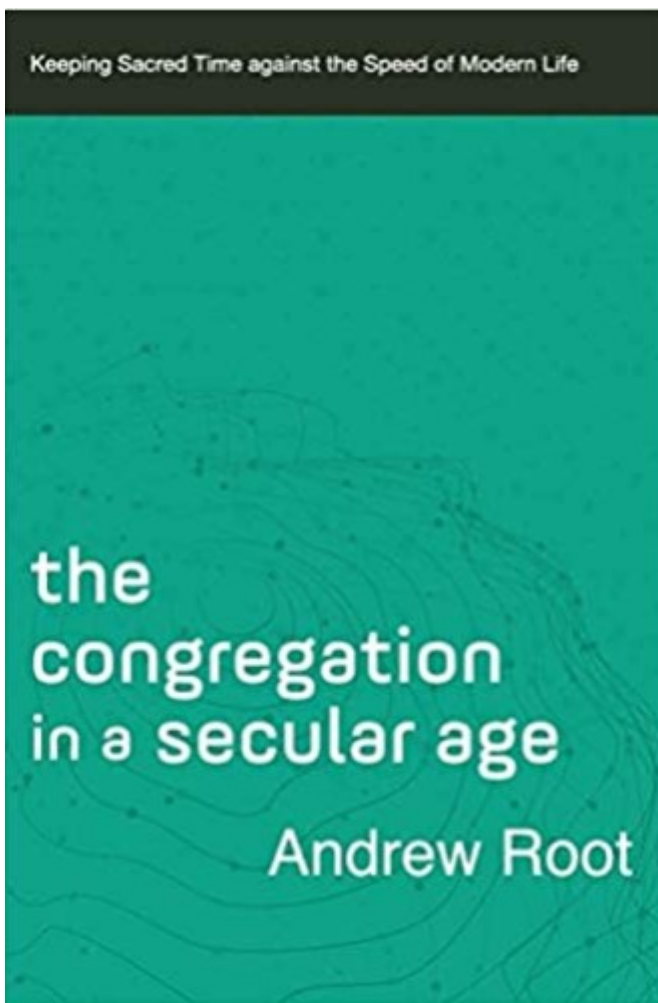


The busy church dilemma

Andrew Root cautions pastors that doing more is not the answer.

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Congregation in a Secular Age

Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life

by Andrew Root

Baker

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Church leaders today often find themselves caught in the busy church trap. People are attracted to churches they describe as busy, active, or making a difference. Such people express interest in a wide variety of programs or initiatives. But when church leaders respond by rolling out new ministries, they find that people are too busy or too exhausted to get involved.

In this third volume in his *Ministry in a Secular Age* series, Andrew Root does a terrific job of examining the busy church dilemma and helping church leaders understand why doing what we have always done—in short, more—may not be the answer.

Root ranges wide in this volume, writing in dialogue with several key thinkers, including philosopher Charles Taylor and social theorist Hartmut Rosa. Drawing particularly from Rosa, Root helps us understand how and why “modernity is the constant process of speeding things up.”

Technology’s long-standing promise has been an easier, more leisurely, and even more meaningful life. But it hasn’t worked out that way. The pace of life has accelerated, and the present is compressed—which is a way of saying that the present doesn’t last as long as it used to, and keeping up can be exhausting.

Root cites email as an example of this built-in acceleration. Before email, a person might get four or five pieces of correspondence a day. Responding to those might require two hours. With email, those four or five responses can be taken care of in 15 minutes. So now you have more time, right? Wrong. Soon you are getting 55 emails a day. Suddenly, you need three hours a day to keep up with your multiplying number of contacts. Or you find yourself checking email all day long, as one of your many multitasking activities.

Of course, by now email is old-school. Technological innovation has brought messaging, social media, and a zillion apps. These promise that you can connect to hundreds, even thousands, of people in just seconds. But you have to keep up with these platforms all the time or you become irrelevant. The upshot? You look around at a family gathering and find that two-thirds of the adults have their faces glued to their phones. Instead of being relieved by technological innovation, people become

captive to its imperatives, which include the unrelenting demand to do more in less time.

An additional element of this acceleration is that the “decay rate” for technology has shortened. A computer is out of date in three years and your phone even faster. It’s not only technology that gets old faster; so do our social norms. The boundary between work and nonwork is eroded. With all the tools and options at our disposal, a new ethic takes hold: self-optimization. It’s not just that you have to do more in less time, you have to be more all the time. What sounded like freedom “to create and curate a self” comes at a high price and with a lot of pressure. “In a secular age, sin is my inability to optimize myself,” comments Root.

All of this sets the stage for the discussion Root wants to have: What are the implications of the quickened pace of disruption, innovation, and self-optimization for congregations and their leaders? How are we to respond?

One implication is that a quickened pace erodes meaning. “As a whole, late modernity is moving too fast for questions about the substance of the good life,” Root writes. The quickened pace also tends to exhaust and depress church leaders and congregations, who are regularly encouraged to extend their reach and increase their relevance while their resource base stays the same (or, more likely, shrinks).

The temptation is to try to keep up—to mimic the ethos of Silicon Valley, with its constant disruption and innovation cycle driven by the imperative to go faster. The megachurch movement can be characterized in part by this dynamic. While it looked wildly successful for a while, cracks have begun to appear. I’ve talked with more than one megachurch founder who wonders if they have created a monster. “You have to constantly feed the beast,” lamented one, “with innovation, new ideas, new programs.”

Following Rosa, Root says that “resonance” rather than relevance is what is required for churches to be an antidote to the angst and alienation of modernity’s constant acceleration. “Too often,” observes Root, “congregations look to programs and strategies to change them. But this reverses things. Programs and strategies are best born out of a story of transformation. Congregations should yearn for a story, not just for innovative programming.” A story that is resonant has at least two elements: connection and call. The connection is the experience of being “touched or affected,” and from it springs a call to act.

Root illustrates this idea with extended attention to one pastor, Meredith, and her small congregation. When an elderly man, Henry, is overcome as he asks the congregation to pray for his little granddaughter, whose heart is damaged and who needs an operation, everyone is touched, affected, and connected. A congregation that, in Meredith's words, had been a spiritual "desert" is suddenly alert.

But it doesn't stop with being touched by Henry's emotion and prayers. The congregation discovers, or is discovered by, a call.

A church that "has no children of its own" finds that it does have children. They may be the grandchildren of its members like Henry, or they may be children in the wider community who suffer a serious childhood illness. These children and their parents need support. Meredith's congregation finds ways to give it and in doing so births a ministry of "carrying children."

Root pins a lot to this one example, which he teases out and explores in the final quarter of the book. He does so to challenge what have too often become the mantras of church consultants and denominational officials: innovate, extend your reach, change or die. Root's analysis helps us to see why such imperatives are often less a solution than a symptom of the problem.

A friend of mine used to say that what's necessary isn't so much to be a great church as to be a real church. Root's expansive exploration helps show congregations and their leaders how to be real churches in a secular age.