

What we call “empathy” used to be called “sympathy.” Writing in the 18th century, economist and philosopher Adam Smith described sympathy as the imaginative capacity to “enter as it were into [another’s] body, and become in some measure the same person.” With the discovery of “mirror neurons,” modern neuroscience validated Smith’s theory. Neuroscientist Christian Keysers explains: “The mirror system builds a bridge between the minds of two people,” showing that our brains are not only “deeply social” but also “magically connected to each other.” Put simply, we are hardwired for empathy. No machine can do this. Only a human being can earn an E for empathy.

Presence. Jesus sent the apostles out saying, “Do not take a road leading to Gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-6). The P in EPOCH is *presence*. Jesus expected his followers to be present among “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6). Jesus knew the apostles could not be all things to all people; they were to focus on certain groups and particular individuals to make a deeper impact. The Gentiles and the Samaritans would receive this ministry eventually, but not just yet.

To be present is to provide care face to face, not from a distance. One of the tragedies of the COVID pandemic was how it prevented us from gathering in person. Ours is a ministry of presence. To grow in faith and do the work of Jesus in the world, we need to step into other peoples’ messes, meet them where they are, and walk forward with them. The word “church,” also defined as an “assembly” or a “gathering,” reminds us that we need to be present to be effective. In Greek, the term for “church” is *ekklesia*, literally “the ones called out.” When we assemble as the church, we gather to be encouraged and equipped so we may go out into the world to be present where help is needed.

Jesus commanded the apostles to perform a ministry of presence when he said, “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons” (Matthew 10:7-8). Such good news was delivered face to face and healings happened in close physical contact with people, not at a distance. The apostles earned a P for *presence*, and so must we.

Opinion. Next comes O, which stands for *opinion* (AKA ethical judgment). Human beings can be discerning and assign value; machines cannot. “Whatever town or village you enter,” said Jesus, “find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town” (Matthew 10:11-14).

Jesus knew that ministry is relational, not transactional. The currency of discipleship is not money, but deep-spirited fellowship. Jesus said, “You received without payment; give without payment” (Matthew 10:8). We need to build trust-filled relationships with people before we can make an impact. Followers of Christ are challenged to make ethical judgments, to use their *opinions* to discern where best to invest their time and energy. We are constantly challenged to figure out what is worth doing and what is not, to figure out where our efforts will be welcomed and effective, and where they will not. Jesus asks us to demonstrate the O at the center of EPOCH discipleship.

Creativity. We also need *creativity*. “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts,” said Jesus, “no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff” (Matthew 10:9-10). Moving from town to town required faith and creativity: the apostles trusted the people they met to give them food, and they adapted to the needs of the villagers. “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves,” said Jesus, “so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). The apostles had no plan except for the words of Jesus and no protection except for their wisdom and innocence. They made it up as they went along, in an act of supreme faith and improvisation. They were EPOCH apostles who showed a big C for *creativity*.

In the 1940s, running an ice-skating rink was hard, backbreaking work. When the ice became pitted and dangerous, a crew scraped the surface with large metal blades, hosed the ice down with fresh water, smoothed the surface with squeegees, and waited for it to harden. Resurfacing took 90 minutes, which cut into ticket sales. One rink owner found a better way. A skilled mechanic, he toiled for nine years in his shop, inventing a machine to smooth the ice. He started haunting war-surplus warehouses, looking for parts to buy and repurpose. The result was an odd, boxy vehicle that could be driven like a truck. One pass across the ice was all it took. In 1950, Frank Zamboni acquired a patent for his “ice rink resurfacing machine.” He established a company to manufacture them. The famed figure skater Sonja Henie bought the first one; so did the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team. Creativity for Frank Zamboni came by welding together odd bits of machinery, to bring to reality an abstract concept he had long held in his mind.

Modern faith leaders are seeking creative way to “get back to basics.” Congregations are stripping away complex structures and returning to foundational practices such as organic fellowship, prayer, and sharing the gospel which create a stronger, more united foundation. Many ministries are transitioning from passive classroom learning to relational discipleship, fostering deep, all-age participation in small groups. Rather than relying on prepackaged, one-size-fits-all programs, churches are engaging in personalized

revitalization efforts that address their specific community contexts and histories. The future of the church relies on protecting its core heritage while remaining open to change, effectively listening to the needs of the community, and communicating in relevant, understandable ways. All of this takes great creativity to achieve.

Hope. Finally, the apostles had *hope*. They shared Jesus’ vision of a new world based on the reign of God, which had come near and was constantly leading them forward. The apostles, filled with hope, knew that the sick would be cured and the dead would be raised. They feared nothing when dragged before governors and kings because of their faith in Jesus and of their hope for a renewed world. Do not be concerned about “what you are to say,” promised Jesus, “for what you are to say will be given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matthew 10:19-20).

EPOCH apostles always have *hope*. They do not worry about the future, because they know God is always working for good in their lives, even in times of opposition and persecution. They “will be hated by all because of my name,” predicted Jesus. “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22). The hope for the modern church lies in returning to its essentials: authentic community, the core gospel message, and active, practical discipleship. By shifting focus away from rigid institutional programming and toward deep, relational faith, the church can remain a resilient beacon of hope, support, and relevance in a changing and challenging world.

AI is causing anxiety in the workforce; upheaval will happen as jobs are lost or transformed. But our security as followers of Christ cannot be shaken. In every time and place, Jesus calls disciples to show Empathy, be Present, express Opinions, work Creatively, and be Hope-filled. This work can never be replicated if we maintain a high EPOCH scores.

Prayer: Empowering God, thank You for calling me to be Your disciple. I ask You to equip me for the days ahead. Lord, when the world feels hostile or overwhelming, remind me of Your comforting voice: “*Do not be afraid*” (Matthew 10:31). Give me the courage to boldly acknowledge You before others, trusting that my worth is secure in Your hands. As I navigate a challenging world, grant me the grace to be “*wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove*” (Matthew 10:16). Fill me with Your Holy Spirit so that my words and actions bring light, grace, and truth to those around me. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Sources:

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- Kumar, Atul. “Why AI is replacing some jobs faster than others.” *World Economic Forum*, August 12, 2025, www.weforum.org.
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- Sweet, Leonard on *Facebook*, September 21, 2024. Sweet describes this quotation as “Something I just wrote for a chapter in my textbook on semiotics, ‘Decoding the Divine.’”

EPOCH Apostles

Sunday, June 14, 2026
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 9:35-10:23

AI (Artificial Intelligence) is a branch of computer science that builds systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence. These systems learn from massive amounts of data, recognize patterns, make decisions, and generate new content without needing explicit, step-by-step programming. The rise of AI is causing anxiety in the workforce. Software developers are affected because AI can solve problems and write programs. Customer service is vulnerable because AI uses phone, email, and ticket data to help with responses and cut costs. Finance workers are nervous because AI is heavily involved in high-frequency trading, tapping into vast amounts of data. Many people worry that AI will replace knowledge workers such as lawyers, writers, and scientists.

There is good news, according to MIT researcher Isabella Loaiza, who says that there are many things that humans still do much better than machines. She grades these abilities by giving them an “EPOCH” score. EPOCH is an acronym that stands for Empathy, Presence, Opinion [AKA ethical judgment], Creativity, and Hope, which is the ability to plan and execute a vision. Loaiza’s belief is that “High EPOCH jobs, ones that require more human skills, might be more resilient to AI.”

Being a disciple of Jesus is a high EPOCH job requiring empathy, presence, opinion, creativity, and hope. Jesus gave his disciples these abilities so that they would survive and thrive in the face of all kinds of difficulties. Jesus equipped them to become EPOCH apostles. Matthew’s Gospel says Jesus traveled through all the towns of Galilee, teaching in “synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness” (Matthew 9:35). Two thousand years before the rise of AI, Jesus knew the value of the health care sector! Jesus showed the disciples the power of a high EPOCH score. “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless” (Matthew 9:36).

Empathy. Jesus had *empathy* in abundance. He understood and shared the feelings of others. When he saw the distress of the crowds, he cared for them. Jesus shows compassion towards the people around him: he “suffers with” them, a literal translation of the Latin *com* (“with”) and *passio* (“suffer”). Jesus had a sympathetic awareness of the distress of the crowds, combined with a strong desire to alleviate it. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to show empathy and compassion, to understand the feelings of others, and to be agents who ease their pain.