

Pay attention: Living in the present tense

by [Thomas R. Steagald](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

When our United Methodist Annual Conference urged pastors to create covenant peer groups as a way to maintain connection, seven of my colleagues and I agreed to meet every other week for a few hours of prayer and conversation, mutual accountability and “resourcing.” It seemed appropriate when one of our meetings was scheduled for the Feast of St. Benedict; after all, what we are doing feels a little bit monastic. It seemed *inappropriate*, however, when in the middle of our religious conversation a pastor pulled out a BlackBerry and checked for messages.

I was angry and thought back to a similar interruption a few evenings earlier. My wife was planning to leave town for several days and suggested that we meet for dinner before she left. I canceled a meeting and drove some distance to meet her at the only time she was available. We had been at the restaurant for maybe 15 minutes when her BlackBerry buzzed and she reached for it saying, “Do you mind if I take this call?”

“No,” I lied. As soon as she began speaking on the phone she was gone—except geographically, which she was the next day anyway. She never really came back to our table, our meal or our conversation. I’m not suggesting that the call wasn’t important. But I received the clear message that something or someone was *more* important to her in that moment than I was. Yes, I consented to her taking the call and therefore was complicit, but I am also certain that we would have lost the “moment” if I’d come out with “Yes, I mind!”

“Pay attention to *me!*” is what I wanted to say at the restaurant and in the meeting. I did say something like that to my friend, and later also to my wife, along with the honest confession that I knew I had treated her the same way on countless occasions.

We see it all the time. We’re on our cell phones talking to someone other than those at the table with us. We’re putting somebody on hold while we take another call. We

are shuttled by device and distraction to somebody's sub routine. The message is always the same: whoever is calling needs my attention more than you do; whatever this call concerns, it is more important than the present conversation; whoever or whatever is "out there" is more interesting than this or you or now.

Throughout my years as a pastor, my wife and children have often accused me of giving my best attention and energy to others, whether parishioners or strangers, instead of to them. "We need you here!" they tell me regularly. In the past, those discussions and disagreements mostly concerned my clock or calendar, but lately the issue seems spiritual and even theological.

During Lent, I was part of another group of ministers who met at the basilica of Belmont Abbey College. The prior of the monastery there, Abbot Placid, joined our group and taught us that all Roman Catholic religious orders fall into one of two categories: apostolic or monastic. The former, including the Jesuits, move out into the world in various ways to fulfill their vocation. The latter, including the Benedictines, pledge themselves to one place and to one conversation: prayer.

One place and one conversation: it is an appealing notion, and an apt description of what I am trying to do in my ministry. I am not a Benedictine oblate, but I try to live my life and fulfill my own vocation by that Benedictine premise: pledging myself to this place and this conversation, whether in a meeting or at dinner, whether in prayer or while counseling, whether studying or writing. Similarly, I am trying to tend to one particular church—not my next church or my former one; not even to *the* church—but to where I am now, and to its people, one conversation at a time.

It's an incarnational effort: I aim to enter into relationship, avoiding as best I can the incessant, disembodied, Gnostic summons elsewhere, and the Twittering, texting and Facebook emanations of what a young colleague calls the "whole other world" of cyberspace. I believe that incarnation requires us to respond to disembodied distractions by praying ourselves back into the moment in order to stay present and attentive to God's voice.

Both incarnation and monasticism have to do with one place and one conversation. Yes, the apostolic orders are incarnational too, and yes, we are to go out into the wider world carrying the message and effecting the ministry of reconciliation. But we often work against reconciliation when we separate ourselves from the people closest at hand in pursuit of distractions.

Instead, we must determine to commit ourselves to “this place and this conversation,” doing the best we can to be attentive to each person in each situation: listening, engaged, present and available. We can pay attention by not checking out, by saving messages and e-mail until later, by leaving the phone in the car when we go into a restaurant—which is the agreement my wife and I reached—or by taking the earbuds out of our ears.

Abbot Placid reminded us that Benedict placed great value on hospitality. “Let all guests who arrive be treated as Christ, for he is going to say, ‘I came as a guest and you received me.’” Benedict says, “Let due honor be shown,” and I would add, “to those right in front of us.”

While it could be argued that answering the phone is itself a form of hospitality, of receiving guests, I find myself thinking of Cleopas and his friend in Emmaus. Jesus is at table with them, but they do not recognize him. Imagine that as he takes the bread, prepares to bless, break and give it to them, Cleopas interrupts with: “Do you mind if I take this call?”