boys)." (*Consequences of Bullying*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.stop.bullying.gov)

⁷ See 1 Peter 3:15-16.





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3w

I've always known there was something special about digital conversations. It's not just the fun technology—though there's nothing like a new device! No, it's not the tech. There's something unique about a drawn-out, rambling thread that lasts for days, or a carefully constructed reply.

Why is it that I tend to notice more special moments and conversations while online? Why are people sometimes willing to be more vulnerable in a private message than when we're face-to-face?

Researchers are starting to understand why some of us open up more, get more honest, and get more curious in digital spaces.⁸ But I don't need scientists to tell me. I've seen it. I've experienced it firsthand.

I've seen digital interactions that are not just special, but ... *holy*. It reminds me of what Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians about "open doors." Sometimes it's like that: God seems to open a door. Someone who's usually so closed off opens up. Someone who's usually very quiet crafts an unbelievably long (and beautiful) comment. I've seen that happen in digital spaces, too.

Yes, I've also seen lots of hilarious cat videos that I *just have to* forward to my closest friends. There's nothing wrong with that. But I know there's more going on in my digital connections and relationships. These are real people I'm talking to online. And there's a real God moving in their lives.

And so, I resolve to keep my eyes open and stay alert. When God does open a door, I will pay attention and put thought into "how I ought to speak" in that moment.

I know digital spaces are filled with chances for deep conversations and potentially life-changing encounters.

And so I pledge: I will look for holy moments, not just hilarious memes.



Add a comment ...



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70 likes

1w

It's pretty easy to get linked to people online. Just one small click and we are "friends." People group easily online and social media platforms make it easy to see these groups.

Algorithms and tracking software watch what I do and keep record of my tastes, beliefs, and preferences. They group me with similar people and show me content they think I'm already predisposed to like. If I like *this* video, I'll be shown similar ones—and maybe ones that are even *more entrenched* in my current beliefs.⁹

This makes it tempting to only interact with "my people" online. My friends. My group. People just like me. The digital landscape pulls me together with some people and separates me from others.

But I know my God. He cares for people who are marginalized or left out. God is like a shepherd who is willing to leave a group of clustered sheep in order to go after that lone sheep that is lost. I love that God is that way. I love that Jesus lived that way here on earth—not content to sit with people who already liked Him and His teachings, but always seeking out those on the margins. And I know Jesus calls me to live the same way—not content to invite just my friends and family over for dinner.

This call from Jesus is exciting because people who normally hide from face-to-face interactions choose to hide less in digital places.¹⁰ I can reach out to people in ways I might never be able to in real life. The socially marginalized are empowered to mingle digitally! And that matters because God cares about those who are marginalized.

And so, I refuse to be grouped. I won't settle for only digitally hanging out with people like me. I won't be pushed into spaces filled with people just like me. I will meet new people. I will be curious about others. I will seek to expand my group. Like Jesus, I will seek out others and try to befriend someone new.

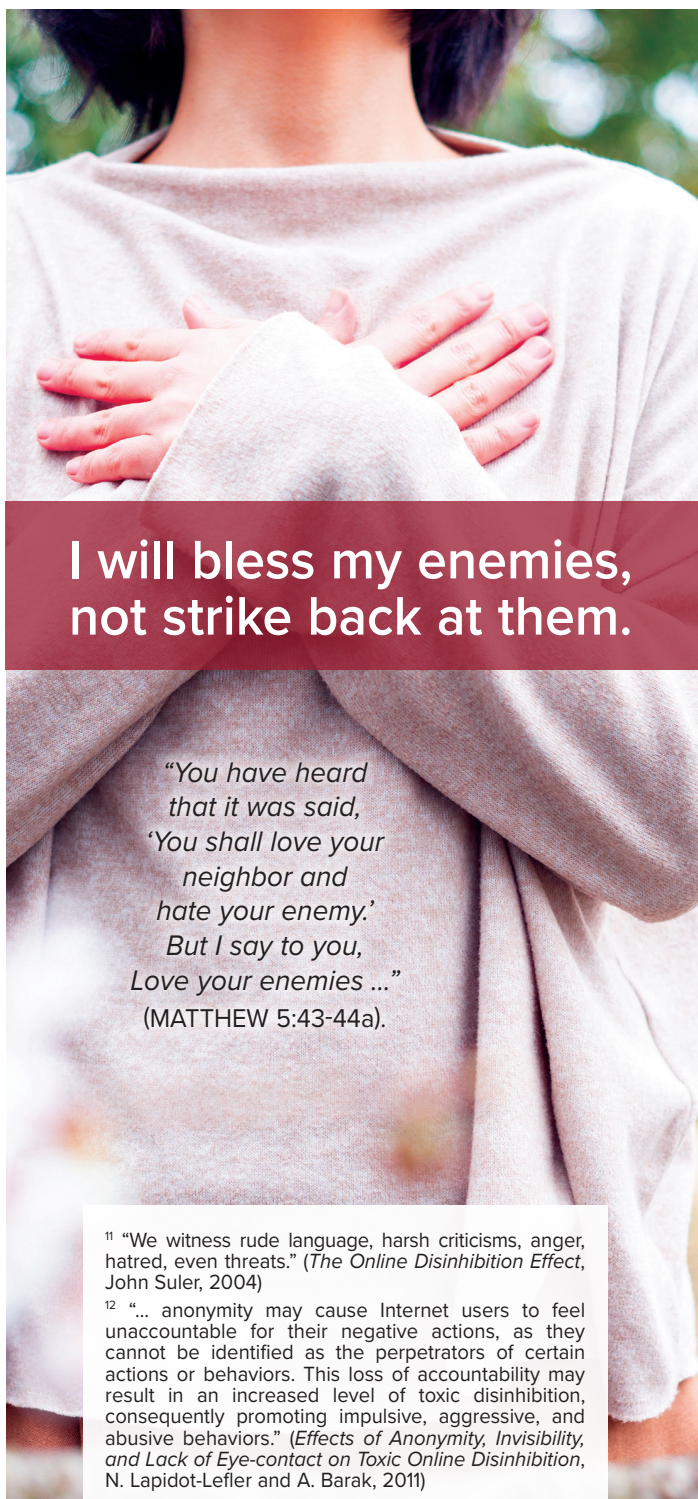
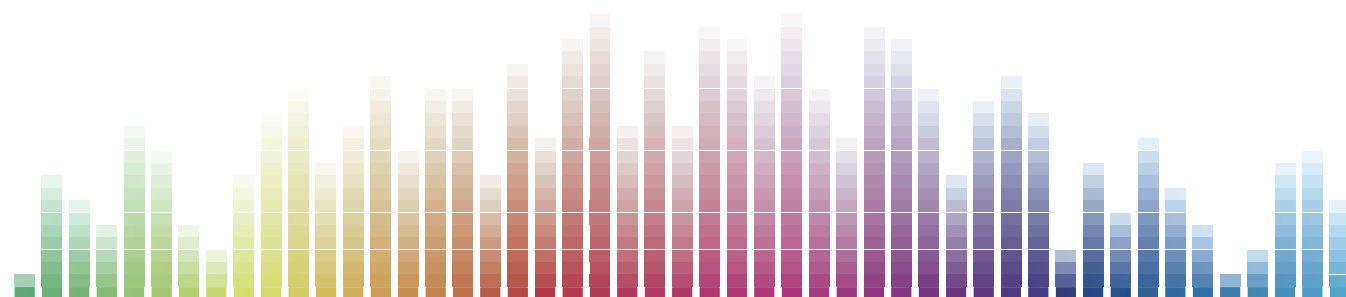
And so I pledge: I will connect with new people, not just my friends.

♡ Add a comment ...



⁹ "Videos about vegetarianism led to videos about veganism. Videos about jogging led to videos about running ultramarathons ... [YouTube] promotes, recommends, and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes." (*YouTube, the Great Radicalizer*, Zeynep Tufekci in The New York Times, 3/10/18)

¹⁰ The digital landscape "... provides options for communication and self-expression among people who would normally be reluctant to disclose. These include people who are typically inhibited or shy, introverted or neurotic, socially phobic, or lonely, people who stutter, individuals with impaired hearing, and those who are socially stigmatized." (*The Benign Online Disinhibition Effect: Could Situational Factors Induce Self-disclosure and Prosocial Behaviors?* N. Lapidot-Lefler and A. Barak, 2015)



I will bless my enemies,
not strike back at them.

*"You have heard
that it was said,
'You shall love your
neighbor and
hate your enemy.'
But I say to you,
Love your enemies ..."
(MATTHEW 5:43-44a).*

¹¹ "We witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats." (*The Online Disinhibition Effect*, John Suler, 2004)

¹² "... anonymity may cause Internet users to feel unaccountable for their negative actions, as they cannot be identified as the perpetrators of certain actions or behaviors. This loss of accountability may result in an increased level of toxic disinhibition, consequently promoting impulsive, aggressive, and abusive behaviors." (*Effects of Anonymity, Invisibility, and Lack of Eye-contact on Toxic Online Disinhibition*, N. Lapidot-Lefler and A. Barak, 2011)



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59 likes

1d

I know there will always be arguments and debates and misunderstandings. Obviously, there will be people I disagree with. And not everyone will think that all of my ideas are brilliant.

But I've noticed there's something different about disagreeing with someone when they aren't physically present.

Maybe it's the effect of eye-contact or facial expressions and body language. Whatever the case, the same rules don't always seem to apply in my digital scuffles.

When people argue with me online, it's easy to forget they are actual humans. Just like that I fire off a quickly typed ALL CAPS retort! Striking back is fast and fierce in the digital world.¹¹ Perhaps the public nature of our disagreement emboldens me. I know I am surrounded by digital eyes waiting to applaud my snarky reply.

I know the anonymous nature of my digital arguments can cause me to strike back at my enemies more harshly than usual,¹² but I also know Jesus called me to treat my enemies differently.

Jesus calls me to love my enemies—to forgive people who've hurt me. And the call isn't just to forgive once—but to *keep on forgiving*. As a Christian, grace and peace and forgiveness and humility are important to me. I pray for these virtues.

And so I won't give in to the digital call-out culture. I won't publicly shame others. I won't use my digital voice in ways that are aggressive, abusive, or harsh.

Yes, there will be people I disagree with. But I choose to have generous assumptions and opinions about those who disagree with me or strike out at me. And I won't strike back. I will listen and ignore petty moments and not hold grudges.

And so I pledge: I will bless my enemies, not strike back at them.



Add a comment ...



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83 likes

6h

If I was starving and found a plentiful source of bread—I wouldn't keep it a secret. I'd want to share the bread with other people who were hungry.

Sharing bread seems simple enough. But I don't always have that same confidence when it comes to sharing *Jesus* with others. It's not always easy to bring my faith up in conversations.¹³

A lot of the people around me have been hurt by the church or by people in the church. Just the mention of Jesus or the church (not to mention using overly-Christian words) can trigger some of my friends and family, causing their defenses to go up. That makes it tricky to share about Jesus.¹⁴

But Jesus has made such a difference in my life—I *want* to share Him with others. I don't want to be silenced by the shift in culture as some Christians have been. But I also refuse to awkwardly burp out religious language in a conversation like other Christians do. I know there is a better way.

Paul's words in Colossians make me think: if the very first Christians had to figure out how to "walk in wisdom" with people who didn't share their faith, I can do the same. I, too, can respond to non-Christians "graciously," resolving to make the "best use of my time" here on earth.

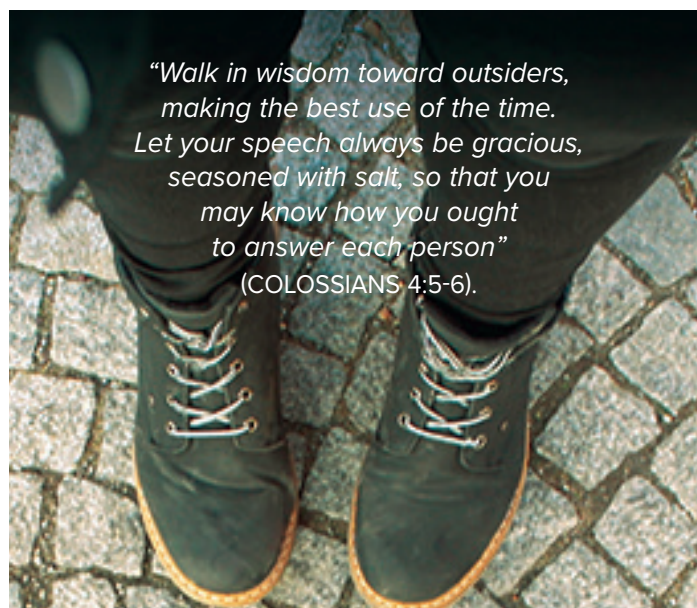
And so, I will be thoughtful about people who don't share my faith. I will become curious about them and how best to walk in wisdom with them.

If they are unreceptive to the faith, I will humbly seek to gain a hearing. If they are receptive to the faith, I will authentically share about the difference Jesus is making in my life. If they are seeking clarity about the faith, I will explore their questions with them and help them understand the core of the Gospel. I will try to use normal words that are easily understood, rather than Christianese words that might be confusing.

And so I pledge: I will relate wisely with those who don't share my faith.



Add a comment ...



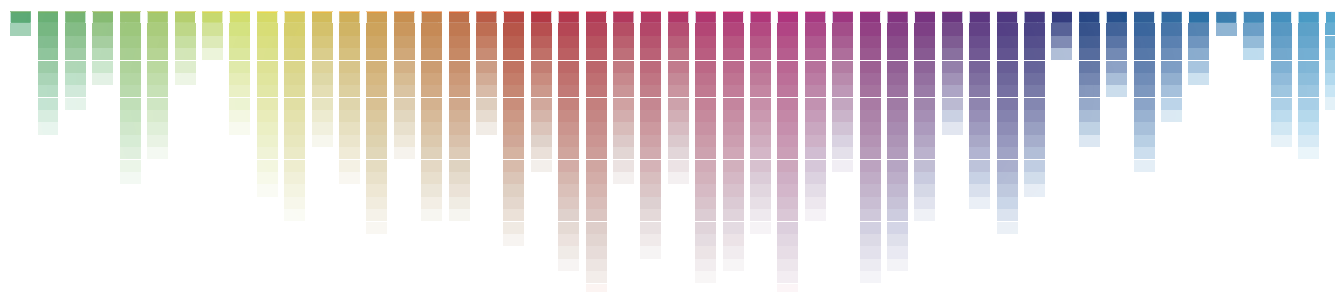
*"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders,
making the best use of the time.
Let your speech always be gracious,
seasoned with salt, so that you
may know how you ought
to answer each person"*
(COLOSSIANS 4:5-6).

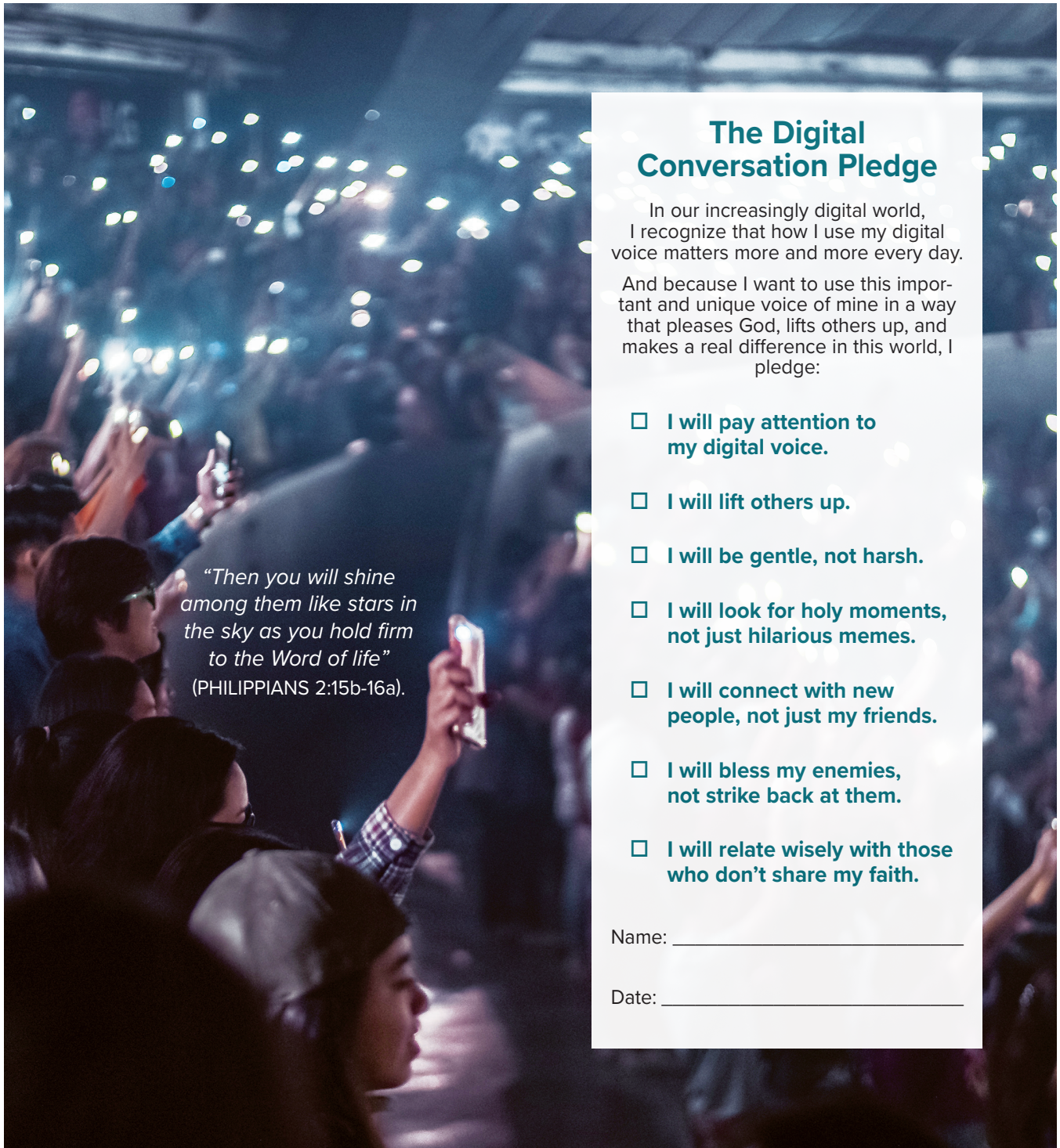
**I will relate wisely with those
who don't share my faith.**



¹³ "Based on Barna's extensive research on faith and religion over the past three-plus decades, we can identify some overarching cultural trends that are undoubtedly contributing to a society that is less interested in religion and that has marginalized the place of spirituality in everyday life." (*Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age*, 2018)

¹⁴ "The rise in secularism, coupled with growing skepticism toward the Bible and Christianity, creates a cultural climate in which talk of spiritual or religious matters become less pertinent and less comfortable." (*Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age*, 2018)





*"Then you will shine
among them like stars in
the sky as you hold firm
to the Word of life"*
(PHILIPPIANS 2:15b-16a).

The Digital Conversation Pledge

In our increasingly digital world,
I recognize that how I use my digital
voice matters more and more every day.

And because I want to use this impor-
tant and unique voice of mine in a way
that pleases God, lifts others up, and
makes a real difference in this world, I
pledge:

- ☐ I will pay attention to
my digital voice.
- ☐ I will lift others up.
- ☐ I will be gentle, not harsh.
- ☐ I will look for holy moments,
not just hilarious memes.
- ☐ I will connect with new
people, not just my friends.
- ☐ I will bless my enemies,
not strike back at them.
- ☐ I will relate wisely with those
who don't share my faith.

Name: _____

Date: _____

To register your pledge and join a movement of like-minded Christians who want to shine their digital lights in a dark world, go to lhm.org/pledge. You can register your pledge, learn more about how to be a faithful Christian in digital spaces, and find out about The Digital Conversation Team—a new team of trained and equipped digital missionaries who are pursuing spiritual conversations.

Don Everts is an award-winning author of more than a dozen books about Jesus of Nazareth and the adventure of being one of His disciples. As a college minister, ordained pastor, and digital immigrant, Don has been getting into conversations about Jesus for more than 25 years.

Rachel Legouté is a social media professional who is a self-professed lover of people. Through years of community outreach, youth ministry, mission work, and world travel, she's been finding ways digitally and in person to get to know new people and let them know they are loved by Jesus. Rachel's a digital native and huge fan of technology and its ability to keep her connected to her worldwide village!



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