

# HYBRID CHRISTIAN YOUTH MINISTRY: A STUDY OF CLOSED-GROUP SOCIAL MEDIA

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by

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# Abstract

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The youth ministry field has been slow to respond to the rise of social media use among young people, due to concerns that are both practical and theological. Scholars have studied the use of digital forms in Christian ministry and have often formed opposing dystopian/utopian views. Now, the impact of the pandemic has made this topic a major concern and increased experimentation.

There is little evidence of scholars examining the use of group messaging apps as a distinct form of closed-group social media. However, the Wave youth group have been pioneering the adoption of social media into their youth ministry and practice since 2016. This thesis examines two cohorts from the Wave, the first using Facebook Messenger and the second on Instagram. A practical theology methodology is used to explore empirical data drawn from social media feeds and focus groups with youth leaders, relating them to the wider field of youth ministry.

Two areas are discussed: firstly, concerning community. As leaders accompany the group on social media, this enables improvisation and reflection with young people; 'doing' and 'being' together. It extends incarnational youth ministry, drawing attention to dynamics of absence and presence. Secondly, discipleship considers the strategic potential of social media and its ability to provide quick response to circumstances, as seen during the pandemic. Models to assess engagement identify levels of interaction which range from phatic communication through to expressions of Christian practices, raising expectations regarding discipleship.

This thesis draws out key learning from the Wave group leaders and argues for a hybrid ministry as a best of both worlds approach, enabling a flow of interactivity between real and virtual spaces. This is of profound significance with implications not just for the future of youth ministry but for the whole church.

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# Glossary

**App** – an application installed on a smart phone or tablet.

**Closed-group** – members of a group messaging service where access is controlled by an administrator from the group. (For the ‘Wave’, this role is held by group leader Ben).

**Digital media** – an umbrella term for all forms of digital media which includes the Internet, blogs, videoconferencing as well as all forms of social media.

**Facebook Messenger** – a group messaging service, which can be linked to Facebook but also operates through a separate app (minimum age 13).

**Group chat** – informal expression for the conversation within a group messaging service.

**Hybrid** – here refers to a blend of social media use (virtual world) and in-person meetings (real world).

**Instagram** – a social media platform (minimum age 13). Whilst not exclusively a group messaging service, it does allow for conversations alongside the main profile page, accessed only by those authorised by the owner.

**Platform** – a term for software which enables the publishing of social media posts including for example, Facebook, Twitter.

**Social media** – applications and websites that allow users to create and share their own content, and build a network of friends or followers. Examples include: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok.

**WhatsApp** – the most popular group messaging service (minimum age 16).

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# 1. Introduction

Social media use is almost ubiquitous among young people with 95% of 15-year-olds using platforms in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about its effect on young people, raising major concerns. The Netflix film ‘The Social Dilemma’ and the accompanying work of the Centre for Humane Technology sets out the dark side of social media very starkly, with a dystopian view of its impact on society.<sup>2</sup>

Much criticism rests with the design and control of social media platforms by huge corporations with commercial interests. Parallels are drawn between how social media companies utilise technology to control behaviour with complex algorithms, and the way authoritarian cults exploit the vulnerable. Therefore, we need to reclaim our minds, detach from social media, assess and evaluate its impact on our lives.<sup>3</sup>

This study aims to do some of this examination and evaluation, not being naïve to the risks but alert to the reality of social media dominance among teenagers and the need therefore for youth ministers to critically reflect on their own engagement. The youth ministry community has been slow to engage with social media use and its impact on young people, with few studies examining the subject in this context.

Where studies do exist, they concern posting on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram by individuals on their profile pages, building up their network of followers. Another form of social media use exists, in the world of group messaging services such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Use of these apps is on the increase with a recent survey indicating that 9 out of 10 8–17-year-olds are using these services in the UK, despite a minimum age limit of 13 for many platforms, and 16 for WhatsApp.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ofcom, Online Nation 2021 data. [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf), 5, accessed 29.01.22.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Humane Technology, ‘The Dark Side of Social Media’, <https://www.humanetech.com/infographic-dark-side-social-media>, accessed 30.09.22.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Human Technology, ‘How Social Media Features Parallel Cult Techniques’, 2022, <https://www.humanetech.com/insights/how-social-media-features-parallel-cult-techniques>, accessed 30.09.22.

<sup>4</sup> Children’s Commissioner, ‘Access Denied’, 2020, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/cco-access-denied.pdf>, 2, accessed 29.01.22.

Using social media for group messaging is a distinctly different form of engagement than building a personal profile. The closed-group format is a hitherto unexplored area, enabling a private, virtual space which negates many of the serious concerns around the dark side of social media. The use of group messaging can be adopted for youth ministry, allowing leaders to be 'with' young people across the week, enhancing youth ministry through hybrid use of real and virtual spaces. The importance of accompaniment has its roots in youth work principles of leaders meeting young people where they are, being present with them as a co-traveller in a position of trust. This with-ness has a theological basis as a model for incarnational youth ministry based on the Emmaus-road biblical narrative.<sup>5</sup>

This study focuses on the 'Wave' youth group, who have pioneered the use of social media since 2016. Two cohorts of young people and their youth leaders have participated in group messaging on Facebook Messenger and Instagram. This study aims to examine this practice to discover what can be learned about using social media in this way as part of a hybrid youth ministry that operates in real and virtual worlds.

The global pandemic has heightened the need to consider use of digital technology in ministry and this research aims to offer the youth ministry field a reflection on its potential to enhance practice. There are many challenges here. Some are practical, concerning the safety of use for young people and youth leaders. Others are theological, for example, is this a legitimate form of ministry? What values operate here and can use remain faithful to youth ministry practice?

To begin, the methodology of the study combines both empirical research with a practical theology approach, starting from the experience of the Wave Youth Group rather than Scripture or tradition.<sup>6</sup> First, we consider the ontological approach taken in the study, before exploring the practical theology methodology and then the method for the qualitative research is explained.

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<sup>5</sup> Maxine Green and Chandu D. Christian, *Accompanying: Young People on Their Spiritual Quest*, London: Church House Publishing, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Cartledge, 'Can Theology be Practical? Part 1', *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* 3 (2007): 9.



In chapter 2, a literature review considers the adoption of digital media within churches before focusing on examples within youth ministry and reflecting on the impact of the global pandemic in accelerating interest in this field.

Chapter 3 presents the findings of the research before the empirical research is discussed in relation to youth ministry through subsequent chapters. In chapter 4, the use of social media to form community is examined as a method of accompanying young people. The consequences for discipleship are explored in chapter 5, looking at how social media is adopted as a strategic tool that helps leaders reflect on levels of engagement in youth ministry.

The concluding chapter outlines recommendations for future use, reviews the research process here and offers areas for further examination in future studies.

## **1.1 Ontology**

Fundamental to any research study is the question of what can truly be understood. There are broadly two extremes of ontological positions, from a positivist approach assuming a concrete reality which can be objectively understood through to a phenomenological or interpretivist view where reality can only be identified through the human mind and social constructs.<sup>7</sup> I aim to take a middle approach between the extremes of positivism and interpretivism, seeking a critical realist position.

The critical realist position is appropriate for this study firstly because it pertains to a reality that is both subjective (drawing from youth leaders experience) and objective (relating to belief in a God that demands acknowledging an objective reality beyond our understanding). Secondly, the critical aspect requires a hermeneutical approach that combines empirical study with theological reflection, drawing out learning and situating this in the context of youth ministry.

As Andrew Wright notes, there are three distinct aspects to this approach: “It seeks to map a path beyond the extremes of modern certainty and postmodern scepticism via a

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<sup>7</sup> Mukhles Al-Ababneh, ‘Linking Ontology, Epistemology and Research Methodology’, *Science & Philosophy* 8 (2020): 79-80.

triumvirate of core philosophical principles: ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgemental rationality.”<sup>8</sup>

Each of these three principles will be considered in turn as applied to this study.

### 1.1.1 *Ontological Realism*

The critical realist position makes a clear distinction between what is real (ontology) and what we know of this (epistemology).<sup>9</sup> From a theological standpoint, God’s perspective is beyond our ability to fully imagine or fathom, yet exists as an objective reality or truth.<sup>10</sup> If this understanding can never fully be grasped, then a move towards understanding is the aim.

This study, then, takes a theological approach which is fundamentally summed up by Anselm’s definition of ‘faith seeking understanding’.<sup>11</sup> The key here is ‘seeking’, as the research examines how faith is mediated through social media and aims to bring understanding to this in relation to youth ministry practice. There is no attempt here to create a new blueprint for ministry, but to move toward understanding how faith is made real in this context:

Critical realism affirms both the need for hermeneutical theory and empirical study, but it refused, as some theorists call it, the ‘suicide pact’ of contending that only what can be empirically proven without doubt is real, or, that there is no reality at all because everything can be deconstructed.<sup>12</sup>

Ballard and Pritchard differentiate the theological task into four core tasks: descriptive, normative, critical and apologetic. In practical theology, this involves articulating what Christians do, examining this in the light of both Scripture and tradition, aiming to ensure that the church remains faithful to its core commitments as lived out in different cultural contexts. Theology is critical in that it engages with other disciplines which

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy*, London: Routledge, 2012, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Pete Ward, ‘Blueprint Ecclesiology and the Lived’, *Ecclesial Practices* 2 (2015): 84.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Isaiah 55:8-9 and Ephesians 3:20.

<sup>11</sup> Anselm quoted in Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, London: SPCK, 2006, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Root, *Christopraxis*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014, 197.

offer challenge. Ultimately, theology is practical in that it serves a community of faith to live out their beliefs with integrity.<sup>13</sup>

### *1.1.2 Epistemic Relativism*

The middle ground of critical realism falls between certainty (or naivety) and scepticism (or cynicism). This study draws knowledge principally from two directions, the empirical research and the field of youth ministry theory. It is the interplay between these two interpreted through my own hermeneutic lens which will contribute new understanding.

The theological approach taken is grounded in a practical theology methodology outlined below. Whilst theology is the primary domain for this study, knowledge can be gained through other disciplines, such as sociology. In dealing fairly with other perspectives Swinton and Mowat use the analogy of hospitality: theology is the host, but other guest disciplines are brought into the conversation.<sup>14</sup>

This approach seeks “critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world with a view to ensuring faithful participation in the continuing mission of the triune God.”<sup>15</sup> In this case, the empirical research, wider discourse around social media use and the pressures on young people today all bring something to the table, but the meal itself is a theological feast. As scholar, my service is to bring all courses together, which requires some consideration of my own etiquette and approach.

### *1.1.3 Judgemental Rationality*

If not all accounts of reality are of equal value, then judgemental rationality is the process of testing different views. The intention is to start from a position of being open to research findings without prejudging outcomes, though at the same time, paying attention to my own subjective position and potential bias.

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<sup>13</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical*, 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, London: SCM Press, 2006, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Theology and Research*, 25.

This process involves reflection, reflexivity and representation. Reflection means that: “methods, interview questions, and ways of analysing and describing what is found will be reviewed, adjusted and developed as the project progresses.”<sup>16</sup>

Reflexivity concerns paying attention to my own faith background from within evangelical Christianity. This study focuses on a youth group within this tradition, and aims to represent their views fairly and critically.

Evangelical Christianity places the greatest weight on Scripture as the ultimate revelation of God. Church tradition, reason and experience make up the rest of Wesley’s theological model of revelation and are important reference points which shape the reading of Scripture.<sup>17</sup> Over the years there have been shifts in evangelical perspectives, often concerning issues with high impact on young people, such as views on gender and human sexuality.<sup>18</sup>

My own perspective has shifted over the years, to a point where I have an uneasy alliance with the evangelical label. As a youth minister, I have usually operated outside of dogmatic church views, working with teenagers who challenge church traditions and practice. I remain committed to relational youth ministry, recognising that it evolves with each youth group cohort and aims to find new ways of bringing relevance to Christianity for the next generation.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, I am doing theology from the middle of the pool – immersed in the practice of youth ministry and seeking others who will dive in “to better understand how God works in Christian action so that our practices may cooperate with God more fully.”<sup>20</sup>

As a professional with the field of youth ministry, I have first-hand experience of the declining participation of young people within the church. Part of my motivation for study is to help youth ministry develop new practices which might reverse this trend of decline. There is a certain pressure to find the illusory silver-bullet for youth ministry

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<sup>16</sup> Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2017, 160.

<sup>17</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Theology and Research*, 78.

<sup>18</sup> J. Twenge, *iGen*, New York: Atria, 2017, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Relational youth ministry as being alongside and for adolescents, Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark & Dave Rahn (eds.), *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2001, 32-33.

which would ensure both the survival of my profession but also the Christian faith which forms so much of my identity.

Beginning research without prejudging outcomes demands that I anticipate that this endeavour will not produce a cure-all for the ills of youth ministry, but I remain hopeful that it might contribute to finding new practices in some form. My hopes could, however, produce a bias which attends to the positive and minimises negative findings. Awareness of this potential hopefully minimises its effects and necessitates testing my own views against research evidence. The use of an appropriate methodology and methods will formalise and strengthen this.

## 1.2 Methodology

Practical theology is appropriate for this study because it offers a reflective process which can make use of qualitative research. It also represents doing ‘theology from below’, starting from the experiences of youth leaders.<sup>21</sup> The methodology employed here is based on the pastoral cycle, as modified by Swinton and Mowat. Their approach pays particular attention to hermeneutics and encompasses the entire research journey. It is based on four stages related to the overall structure of this thesis as outlined below:

|    | <b>Swinton / Mowat Model</b>  | <b>Thesis structure</b>  |
|----|---|--|
| 1. | Current Praxis: what appears to be going on pre-reflectively?                                       | Formation of core research questions and literature review   |
| 2. | Cultural / Contextual: what is actually going on here?  | Findings of the qualitative study, key themes that emerge and discussion with leaders on these themes. |
| 3. | Theological: How are we to understand this situation from the perspective of critical faithfulness? | Discussion relating the findings to youth ministry theory.   |
| 4. | Formulating revised practice: what should now be done?  | Conclusion, evaluation, and recommendations.   |

*Figure 1: outline of practical theology model*

<sup>21</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical*, 89.

Whilst this model is applied to the thesis structure in linear fashion here, the reality is that it is a cycle and the four stages interact with each other.<sup>22</sup> For example, the core research questions were refined in light of the reading material and as the qualitative study began to take shape.

Using practical theology is not simply an academic exercise. Root cites Miller-McLemore's work articulating four locales for practical theology: scholarly discipline, activity of faith, method of study, and curricular area.<sup>23</sup> The first two are of particular concern here as this study invites youth leaders into theological reflection, through a focus group, which further informs my understanding as the scholar and affects the practice of youth ministry on the ground.

Youth leaders share their experiences of ministry which are bound into their personal faith story. As scholar, I acknowledge and aim to be faithful in representing their expertise, using examples to draw out key learning that confirms or challenges youth ministry practice.

## **1.3 Method**

### *1.3.1 Empirical Research*

The process of empirical research undertaken here has not been without its frustrations. Originally, the intention was to work with several youth groups of which I have professional oversight. I was aware that youth leaders might feel obligated to participate and attempted to mitigate this with honest discussions that named this tension. In addition, as part of the information sent to youth leaders about the study, I specifically stressed that engagement was entirely voluntary and there was no expectation or pressure from myself or anyone in my workplace to participate. I felt it was necessary to emphasise this point both conversationally and in writing, so that this study was clearly separated from my professional role to break any power dynamics that might otherwise have affected the research. I had six youth groups that were willing to participate at the

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<sup>22</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical*, 85-87.

<sup>23</sup> Root, *Christopraxis*, 29.

beginning of 2020, who were to form a learning community setting up new social media groups and reflecting together on their effectiveness.

With the onset of the global pandemic, it became clear that my research ambitions needed to change. Suddenly youth groups could not meet as normal, and so digital ministry became the only approach available. An interesting experiment into social media ministry began to feel like extra scrutiny of youth leaders at a time of already increased anxiety. Instead, I return to the Wave youth group, who had already pioneered social media use as part of their ministry and inspired my initial interest in this subject.

Hence this thesis uses qualitative data from the Wave as a case study, analysing two iterations of social media ministry from different cohorts. This group is appropriate as having already pioneered the use of social media back in 2016, they offer the chance to see how the group operated before and during the pandemic. The first cohort uses the Facebook Messenger platform with mostly historic data and group members who are now all adults; the second is still a live social media group with members under the age of 18, using Instagram.

With a focus on one group exclusively, this research became more limited in scope. It considers one scenario in detail but does not unpack the issues that could arise in setting up social media groups across a variety of contexts. However, it has enabled consideration of a hybrid youth ministry which adopts social media as part of its approach. The notion of hybrid ministry has emerged as a key concern coming out of the pandemic and the Wave group offers a unique insight into the opportunities it affords.

The core research question: “what can be learned from the Wave Youth Group about the role of closed-group social media in hybrid Christian youth ministry?” is explored through three sub questions. Firstly, how social media might enhance / complement Christian youth ministry practice, then to what extent social media increases engagement and participation from young people and, finally, what expressions of faith the format allows / encourages among young Christians.

The main youth leader, Ben, has assisted in communicating the research process to young people and parents included in the study. He has collated permission forms, and

provided examples of the social media feed, redacting references to names and replacing these with initials. Therefore, throughout this thesis, leaders are referred to by first name and young people using their initials.

A focus group has been conducted with four Wave group leaders to present some of the findings and to allow for reflection and feedback, encouraging their participation in the practical theology cycle. An audio recording was made of the discussion and a copy of the transcript can be viewed in appendix 5.

### *1.3.2 Research Tools and Analysis*

The social media feeds were received as image files, therefore Google Docs has been employed as a tool to convert text from the image into a text file, to aid with analysis. NVivo (version 20) software has then assisted with processing the qualitative data. Cases were created for each user, separated into cohort and leader / young person categories. Codes were created on themes of interest, centred around three areas: “building community”, “discipleship/Christian practice” and “social media distinct features”. Cross-referencing between cases and codes allowed tracking of engagement from youth leaders and young people across the themes. In addition, static sets – collections of posts relating to one conversation of interest – were also created. Some examples from the feed are included in appendices 11-13.

The use of NVivo has enabled netnography tools, which aid interpretation and analysis of social media. The seven ‘Interpenetrating Intellectual Implements’ provide creative ways to examine data and test ideas that emerge. ‘Imagining’ and ‘Re-Memorying’ have been employed through a process of journaling ideas and then querying the data to see if theories stack up to the evidence. ‘Artifying’ and ‘Cultural decoding’ make use of NVivo to generate visual summaries of the data and codes.<sup>24</sup> Examples of these visual infographics are included in appendix 6.

### *1.3.3 Ethics*

Ethical approval for research has been granted through the application process at London School of Theology to ensure that there is no harm to participants in the study,

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, London: Sage, 2015, 199-200.



that informed consent has been received and confidentiality assured (appendix 1). The main concerns here were to ensure that young people were fully aware of the process, consenting to submission of the social media feed and able to request that the youth leader redact any posts that they would prefer to be excluded from the study. Ben, as youth leader, provided copies of the social media feed for this project, so anonymity of the youth group is maintained. I have no knowledge of any conversations that have been removed or how many users may have withheld consent. In this respect, it should be noted that examples of the feed used in the study are incomplete, but nevertheless they are sufficient in their quantity and quality for the purposes of the research.

Through this process, the Parochial Church Council was first consulted to consent to participating in this study (appendix 2). Those part of the Messenger group, who are all now above the age of 18, were given an application pack and consent form to complete (appendix 3). For the Instagram group, separate consent was sought from parents and young people with age-appropriate information for both groups (appendix 4).

All participants in the research were invited to receive a summary of the research findings, if they wish.

## 2. Literature Review

This review seeks to examine how youth ministry practice has responded to social media. This field of study is small, so research is augmented with literature covering the wider church. This helps to contextualise the youth ministry approach within a broader culture.

To begin, the church's response to digital media more generally is examined for context, before looking in particular at social media and the distinct challenges it brings. Attention then turns to youth ministry, considering how these challenges have influenced its response to them. Finally, the impact of the pandemic is discussed as a watershed moment which opens new possibilities, though challenges remain. Given the pace of digital change the focus here is mostly on sources from 2010 onwards.

### 2.1 Digital Media and the Church

Since the evolution of the internet, there has been controversy over whether use of virtual space in ministry is appropriate, with a utopia-dystopia divide dominating discourse.<sup>1</sup> From the advent of web 2.0 early this century the internet moved away from being the preserve of technical professionals into the hands of 'producers' or 'prosumers' in a shift from top-down to bottom-up development.<sup>2</sup>

Those on the utopian side of the debate could see the potential for the internet to provide new forms of digital ministry which could revolutionise the church. Some writers compare this opportunity to the invention of the Gutenberg press in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century which enabled the mass distribution of the Bible, democratising access to Scripture around the world.<sup>3</sup> Yet, even in the case of the Gutenberg Press, there was

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<sup>1</sup> H. Campbell, 'Community' in H. Campbell (ed.), *Digital Religion*, New York: Routledge, 2013, 60 and L-M Ocampo, 'Internet and Social Media' *Landas* 32:2 (2018), 33-59.

<sup>2</sup> H. Campbell and S. Garner, *Networked Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016, 46.

<sup>3</sup> For example: S. Hips, *Flickering Pixels*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009, 48 and L. Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking is Poised to Ignite Revival*, Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2012, 3-4.

critical backlash and concern about technology ‘dumbing down’ the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> Those on the dystopian side of the current debate are similarly concerned.<sup>5</sup>

This polarised response is unsurprising as it follows a typical pattern which is in part determined by the four laws of media identified by Marshall McLuhan. These laws recognise technological innovation as an extension of self, which firstly enhances life in some way. Secondly however, the new media renders a previous form as obsolete, and then thirdly retrieves some function which had been lost or obsolesced earlier. The final fourth law is where the new media form reverses on itself as it is pushed to the limits of its potential.<sup>6</sup>

Hipps relates these laws to the way in which the church responds to new media. He considers the fourth law of reversal as a dark dimension which can generate surprising and unanticipated consequences. Regarding the Gutenberg printing press, the structure of church buildings began to mirror the media format as pews become like rows of text in a book, hence the values and format of the media were influencing ministry rather than vice versa. This sort of unintentional effect may not be obvious for some time.<sup>7</sup>

This analysis helpfully sheds light on reactions from the church and takes us beyond a simple divide between technophiles and technophobes. Whilst new media is initially attractive for pioneers, others see that it offers nothing substantially new. For sceptics or digital aliens, the dark dimension is a source of fear as it leads to substantial and unpredictable change which threatens existing structures.<sup>8</sup>

A polarised response gives voice to extreme opinions and leads to ambivalence and inertia for much of the church. An illustration of this can be seen in a 2015 study, the ‘Cyber church’ survey of US church leaders, which found 54% of pastors agreeing that the internet is a powerful tool for effective ministry (up from 35% in 2000). There remained a substantial proportion who were unconvinced, with a significant minority

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<sup>4</sup> E. Drescher, *Tweet if You [Heart] Jesus*, Harrisburg: Morehouse Pub., 2011, 61-62.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of technological pessimism see Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 31-33. A more recent example raising concerns of the digital impact on community, discipleship and the Bible can be found in J. Kim, *Analog Church*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2020, 13-29.

<sup>6</sup> M. McLuhan, ‘Laws of the Media’, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 70.4 (2013), 451-452.

<sup>7</sup> Hipps, *Pixels*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> P. Meadows, ‘Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture’, *Mission Studies*, 29.2 (2012), 163-182.

(13%) endorsing the view that: “The chances of the internet being used to spread spiritual heresy and to distort Christianity outweigh the potential of the internet to spread authentic Christianity” (down from 17% in 2000). This represents an entrenched minority resistant to online ministry.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.1.1 *The Rise of Social Media*

Whilst ambivalence characterises much of the overall response to digital media, from 2010 onwards the use of social media by Christian churches has been on the rise. Internet 3.0 allows even greater interactivity and portability as social networking sites experience exponential growth across every generation.<sup>10</sup> This is now such a dominant part of contemporary culture that it is impossible to ignore, even for the church!

This rise is accompanied by a growing number of texts which offer practical guidance to embrace the new opportunities social media affords.<sup>11</sup> Typically, these sources offer an overview of social media platforms, encouraging ministers to participate, using their social media profile as a marketing and communications tool for the church.

This approach recognises the huge potential reach of social media through networks of followers,<sup>12</sup> its interactive nature allowing many-to-many communication.<sup>13</sup> Yet the dominant narrative focuses on building profile, increasing the number of followers and the creation of a clear digital strategy.<sup>14</sup> This suggests a corporate, marketing approach reinforcing a broadcast media one-to-many style of communication, for example: “If a church... attempts to create a social media strategy with an absent or unclear Big Idea, the results are usually disastrous.”<sup>15</sup>

A study of Facebook use by churches in Australia in 2016 exemplifies this, finding that two-thirds of churches used the platform, categorising ten different ways of posting. By

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<sup>9</sup> Barna Research Group, ‘Cyber Church: Pastors and the Internet’, Barna Group, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/cyber-church-pastors-and-the-internet/>, accessed 08.03.22.

<sup>10</sup> J. Wise, *The Social Church*, Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014, 48.

<sup>11</sup> For example: T. Crawford, *Going Social: A Practical Guide on Social Media for Church Leaders*, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012, 40.

<sup>12</sup> D. T. Bourgeois, *Ministry in the Digital Age: Strategies and Best Practices for a Post-Website World*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2013, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Wise, *Social*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Bourgeois, *Strategies*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Wise, *Social*, 131.

far, the most popular forms were ‘persuade’ and ‘create excitement’ which advertise real-world events hosted by the local church.<sup>16</sup>

Some voices, though, call for more. For example, Williams insists that churches must understand their ‘why’ for using social media, emphasising that its use should include creating community through authentic relationships that enable discipleship.<sup>17</sup> In a Danish church study of pastors using Facebook, a dialogical rather than monological approach is called for, to build community. This includes ‘spiritualising’ the social media feed by accepting prayer requests, posting biblical quotes, and displaying video extracts of church services. In this way, the church asserts herself in this virtual space, shaping the technology for her own purposes.<sup>18</sup>

Others go even further, advocating for a digital rule of life to articulate Christian approaches to social media posting,<sup>19</sup> which Drescher argues could reflect the ‘habitus’ evident in mediaeval monasticism.<sup>20</sup> In these cases, the networking opportunities of social media platforms offer the church a new community space – not as a means to the end of getting more people through the doors – but as a potential form of church in its own right.

### *2.1.2 Key Issues relating to Social Media Ministry*

Social media goes further than previous innovations in communication and technology, and as Williams noted, churches should harness its potential for building community, incorporating use into a discipleship strategy.<sup>21</sup> There are some key challenges to explore which have proved especially difficult for the church and added to ambivalence and inertia regarding full adoption of the possibilities of social media.

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<sup>16</sup> A. Lim, ‘Effective Ways of Using Social Media’, *Christian Education Journal*, 14.1 (2017), 23-41.

<sup>17</sup> M. Williams, ‘Community, Discipleship and Social Media’, *Christian Education Journal*, 12.2 (2015), 375-383.

<sup>18</sup> P. Fischer-Nielsen, ‘Pastors on the Internet’ in P. H. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, and S. Gelfgren (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture*, New York: Peter Lang, 2012, 115-130.

<sup>19</sup> Drescher, *Tweet*, 173-175 and A. Gorrell, *Always On*, Baker Publishing Group, 2019, 155.

<sup>20</sup> Drescher, *Tweet*, 34-53.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, *Community*, 381-2.

### *Negotiation of Values*

Writers in this field reflect to some degree on Marshall McLuhan's warning that 'the medium is the message' and therefore no digital platform can be considered value-neutral.<sup>22</sup> This becomes a central issue for engagement and leads to a range of approaches to the relationship between religious practice and digital media. Lundby names 'technological determinism' at one extreme where the values intrinsic to the media drive its use;<sup>23</sup> at the other extreme is Campbell's 'Religious Social Shaping of Technology' where the use of media is negotiated to fit with the core values of religion.<sup>24</sup> The latter is exemplified in the Catholic Church's YouTube channel where the Church negotiated the removal of the comments function, star rating and ranking system in order to control the image and reputation of the institution.<sup>25</sup>

### *Threats to traditional church*

There are questions over the validity of digital media use in ministry, explored by Baab. She focuses on a theology of place, contending that the internet constitutes a third space as a locus of human activity and God's engagement with us.<sup>26</sup> Her view takes seriously the potential for forming real relationships online and the subsequent nurture of Christian community but she raises questions of authority in and over these new forms of church, including the relationship between online and traditional church structures. In one study into the sharing of Bible quotes with accompanying images on social media, De Bruin suggests that the imagery demonstrates the power of the illustrator to influence the recipient without authority. This is a cause for concern, as it represents a movement away from institutions to individuals controlling the use of Scripture and

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<sup>22</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, London: Routledge and Regan Paul, 1964, 7-23.

<sup>23</sup> K. Lundby, 'Theoretical Frameworks for Approaching Religion and New Media' in H. Campbell (ed.), *Digital Religion*, New York: Routledge, 2013, 225-237.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 103.

<sup>25</sup> H. Campbell, 'How Religious Communities Negotiate New Media Religiously' in P. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, and Stefan Gelfgren (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture*, New York: Peter Lang, 2012, 81-96.

<sup>26</sup> L. Baab, 'Towards a Theology of the Internet' in P. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, and S. Gelfgren (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture*, New York: Peter Lang, 2012, 277-292.

effectively mediating the Bible for millions of people online, who view these images in a 'secular' space.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst the threat to existing models of church has theological implications, there are practical considerations too – if the congregation can participate online what does this mean for physical gatherings in church buildings? In his study of five online churches, Hutchings found that almost all participants combined online with local (physical) church attendance, suggesting that these concerns may be unfounded. However, he notes that over time online churches are beginning to deviate their patterns of ministry from inherited church models, suggesting that the future offers a more divergent landscape.<sup>28</sup> During the pandemic, questions concerning the nature of hybrid church have become more urgent, with associated fears for the future of in-person church gatherings.

I would argue that these questions over power and authority express a fear of the declining influence of Christian institutions in this technological age.

#### *The Use of Scripture and Biblical Narrative in Discourses of Social Media use in Church*

There are many attempts to use Scripture to make the case for or against the use of digital media. For those who use biblical passages to warn of the dangers, the Genesis 1-3 narrative is used to illustrate the honour-shame and power-fear dynamics of social media,<sup>29</sup> and to mirror internet experiences of addiction and temptation.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, Kinnaman and Matlock use the exile of the Israelites to suggest that young people live in a digital Babylon.<sup>31</sup>

More positive interpretations of the Bible are used as a way of persuading and enthusing Christians to engage, such as the parable of the mustard seed illustrating that social networking can lead to exponential Kingdom growth,<sup>32</sup> or the vine and branches

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<sup>27</sup> T. De Bruin, 'Seeing is Believing: The Digital Bible and Bible Verses Online' *Spes Christiana* 31.1, 2020, 123–152.

<sup>28</sup> T. Hutchings, 'Creating Church Online' in P. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, and S. Gelfgren (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture*, New York: Peter Lang, 2012, 207-226.

<sup>29</sup> G. Russell, 'Fame, Shame and Social Media', *Journal of Youth Ministry*, 16:1, 2017, 31-56.

<sup>30</sup> Baab, *Towards*, 277-292.

<sup>31</sup> D. Kinnaman, & M. Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2019, 17-20.

<sup>32</sup> Sweet, *Viral*, 188.

metaphor as an example of connecting the faithful to the word online and to the body of believers.<sup>33</sup> Guidance on appropriate use of social media is drawn from the life of David<sup>34</sup> whilst others refer to the men of the tribe of Issachar and their ability to interpret the signs of the times as a mandate for using social media.<sup>35</sup> These writers are responding to McLuhan's warnings, trying to ensure that the Christian's reading of Scripture influences their social media posts rather than vice versa. Some authors use examples of innovation in communication throughout Scripture to make the case for social media use.<sup>36</sup> However, as the interpretation of Scripture as a guide for digital ministry varies, there lacks a consistent and coherent theological approach for the church.<sup>37</sup>

## 2.2 Youth Ministry Response to Social Media

Young people's use of social media in the US is charted by Twenge, who notes an exponential rise in uptake from about half of young people in 2008 to almost all of them by 2015.<sup>38</sup> Given the dominance of social media among teenagers, it seems surprising that the youth ministry field has also demonstrated ambivalence towards it, through a spectrum of responses. At one extreme, there are those such as Bradbury who are highly critical of digital media, considering it narcissistic, damaging for relationships and leaving no room for prayer.<sup>39</sup> Tobey questions whether technology ultimately satisfies young people's needs and likens social media to mask-wearing. He advocates face-to-face, fully present, safe-space youth ministry, asking young people to surrender phones on arrival.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> C. Shirley, 'Overcoming Digital Distance', *Christian Education Journal*, 3:14, 2017, 377.

<sup>34</sup> B. Ashlin-Mayo, *Age of Kings*, Incipiosermo Press, 2018, 4-13.

<sup>35</sup> See Wise, *Social*, 15-27 and J. Emery-White, *Meet Generation Z*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2017, 18.

<sup>36</sup> See for example A. Byers, *TheoMedia*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013, 3-18 drawing examples of the way God communicates through many forms e.g. creation, voices, images and symbols or Drescher, *Tweet*, 78-80 illustrating the way Paul's Epistles innovate media norms of their day.

<sup>37</sup> S. Baker, 'Who's Shaping Whom?', *Journal of Youth and Theology* 16.2, 2017, 117-143.

<sup>38</sup> Twenge, *iGen*, 54.

<sup>39</sup> J. Bradbury, 'Tuned in, Turned Off', 2011, <https://www.youthworker.com/articles/tuned-in-turned-off-the-ywj-youth-culture-and-technology-roundtable/>. This is also referenced in Sweet, *Viral*, 56-58.

<sup>40</sup> A. Tobey, 'Ministry with Young People and Technological Communication', *Journal of Youth Ministry*, 16:1, 2017, 57-86.



Even towards the end of the decade, Kinnaman and Matlock offer five approaches to support ‘resilient disciples’ in digital Babylon: intimacy with Jesus, developing cultural discernment, meaningful inter-generational relationships, vocational discipleship and countercultural mission.<sup>41</sup> They ignore the potential to use social media in youth ministry, even though this technology could enhance these approaches. For example, group messaging apps could be used to sustain inter-generational relationships into adulthood and online profiles linked to digital networks offer an opportunity for Christian witness in a vast virtual mission field. Yet they insist that they are not anti-tech, arguing “that the disruptive ‘move fast and break things’ ethos of technological innovation is emblematic of digital Babylon’s complexity – and this often leads to anxiety.”<sup>42</sup>

Some writers take a middle way – a qualified acceptance of the need to engage. For example, Kim recognises distractions and boundary issues for youth ministers using social media but urges Presbyterians to join this third space to draw attention to truth amongst the mess.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Shirley claims that ‘authentic community demands face-to-face interaction’, though there are advantages to social media for accessibility and interactivity.<sup>44</sup> An ‘interested conversation’ approach is advocated by Gorrell-Williams, to encourage reflection, linking social media posting to spiritual practices like *Lectio Divina* or the Examen. Her approach also advocates a hybrid ministry model, blending social media connection with real-world meetings.<sup>45</sup>

Then there are those who advocate full participation, suggesting that churches have paid too much attention to the rights and wrongs of technology, which is an irrelevant distraction. Zirschky argues that young people want meaningful relationships, forming community with those beyond geographic limitations and therefore social media in youth ministry should focus on building *koinonia*, which he roughly translates to communion.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kinnaman, *Exiles*, 29-38.

<sup>42</sup> Kinnaman, *Exiles*, 72.

<sup>43</sup> H. Kim, ‘Cultivating the Gospel in Social Media’, *Presbyterian Outlook*, 199.7, 2017, 18-21.

<sup>44</sup> Shirley, *Overcoming*, 377-390.

<sup>45</sup> Gorrell, *Always*, 11-34.

<sup>46</sup> A. Zirschky, *Beyond the Screen*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, 6.

The potential to deepen community experience and expression is also noted by Yust, who suggests that digital living can broaden our understanding of self and enhance spiritual formation. She compares the practice of filtering views, updating statuses, and liking posts to patterns of discipleship—honing gifts, taking responsibility, and creating community.<sup>47</sup> This community is potentially global as social media transcends national borders. In Nigeria, western European influences flood social media channels and have impacted young people, therefore, Ogibi argues that Christian youth ministry needs to engage and articulate biblical examples of identity formation to counter powerful global cultural influences.<sup>48</sup> I would add that there is potential to re-think our sense of community here too, with the possibility of uniting young disciples across cultures – what new perspectives and insights might Nigerian young people offer to Europeans?

There are clear positive possibilities here, shaping identity with new digital patterns of discipleship and deepening community connections beyond local boundaries. Seeing this potential, Faix calls for youth ministry not to separate real and virtual worlds but to cooperate with social media platforms to build relationships, finding secure spaces where this may be enacted.<sup>49</sup> Hunt is one of the most enthusiastic advocates for social media ministry and the first to advocate that youth ministers should accompany young people in digital space.<sup>50</sup>

### 2.2.1 Key Issues for Youth Ministry

Many of the issues covered in section 3.1, relating to social media use in ministry, resonate within the field of youth ministry. With regards to McLuhan's warnings and concerns over the value-base of social media, Campbell and Garner note that interactivity is actually a myth as 'choices' are controlled through complex algorithms.<sup>51</sup> Therefore platforms operate with the illusion of choice and freedom, but 'technological determinism' is always at play.<sup>52</sup> The sophistication of underlying algorithms is

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<sup>47</sup> K. Yust, 'Digital Play as a Spiritually Formative Activity', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 20.2, 2015, 129-139.

<sup>48</sup> J. Ogibi, 'Social Media as a Source of Self-Identity Formation', Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> T. Faix, 'Hybrid Identity', *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 15:1, 2016, 84.

<sup>50</sup> J. Hunt, 'The Digital Way: Re-imagining Digital Discipleship in the Age of Social Media', *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 18.2, 2019, 91-112.

<sup>51</sup> Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 48-51.

<sup>52</sup> Lundby, *Frameworks*, 227-228.

increasingly complex but also intrinsic to the design and success of more recent platforms such as TikTok, which embeds the ability to present new videos to a user, based on their history and preferences. This fuels the popularity of video posts, so that some go viral, which in essence is the whole point of this platform.<sup>53</sup>

From a young person's perspective, however, the behaviour of these algorithms mirrors the reality of life as a teenager, where choices are taken within limits and (sometimes strict) boundaries. In fact, whilst the choices and templates on social media are pre-programmed, infinite options and increasing accessibility might mean that, for many young people, this digital space appears to offer more freedom than any other place they occupy. This could mean that engaging in social media as a form of youth ministry might offer a more accessible space, allowing for greater freedom of expression for some.

Youth ministry often operates outside the boundaries of traditional church structures, taking young people away from main worship services and offering outreach programmes. In this respect, the threat of social media to traditional forms of church might have less influence here. However, the most obvious threat is the decline in youth ministry overall, which leaves the field in survival mode.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, youth ministry has been seeking to define its own theological basis, defending its existence to the wider church.<sup>55</sup> This is partly in response to losing the battle for credibility and relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>56</sup> All of this leaves youth ministry weakened and lacking the capacity to innovate new forms of ministry.

A further, complicating factor is discerning the distinct cultural issues that relate to social media, as opposed to wider cultural phenomena. Phillips recognises that defining digital culture is problematic. This is not a discrete area but impacted by wider cultural

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<sup>53</sup> R. Seo, 'Scrolling for Souls', *Christianity Today*, 64:8, 2020, 42-46.

<sup>54</sup> Two-thirds of churches have five or fewer young people in their worshipping community: Benefact Trust, 'Growing Lives', <https://benefacttrust.co.uk/documents/growing-lives-research-report.pdf>, 10, accessed 07.03.22.

<sup>55</sup> A. Root and K. Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2011, 27-36.

<sup>56</sup> See the discussion in A. Root, *The End of Youth Ministry?*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2020, 5-18.

factors, some of which are particular to specific generations.<sup>57</sup> Some of these wider cultural themes that relate to social media and have implications for youth ministry will now be considered.

### *Identity and Authenticity*

Social media affords users the opportunity to create multiple profiles, leading writers to question whether the presentation of self-online is a true representation, or if this encourages young people to experiment with different identities, thus limiting authentic expression.<sup>58</sup> The online profile does provide a space for exploration of identity which Root sees as a crucial space for young people to escape from intensive friendship-parenting.<sup>59</sup> In the early days of social media most profiles fitted into specific stereotypes, and whilst initially there were concerns that fake identities would be prevalent, evidence suggests that online anonymity is mostly used to be more honest and open.<sup>60</sup> Religious identity is often expressed online through affiliation to church pages, though it may only be part of a mediated social life alongside many other 'equal' interests. For some, though, their Christian faith is hidden, subject to the 'mum' effect (keeping silent) due to fears of perceived negative reactions to Christianity.<sup>61</sup>

Expressing a Christian identity online and presenting this authentically is therefore a key concern for social media ministry, though this is surely a relevant concern in offline relationships too. The youth minister will be familiar with concerns about a young person behaving differently in the context of the church youth group to the school or sports club. Perhaps, however, the fact that social media postings are mediated in text and visual form raises the stakes meaning they exist as a public and potentially permanent record. This raises questions for youth ministers modelling good social

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<sup>57</sup> P. Phillips 'Conclusion' in J. Kurlberg and P. Phillips (ed.), *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, La Vergne: SCM Press, 2020. Differences between generations (digital immigrants versus digital natives) are also noted in A. Da Silva, 'Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing', *Communication Research Trends*, 38:4, 2019, 14.

<sup>58</sup> Lövheim cites several sources: M. Lovheim, 'Identity', in H. Campbell (ed.), *Digital Religion*, New York: Routledge, 2013, 44-45. See also Tobey, *Technological*, 57-86.

<sup>59</sup> Root, *End*, 61.

<sup>60</sup> Lövheim, *Identity*, 41-56.

<sup>61</sup> D. Dunaetz, 'Evangelism, Social Media, and the Mum Effect' *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 43:2, 2019, 138-151.

media practice, encouraging young people to reflect on their own profiles and find safe spaces to 'be themselves' online.

### *Mental Health and Wellbeing*

Several writers note twin concerns around a rise in poor mental health and addiction to technology amongst Millennials and then Gen-Z,<sup>62</sup> (or 'Thumbelina'<sup>63</sup>), causing concern and a sense amongst some commentators that this creates an alarming trajectory for the future Gen A.<sup>64</sup> Russell believes that these concerns are fuelled by social media platforms like Facebook, which make people sadder and give rise to feelings of shame through constant comparison with others.<sup>65</sup> This is noted in 'The Happiness Effect' study which reveals how social media creates assumptions of perfection causing young people to hide feelings of suffering or weakness.<sup>66</sup>

Whilst for some, these issues create a compelling case to reject engagement with social media, others see more positive traits and possibilities. Preferring the label 'iGen' to Gen-Z, Twenge recognises an increase in isolation and spending time indoors, but also notes less inclination towards substance misuse and a tendency to wait longer before entering sexual relationships. She sees this as part of a wider trend where 'iGen' are growing up more slowly, with increased screen time and decreased social interactions as contributing factors.<sup>67</sup>

Another finding from Twenge's study is that iGen are notably less religious and less spiritual than previous generations,<sup>68</sup> echoed by Emery-White who notes five defining characteristics of Gen-Z, including that they are post-Christian.<sup>69</sup> This raises important questions for the church's response and resonates with writers who insist that youth ministry needs to offer something deeper than 'fun', embracing the 'delights of

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<sup>62</sup> See for example Ashlin-Mayo, *Kings*, 48-63, Gorrell, *Always*, 119-120, Kinnaman, *Exiles*, 71-76, Zirschky, *Screen*, 65-72.

<sup>63</sup> A caricature of the constant use of thumbs to scroll through posts on small devices, used by Da Silva, *Catechesis*, 11-20.

<sup>64</sup> Ocampo, *Internet and Social Media*, 33-59.

<sup>65</sup> Russell, *Fame*, 31-56.

<sup>66</sup> A. Root, 'Never Let Them See You Cry', *Christianity Today*, 61.2, 2017, 57-59.

<sup>67</sup> Twenge, *iGen*, 17-48.

<sup>68</sup> Twenge, *iGen*, 119-142.

<sup>69</sup> Emery-White, *Generation Z*, 35-50.

intellectual endeavour'.<sup>70</sup> For Root, this is summarised in a commitment to joy – which resonates with a focus on wellbeing through a commitment to seeking the good life, being open to transcendence and building deep friendships through community with each other and Christ.<sup>71</sup> Other writers, in response to fears of declining mental health, seek the redemption of social media,<sup>72</sup> calling for youth ministers to help young people sift through the 'mess' of their profiles.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, in relation to wellbeing, some writers offer advice on navigating the perils of technology for parents and youth workers alike, making suggestions to limit phone access until as late in age as possible and strongly monitoring use.<sup>74</sup> Garner suggests practical wisdom or *phronesis* is needed to engage with digital culture and deal with messy ethical issues.<sup>75</sup> More specific guides for parents offer some practical advice and encouragement to accept the benefits of technology whilst providing appropriate safeguards.<sup>76</sup> Some of these guides are becoming outdated, however, as parents become more relaxed about digital media use.<sup>77</sup>

### 2.2.2 Social Media Evangelism

There are growing calls to harness the power of social media for reaching the next generation and to reverse the decline in church attendance. Evangelism through social media, it is claimed, could lead to exponential growth.<sup>78</sup> Certainly the experiences of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association demonstrate a huge reach, 7.5 million respondents, through online witness via social media channels and sponsored search-engine links to dedicated websites. The challenge, though, is converting these respondents into long-term disciples connected to local churches, with fewer than

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<sup>70</sup> B. Mahan, M. Warren and D. White, *Awakening Youth Discipleship*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008, 3-20.

<sup>71</sup> Root, *End*, 219-226.

<sup>72</sup> Ocampo, *Internet and Social Media*, 33-59.

<sup>73</sup> Kim, *Cultivating*, 18-21.

<sup>74</sup> Twenge, *IGen*, 290-294.

<sup>75</sup> S. Garner, 'Imaging Christ in Digital Worlds', *Communication Research Trends*, 38:4, 2019, 21-30.

<sup>76</sup> Good examples of this include K. Hill, *Left to Their Own Devices*, Edinburgh: Muddy Pearl, 2017 and B. Lewis, *Raising Children in a Digital Age*, Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Emery-White, *Generation Z*, 53-54.

<sup>78</sup> Sweet, *Viral*, 186-190.

230,000 offering follow-on contact information.<sup>79</sup> Strategically, however, this might still be a more effective evangelism tool than rallies, in terms of reach.

The use of TikTok for evangelism among Gen-Z has been examined by Seo, with users like Gabe Poirot seizing its potential, posting with the hashtag #MakeJesusViral. There is a community of Christian evangelists like Poirot who link TikTok to both YouTube and Instagram, allowing for longer video content and interaction with 'followers'. Watchers of their content are asked to pray a commitment prayer and then post the comment 'first' to signal their first step to faith or 'recommit' for renewals. Seo raises two concerns here. Firstly, she names the familiar concern that this community is not part of an established church structure and therefore operates without 'authority'. The second issue relates to 'shadow bans' of Christian content referring to the suspicion that TikTok managers are covertly removing proselytising material and, thus, echoing value-conflicts that McLuhan warned about.<sup>80</sup>

Social media as a tool for evangelism makes the most of a broadcast-media approach, harnessing the power of digital networks to reach a huge number. The Poirot example is interesting because it focuses on creating quality content on TikTok, offering follow-up through online chat on other social media channels. This is an attempt to build dialogue, though it stops short of linking into new forms of church community. It is evidence of a shift from the big gospel story presentation to personal testimonies. Hollinghurst sees this as a significant shift, where the virtual world offers a third space for 'secret thinking', allowing anonymity for the seeker. He stresses the need for the church to go further, connecting Christian faith with big ideas as a bridge into virtual church communities.<sup>81</sup>

### 2.2.3 Catechism

Within the Catholic church, there have been moves to utilise digital technology to improve delivery of catechesis, as a way of connecting disparate members of the church

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<sup>79</sup> S. Zylstra, 'Do Digital Decisions Disciple?', *Christianity Today*, 59.2, 2015, 17-20.

<sup>80</sup> Seo, *Scrolling*, 42-46.

<sup>81</sup> S. Hollinghurst, 'Finding Jesus Online' in J. Kurlberg, and P. Phillips, (ed.) *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, La Vergne: SCM Press, 2020, 75-97.

and integrating them into a broader community network.<sup>82</sup> This offers a different pedagogical approach where learners construct their own learning pathway<sup>83</sup> and utilises digital technology to create a dedicated private space for this purpose. Ryan gives examples of other pioneering uses such as blog sites and podcasts linked to chat rooms which aim to generate positive discourse with potential to form new youth community spaces.<sup>84</sup>

Whilst this demonstrates moves towards using social media in youth ministry, it is focused primarily on utilising technological advances to enhance existing programmes or ideas. Building community through social media seems like an afterthought here, but this could surely be a primary aim.

#### 2.2.4 *Towards a Hybrid Ministry*

Within youth ministry, there is an emerging counter-narrative to the negative impact of social media which opens possibilities for greater engagement. If Gen-Z are increasingly distant from existing Christian ministry and exist in a seamless online/offline world, then a hybrid youth ministry that connects into both spaces is surely needed. Gorrell leads the call for this hybrid approach<sup>85</sup> recalling the #being13 US study: “young adolescents in this study reported that social media makes them feel good sometimes (40%), often (40%), or very often (4%).”<sup>86</sup> Therefore, some *phronesis* is called for through dialogue with young people, to find the best forms of social media ministry for the benefit of real and online spaces. Phillips agrees, seeing the community-building potential of social media for the whole church, calling it the new public realm and the place to focus on building relationships.<sup>87</sup> His writing calls for greater hybrid ministry in response to the pandemic, to which we now turn.

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<sup>82</sup> Da Silva, *Catechesis*, 11-20.

<sup>83</sup> C. McCorquodale, ‘Training Catholic Youth Ministry Leaders Using Web 2.0 Tools’, *Journal of Youth Ministry*, 8:2, 2010, 81-95.

<sup>84</sup> Z. Ryan, ‘Religious Life in the Digital World’, *National Catholic Reporter*, 49.9, 2013, 8-10.

<sup>85</sup> Gorrell, *Always*, 135-154.

<sup>86</sup> M. Underwood, and R. Faris, ‘#Being Thirteen: Social Media and the Hidden World of Young Adolescents’, *Peer Culture*, 2015, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2448422-being-13-report.html>, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Phillips, *Conclusion*, 259-270.



## 2.3 Post-Pandemic World: A Revolution in Christian Approaches to Social Media

As studies on the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic begin to emerge, old arguments about whether Christian ministry should utilise digital and social media are being rendered obsolete. If Drescher's 'Digital Reformation' narrative seemed hyperbolic in 2011,<sup>88</sup> it certainly does not seem so now after the pandemic has paused offline ministry and the church has been forced online. Necessity is the mother of invention, and there has been a revolution in approaches to social media, accelerating much needed change for the church.

Writers are beginning to reflect on this period, and Jones leads a strong call for 'Social Ministry' insisting that Facebook is the best platform for growing church communities and the answer to decline.<sup>89</sup> Regarding youth ministry, Jones defends the relevance of Facebook as the largest platform in the world.<sup>90</sup> I would disagree, arguing that while young people may have Facebook profiles, they tend to use these to relate to older family members, preferring other platforms for their peer-level interactions.<sup>91</sup>

In youth ministry, fears about mental health and authenticity had to be set aside, given that use of digital space became the only option. During the first phase of the pandemic, there was an enthusiastic and energetic response of innovation into the realms of digital provision. Social media platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp have played an important role during this crisis in keeping connection with youth groups.<sup>92</sup> However, Osbourn notes the prevalence of Zoom video conferencing and the subsequent problems with engagement through repeated lockdowns. She contends that young people have eschewed Zoom, especially as schools increased their online learning provision.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Drescher, *Tweet*, 1-4.

<sup>89</sup> N. Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2020, 1-16.

<sup>90</sup> 6% of users are aged between 13 and 17 (162 million users), 25% are aged 18-24 years (675 million) and together this equals a greater number than the entirety of Instagram or YouTube: Jones, *Social*, 51-52.

<sup>91</sup> Studies show a decline in use of Facebook among teens: J Gramlich, '10 Facts about Americans and Facebook', Pew Research Center, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/01/facts-about-americans-and-facebook/>, accessed 07.03.22.

<sup>92</sup> J. Osbourn, *From Isolation to Community*, Issachar Press, 2021, 67-68.

<sup>93</sup> Osbourn, *Community*, 66.

Osbourn concedes that we are still at the beginning of this journey, though I fear that as restrictions ease, youth ministers might be inclined to reject further exploration of any form of digital ministry, based on their experiences of Zoom use. Zoom presents an alternative space when in-person meeting is not possible; this is very different to social media, which is readily available, whenever young people choose. Perhaps here we are seeing aspects of McLuhan's unintended consequence,<sup>94</sup> where exploration of social media ministry is unintentionally rejected because of pandemic fatigue with digital ministry and a desire to resume face-to-face meetings. There is a need to distinguish between different forms of digital ministry, articulating purpose more explicitly.

Hunt laments that digital youth ministry has only ever been a sketched-out idea, which seems surprising given the amount of 'digital natives' research. This has left youth ministers ill-equipped to respond to the challenges of the pandemic and is no longer sufficient. She calls for three frameworks as priorities going forward: understanding the youth audience, being Christ-like communicators and reaching out to youth on the digital margins. Here, the lack of a coherent theological approach is a fundamental concern.<sup>95</sup>

### 2.3.1 *The New Normal*

Osbourn suggests that the way forward is an asset-based approach, which defines and builds on the strengths of the youth group. This approach also emphasises a key principle of doing ministry with rather than for young people:

Perhaps what's needed is a little more creative thought about how we might engage young people in this space – not only which platform to use but also who is creating the content. Is it us as adults creating for the young people or could the young people create for themselves and their peers?<sup>96</sup>

Here we get to the heart of the potential for social media ministry and the need for a value-driven approach connecting with core youth ministry principles. Root has called for place-sharing in youth ministry that moves away from being “wholesome entertainment” or an “exclusive enclave” through meaningful relationships connecting

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<sup>94</sup> Hipps, *Pixels*, 37.

<sup>95</sup> J. Hunt, 'And Then There Was Zoom' *Religions* 11, 565, 2020, 1-12.

<sup>96</sup> Osbourn, *Community*, 74.

with faith in the household as well as church context.<sup>97</sup> What might place-sharing look like in social media ministry?

As we enter a 'new normal', Smith suggests three core values for youth work: sanctuary, community and hope<sup>98</sup>, which he links with wellbeing and *phronesis*.<sup>99</sup> This study contends that social media might offer this place of safety, building community through digital networks, providing encouragement and nurture with and for young people.

Scholars have identified the community-building potential of social media, and some argue that youth workers should incorporate its use as part of hybrid ministry. Yet, there is a notable absence of any consideration of group messaging services in Christian youth ministry literature, and the part that they could play in enhancing community.

There are some enthusiastic advocates for social media use who pay attention to patterns of behaviour on social media and envision that they might be employed towards Christian discipleship. Generally, though, little consideration is given to how discipleship might be enhanced through social media use, which seems surprising given the intrinsic nature of followership that is embedded in the technology. Furthermore, concerns around forming identity online are noted, but the formation of a Christian identity within a social media community of disciples appears unexplored.

In this new normal, hybrid ministry offers a real opportunity to grow exciting and innovative forms of youth work which utilise social media to build community and enhance Christian discipleship. To consider an example of hybrid ministry, we will now examine the experiences of the Wave youth group before exploring the implications for community and discipleship within youth ministry.

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<sup>97</sup> A. Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007, 208-212.

<sup>98</sup> M. Smith, 'Dealing with the 'New Normal'', *The Encyclopaedia of Pedagogy and Informal Education*, <https://infed.org/mobi/dealing-with-the-new-normal-creating-places-of-sanctuary-community-and-hope-for-children-and-young-people/>, 2020, accessed 18.03.22.

<sup>99</sup> M. Smith, 'What is Hope?', *The Encyclopaedia of Pedagogy and Informal Education*, <https://infed.org/mobi/what-is-hope-how-can-we-offer-it-to-children-and-young-people-in-schools-and-local-organizations/>, 2020, accessed 18.03.22.

### **3. Findings from the Research**

These findings are based on analysis of social media feed examples from both cohorts and a focus group discussion with leaders Ant, Ben, Beth and Gemma (summarised in appendix 5). Further information relating to how the Wave group set up these social media groups is found in the parish policy document (appendix 7) and youth contract (appendix 8). Visual summaries of group reflection exercises from the leaders are also referenced here (appendices 9 and 10), as well as examples of social media posts (appendices 11, 12 and 13).

The first social media cohort (Facebook Messenger) provided 89 screen shots of content from 2016 through to 2020, with the second (Instagram) sharing 50 screen shots from 2019-2020.

To begin, I contextualise this research by sharing how and why the Wave group began hybrid youth ministry in 2016 and how this ministry developed in subsequent years. Then, I consider how the group functions as a community, a place of doing and being together, before looking at the role of leaders in holding boundaries. Next, I explore examples of Christian discipleship from the feed, levels of engagement, differences between the cohorts and the use of social media as a strategic and innovation tool.

Finally, a section on hybrid youth ministry draws on the experiences of Wave youth leaders to address the implications of social media use for youth groups as they meet in both virtual and real-world spaces.

#### **3.1 Context and Overview of Content Themes**

The Wave group meets on Friday evenings in the church hall for an open access youth club, with some members also attending church on Sunday mornings. Within this group, some take on leadership roles and participate in leading youth services on a Sunday.

There were two main reasons that the group developed a closed-group space on social media. Firstly, it was obvious that young people were connecting with each other using Facebook. Between Friday evening sessions, lots of interactions would take place, so

youth leaders realised there was a gap in their relationship with the young people. As Ben comments:

Back in the day, you'd see your friends at school, go home and then not see them again until the next day. Now they're talking constantly and they're looking for solutions and looking for advice, help and support which is ultimately what led us to thinking that there's got to be some way we can plug that gap.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, leaders were challenged by young people wanting to 'friend' them on Facebook. This created a dilemma where leaders did not wish to reject young people's requests but wanted to ensure contact was appropriate.

After a youth Alpha weekend away in 2015, there was some momentum in the relationships between the youth group and following discussions over what might come next, some of the young people suggested the idea of a private Messenger group. This was a natural step as both leaders and young people were already using Facebook.

Ben, as main leader, added members to the group, after receiving consent from the church council, parents, and young people. There were four other group leaders and nine young people added to the first group who are included in this study. He developed a social media policy, initially in 2016, which was revised every year by leaders as the group progressed.<sup>2</sup> The stated aims of the Messenger group are detailed on the youth contract,<sup>3</sup> and can be summarised as planning, encouraging and reflecting. Whilst these are the explicit aims of the group, Ben's comment above reflects a desire to be able to accompany young people more effectively through the week, responding to their request to be connected on social media.

By 2019, it was clear that Instagram was the platform of choice for most of the youth group and therefore it was adopted for the second cohort.<sup>4</sup> This group was also set up by Ben, with leaders joined by Eden and Adam – young people from the first cohort group. Young people are referred to by their initials, whilst first names are used for leaders. In the case of Eden and Adam, initials are used to describe their interactions as

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 7.

<sup>3</sup> Appendix 8.

<sup>4</sup> Appendix 7.

young people (cohort 1) and first names refer to their role as leaders within cohort 2. The membership of each group included in this study is as follows:

| Cohort                                       | Leaders    |           | Youth members |        |
|--|------------|-----------|---------------|--------|
|  | Male       | Female    | Male          | Female |
| 1. 'The Wave' – Facebook Messenger from 2016 | Ben        | Gemma     | ATD           | BC     |
|  | Ant        |           | JB            | BP     |
|  | Tyrone     |           | JR            | CQ     |
|  | Luke       |           | WP            | ES     |
|  |            |           |               | KTD    |
| 2. 'Tsunami Army' – Instagram from 2019      | Ben        | Eden (ES) | TB            | AH     |
|  | Ant        | Emily G   | JH            | BW     |
|  | Adam (ATD) |           | TW            | CB     |
|  |            |           |               | JD     |
|  |            |           |               | AB     |
|  |            |           | SB            |        |

Figure 2: membership of social media groups by cohort

The themes that emerged from the social media feed certainly reflect the group aims of planning, encouraging and reflecting. These form a dominant part of what I consider to be 'community' posts.<sup>5</sup> An analysis of word frequency illustrates these community aspects, with the most common words (over 60 occurrences) including: thank, think, good, praying, people, everyone, guys, well, today and church.<sup>6</sup> The appearance of 'praying' within this word list points beyond community activities towards expressions of faith. To some extent, reference to 'church', as opposed to youth group or the Wave indicates commitment to a wider faith community. Evidence of faith expressions including prayer requests and testimony are almost exclusively the domain of cohort 1 and are considered as part of a 'discipleship' category here.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the themes from the text, there is significant use of emojis by members of the group, 162 in total. These give a sense of the tone of interactions, with humour a dominant theme within an overwhelmingly positive and affirming collection of posts.<sup>8</sup> There are two crying emojis used, the "face with tears of joy" and also "loudly crying

<sup>5</sup> See infographic 3, breakdown of coding references in appendix 6.

<sup>6</sup> See infographic 1, 'wordle' in appendix 6.

<sup>7</sup> See infographic 4, balance between cohorts in appendix 6.

<sup>8</sup> See infographic 2, emoji use in appendix 6.

face” which could technically express opposite emotions. They are, however, used interchangeably throughout the feed and always within the context of humour.<sup>9</sup>

During a focus group conversation, leaders were asked to summarise their feelings over the use of social media in the youth group and chart them according to positive and negative features. These features are summarised in appendix 9 and referred to in the following sections.

## **3.2 Community**

In both groups, there is a focus on ‘doing’ which reflects the planning aim of the group. Secondly, there is a ‘being’ element which concerns how the group communicates – encouraging is a large part of this. Finally, there is evidence of leaders ‘holding’ boundaries, keeping the group on track and reviewing its effectiveness. Each of these will be explored in turn.

### *3.2.1 Doing: Planning and Organisation*

Social media is an effective group communication tool which allows for instant feedback and dynamic planning. In youth work this enables collaborative ministry with young people: doing this together rather than leaders doing it for the group.

Leaders identified ‘instant feedback’ and ‘information flow’ as two positive features of using social media.<sup>10</sup> Through analysis of the social media feed, there are examples of both leader-led and youth-led planning and organising. Examples of these types of posts are summarised below:

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<sup>9</sup> For definitions of emojis, this website is used: <https://emojipedia.org/people/>, accessed 30.01.22.

<sup>10</sup> Appendix 9.

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| <b>Asking questions</b> e.g. who would like to do this?  |
| <b>Feedback</b> on youth groups; both in chat and invited to a video conversation.   |
| <b>Information</b> on residential trips; confirming details re booking and what to bring.  |
| <b>Attendance</b> – asking who’s coming, apologies for absence, asking for a conversation with others at the youth group.                                  |
| <b>Preparing</b> worship: which music to play and generating a playlist online, prayers, welcoming, planning for seasonal events e.g. passover meal, lent. |
| <b>Planning</b> the Friday night group: designing the logo, organising activities.   |
| <b>Checking</b> details of upcoming group meetings, worship and residential.   |

*Figure 3: examples of planning and organising*

Three-quarters of this content is from posts by young people, with the remaining quarter from leaders. This illustrates a high degree of youth involvement in planning and organising. The ratio concerning who initiates these conversations is slightly different with two-thirds instigated by young people and one-third by leaders. In some cases, of course, these youth-initiated interactions are responding to information given or tasks set by leaders at in-person meetings, but it does suggest that social media creates an organising space where young people can raise questions, clarify information and plan for youth events and services together. This appears to make communication easier and more effective and keeps it directly between leaders and young people.

### *3.2.2 Being: Encouraging, Using Common Language, Emojis, Humour and Nostalgia*

Social media can provide a safe place to encourage and affirm young people. It offers the chance to reinforce positive shared experiences from in-person group settings.

Leaders identified several positives of social media that relate to strengthening a sense of community. They “can see group develop”, and the platform provides a “good way to catch-up” with youth members. Social media captures “positive feedback” and provides a place that is “available all the time”.<sup>11</sup> It is a way of communicating that appears overwhelmingly positive and uplifting. The number of encouragements across the feed

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<sup>11</sup> Appendix 9.



is striking, with 74 examples across the cohorts, on a par with the 81 instances of planning and organisation as examples from the feed illustrate.<sup>12</sup>

These examples show that encouragement comes typically in response to events that happened in real life – mostly at the youth group, but sometimes in celebration of life achievements, such as exam results. One person’s encouragement is often then repeated by another. In the case of Instagram, the platform embeds the ability to ‘love’ a post, making it easier to endorse what another person has shared.

This is an example of how hybrid ministry can work. An event or meeting happens at the youth group and the feedback is captured on social media. Often positive comments are made immediately after the event to which they refer, even late at night. Social media enables this type of response because of its accessibility. It allows quick, intuitive responses which then remain as a record for all group members and begin to shape the culture of the group. Perhaps, for a teenager, sharing in this way is far easier than verbalising in a real-life group where saying these things might feel awkward or even seem too trivial.

The main group leader Ben, reflects on this ability to capture something from young people, which without a social media group may well be lost:

Sometimes on Friday, you don’t really get to hear about the amazing stuff that’s happened in the week, you’re just confronted with what’s gone wrong. [On social media] you’re more likely to capture those great moments...

I do think also, post-covid, sometimes with the young people, they’re not really sharing the positive, they’re just sharing what’s difficult. If they’re happy they don’t want to talk to you... I mean you’ll have pleasantries, but you don’t want them to come and spend time with you, when you’re here [in the room], you want them to spend time with each other. From what I experience, they’ll seek us out if they’ve had negatives, or it’s difficult because something’s going on. So in the [social media] group you’re more likely to have the positives, which I think is important for each other as well, not just us.<sup>13</sup>

### *Use of Emojis*

Part of this encouraging culture in the group is evidenced through emojis. These are often used to illustrate the tone of a post, and in part make up for the lack of body

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<sup>12</sup> Appendix 11.

<sup>13</sup> Appendix 5.

language which aids communication when meeting face-to-face. Emojis often invite a mirrored response from others, suggesting that they are used to represent empathy with another group member. Non-facial emojis are also present in the feed and used as an expression of encouragement or endorsement of another. These too can generate mirrored and empathic responses as seen in the examples below:

Responding to a shared video of group members in primary school production:

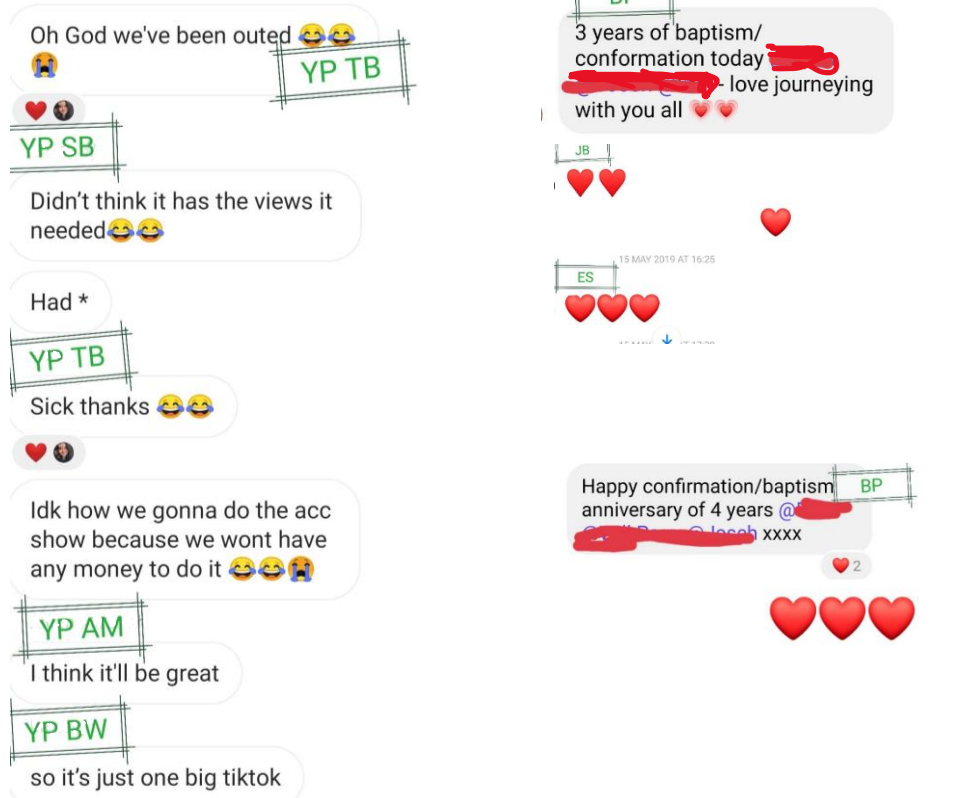


Figure 4: examples of mirrored emoji responses

These represent a distinct language for communicating on social media which aids young people to articulate some of their feelings. They can also enable simpler, non-text responses which might represent a different form of engagement with the platform.

### *Humour and Nostalgia*

The use of humour, shared memories and common language evidence a closeness of relationship and a strong sense of group identity. This, in turn, seems to form part of group culture, influencing future interactions and creating a tone and informality that bonds the group together.

In both cohorts, humour is frequently used, often eliciting the ‘cry laughing’ emoji response. Some of this humour relates to young people poking fun at leaders, whilst other examples relate to nostalgia – remembering shared experiences with fondness. Often these posts are accompanied with other media such as photos, links to other social media sites, or video content. One such example can be seen here:

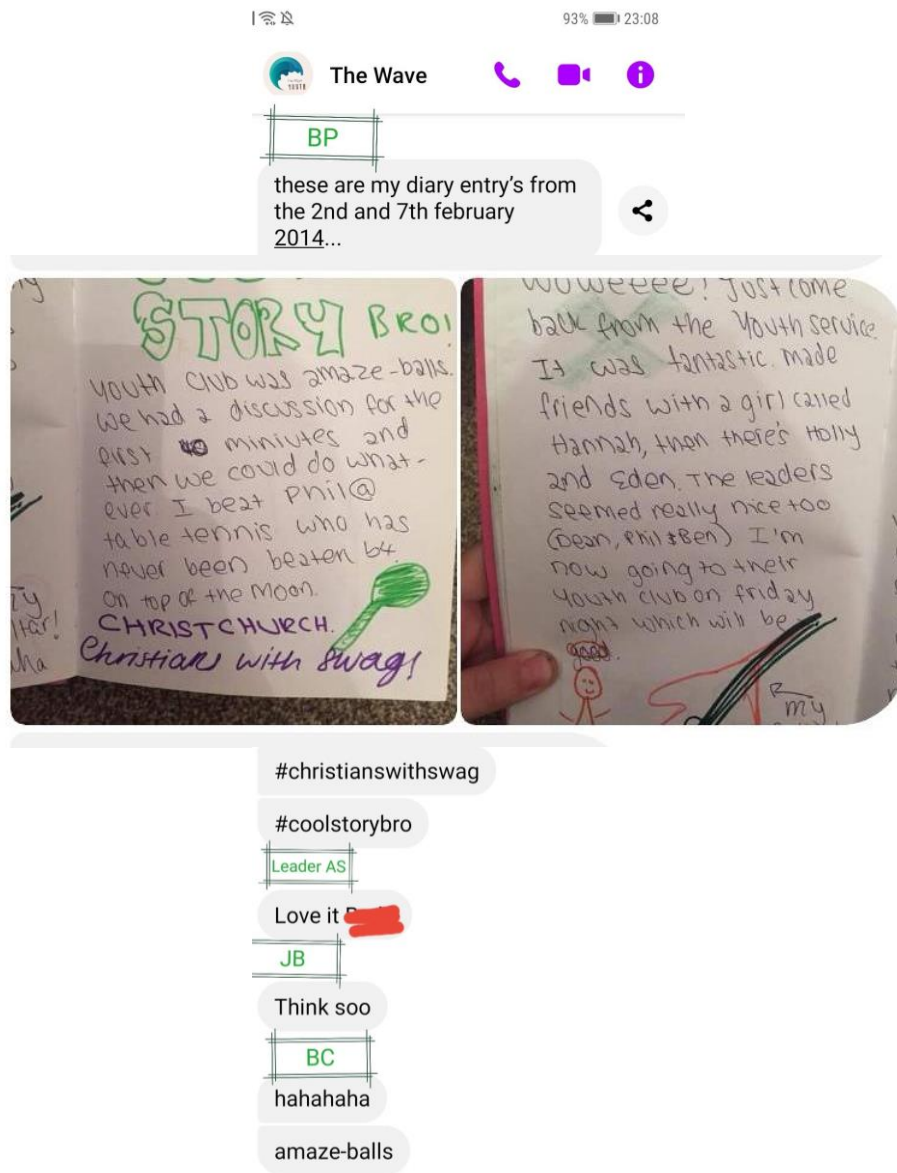


Figure 5: an example of nostalgia

The reference to someone’s diary here and the fact that this is shared with the group underlines the closeness of relationship. The closed-group social media space creates a form of group diary, a shared but private place to remember key moments. Other nostalgic posts include reminders of baptism and confirmation anniversaries and shared

photos from residential trips. In cohort 2, shared memories reference events that pre-date the life of the group, for example, a school event in year 4.<sup>14</sup> Social media promotes this type of nostalgia as both Facebook and Instagram remind users of posts from the same day in the past.

Common language also characterises posts, with the Messenger group referring to each other as ‘guys’ / ‘dudes’ or ‘lads’, despite the mixed gender membership. In the Instagram group, ‘sick’ is used in a positive way, as a synonym for amazing. This informality and shared expression build a sense of group identity which may mirror interactions during in-person youth group.

Social media captures those in-between conversations, the banter between members of the group which happens in real life but might be missed by youth leaders and undervalued in their role of forming community. Ben refers to the ‘flow’ from youth group to online space, particularly in cohort 1: “with the Facebook group, it just was complete flow from the old youth group here [in the church hall] and online, it was a complete flow of trust.”<sup>15</sup>

The flow between in-person and online, Ben explains, helps build a sense of safety together. As the group spend more time together in-person, so their interactions on social media increase. Feeling safe in each other’s company builds trust. This illustrates that the values characterising interactions in the groups exist in both in-person and online spaces. What social media offers to hybrid youth ministry is a way to capture this such that leaders can observe and reflect more easily on how well the group functions.

### *3.2.3 Holding: Boundaries and Aims of the Group*

If safety and trust are core for the Wave youth group, then boundaries are needed to preserve these values. Social media both enhances and complicates the forming of clear boundaries. The Wave group have experienced boundary issues concerning both membership and behaviour.

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<sup>14</sup> Figure 4 includes these examples.

<sup>15</sup> Appendix 5, 126.

Ben has articulated that the original use of social media was in response to the needs of the youth group and it was designed to be a space which empowers young people and encourages them to take responsibility.<sup>16</sup> Leaders have learned the need to control membership of the group, after a difficult experience when one youth member asked for their non-Christian boyfriend, who had started attending the Friday evening group, to be admitted. This changed the feel of the group and the nature of interactions:

So, I remember one incident, where a young person's boyfriend got upset about something – he wasn't a Christian, but he was in the group and when he left, we looked back at before and [asked] did we get everything right there and that's when we saw the times when we stopped replying...There's certain moments when you look back and go.... have we gone, not too far, but given them too much license there? And how do we hold that boundary?<sup>17</sup>

So, a lesson was learned about the need for leaders to hold tightly to membership boundaries. This is a familiar issue within youth work: a new member comes along and the group dynamic shifts. Social media, however, does offer control over membership which can be tightly enforced by the technology as only the group admin (in this case Ben) can add members.

I think protecting the identity of that original group was important. Probably, on reflection, we maybe let in one or two quite easily off the back of them being involved in something, which then shifted for a while what we did, then it reverted back to what it was...<sup>18</sup>

Here, social media can aid youth ministry by offering a tightly controlled membership space. This raises questions over how membership of the social media group is determined, who controls it and how those decisions are made. It also has implications for other youth ministry contexts, who they are open to and the role of young people inviting their friends to join groups.

Other boundaries around behaviour within the group have also had to be addressed. Firstly, concerning time boundaries, leaders have asked members not to post after 10pm in the evening, though this was revised to 11pm following the Friday night youth group, as there was often a flurry of interactions following the session.<sup>19</sup> Secondly leaders

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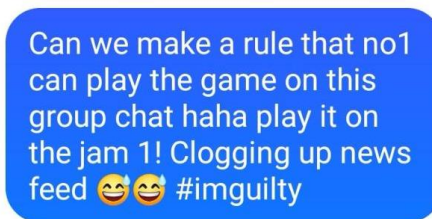
<sup>16</sup> Appendix 7.

<sup>17</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>18</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>19</sup> Appendix 5.

revised the youth contract to explicitly rule out playing games in the social media group.<sup>20</sup> Ben addressed this in a group post:



*Figure 6: youth leader reminds group of boundaries*

To resolve issues within the social media groups, a parallel Messenger chat group was established just for youth leaders to discuss interactions. As Beth notes:

sometimes before messaging in the actual group chat, we'd maybe message another leader like, 'oh, do you think I should say something' [because] you didn't know whether you'd be overstepping sometimes, or you just want to let the conversation flow and see what other people say.<sup>21</sup>

This leaders' chat became a space to discuss boundary issues, reflecting together about "when to speak and when not to speak" and being accountable for group interactions.<sup>22</sup>

One boundary as yet unexplored is when the life of the social media group ends. Cohort 1's members are now adults and still use the Messenger group. This is markedly different to other youth ministry contexts which usually have an upper-age limit. There is a potential benefit here concerning the transition from youth to adult ministry, but there are questions too about the relationship between youth leaders and young people and when the power dynamic changes from leader / member towards friendship and the subsequent implications for the identity of the group.

### **3.3 Discipleship**

Youth leaders identified two positives of the social media feed as being able to "catch moments during the week" including prayer requests, and it is "good for discipleship".<sup>23</sup>

Ben, however, acknowledged that discipleship is hard to define here: "Discipleship.

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<sup>20</sup> Appendix 8.

<sup>21</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>22</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>23</sup> Appendix 9.

That's a bit generic isn't it. But in terms of like sharing a bible verse, sharing a worship song. New worship songs are great to catch."<sup>24</sup>

In his uncertainty over what is precisely meant by discipleship, Ben refers to examples of Christian practices. These can be understood as: "the things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs, in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world."<sup>25</sup>

Practices, then, are expressions of faith in community, though examples here are almost entirely the domain of cohort 1. There is certainly evidence of sharing bible verses, prayers and songs, reflecting Christian practices which may form part of discipleship. Missing here, though, is the sense of leaders modelling practices and a teacher-student dynamic where the young person follows the leader's example. On social media, Wave leaders aim to hold a space that is owned by young people, hence they are careful not to over-share and dominate the feed.

In cohort 1 there is a deeper level of sharing among the young people, including genuine expressions of faith that are both personal (testimony) and relate to the faith community.<sup>26</sup> These examples capture what youth ministry is aiming for, yet, in my experience, it is rare to hear these thoughts vocalised from young people. Social media offers a new opportunity to capture and preserve these expressions of faith.

Young people in cohort 1 demonstrate a faith that is strengthened and supported as part of the group. Some of these posts characterise elements of communal practices such as Bible study and prayer. There are additional examples of sharing worship songs via video links to other platforms. It is interesting to note that prayer requests are regularly posted with responses demonstrating a commitment to pray, yet no prayers are offered through the group chat. This is surprising given the nature and depth of other Christian content.

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<sup>24</sup> Appendix 5, 123.

<sup>25</sup> J. Mitchell, E Bjorling Poest and B Espinoza 'Re-engaging Emerging Adults in Ecclesial Life through Christian Practices', *Journal of Youth Ministry*, 15, 2016, 42 cite D Bass and C Sykstra, 'A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices' in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (ed.), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Appendix 12.

Perhaps this is part of the youth group culture where spontaneous prayers are not offered, or does it indicate a reluctance to offer written prayer?

Beyond these examples of church worship there are other posts that go further. One example is an apologetic discussion defending Christianity, whilst a later post asks a question about suffering, in order to find a suitable answer for a non-Christian friend. These discussions demonstrate a level of understanding of faith whilst acknowledging it is difficult for others to believe. There is also a monologue from ES reflecting on the relationship between the youth group and the local church. Here there is some real articulation of passion for the church and perhaps evidence of a personal call towards a ministry vocation.

For youth leaders, these posts are hugely encouraging as they document the faith journey of the youth group and provide opportunities for this to be shared. One example is through the development of the 6-minute service on Instagram.<sup>27</sup> This was the inspiration of youth leader Ben and became part of the group's pattern of ministry. Young people were soon leading this short service which is shared on the Wave youth group's Instagram account – a public profile page which followers external to the youth group can also view and respond to. It is worth noting that this began in 2017, long before the pandemic necessitated other youth ministers thinking about innovative digital practice. This 6-minute service is an extension of the social media ministry which remains rooted in local church practice as noted in the policy document.<sup>28</sup> This is not an attempt to create a digital church for young people, but rather finding new ways for young people to express their faith privately and in a slightly more public arena too.

Social media therefore can operate as a space for sharing Christian practice, capturing testimony, recording the faith journey of a youth group and innovating new forms of worship to complement local church ministry.

### *3.3.1 Quality of Engagement*

Examples of the social media feed suggest different levels of engagement from individual group members. If social media is to be used as a discipleship tool, then some

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<sup>27</sup> Appendix 12, 2f.

<sup>28</sup> Appendix 7.



way of reviewing engagement in Christian practices is necessary. To explore this, and draw out its significance, youth leaders were asked to reflect on Kaye’s model of interactivity which is summarised here:

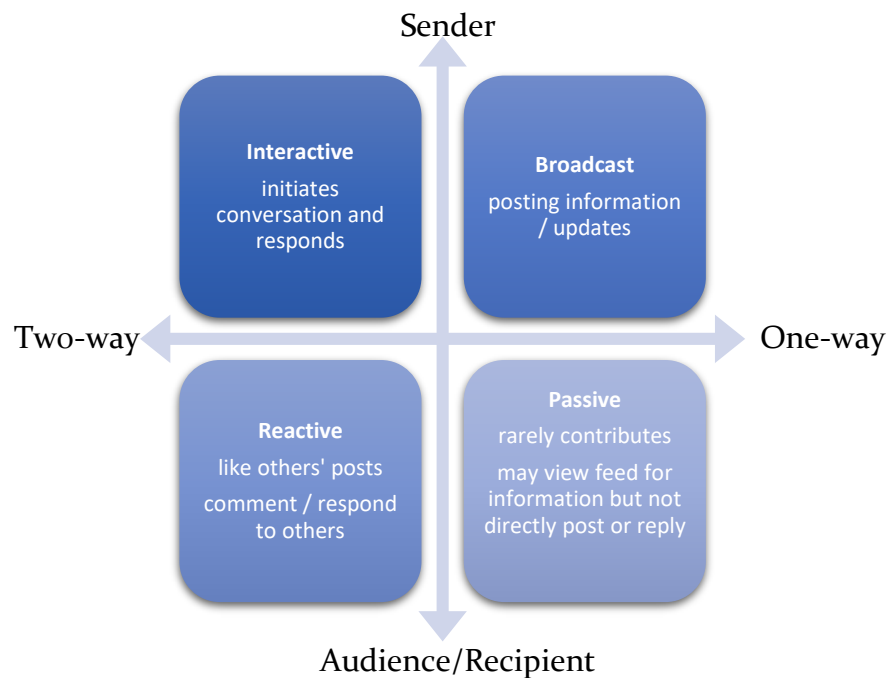


Figure 7: Kaye’s model of social media interactivity

This model categorises social media users into four separate quadrants based on how much their communication is monological (one-way) or dialogical (two-way) and also whether they focus on what they want to communicate (sender) or use social media to keep up-to-date with posts from others (audience). The aim of Kaye’s model is to critique social media posts more thoughtfully, moving beyond a binary distinction of active and passive users towards distinguishing between levels of activity. The broadcast, reactive and interactive categories then express different forms of active engagement.<sup>29</sup> For this research, the model is used to evaluate leaders’ own sense of their level of engagement and that of the youth group.<sup>30</sup>

Within youth ministry, levels of engagement are difficult to qualify, and can easily fall into a binary distinction between those who attend most frequently and those who are less committed. This model enabled leaders to reflect on engagement offering new

<sup>29</sup> Linda Kaye, ‘Exploring the “Socialness” of Social Media’, *Computers in Human Behaviour Reports*, 3, 2021, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Appendix 10.

insight into how they and young people participate in youth ministry, which has implications for the role of leaders and the dynamics of the group.

Leaders found it relatively easy to place themselves on the model. Ben and Ant quickly identified as broadcasters with Gemma and Beth sharing that their use was more reactive and reticent. Beth noted that she often waits for others to respond first, and Gemma expressed that she only uses social media accounts in this context. Leaders also labelled Tyrone as passive as his engagement is very limited. There is a clear divide between the leaders here with Ben and Ant as dominant users, which is certainly reflected in the quantity of posts in the feed.

It is noticeable that no leader identified themselves as an interactive user. This reflects the guidelines for youth leaders on 'ways to interact' and 'things to avoid'.<sup>31</sup> There is a deliberate intention here to articulate boundaries around engagement, steering leaders away from too much interactivity so that young people take ownership and responsibility for the group chat. Nevertheless, leaders still identified differences in their own levels of activity within the feed which seems to relate to what feels natural for them in their role.

Leaders were very engaged in the discussion around where to place young people on the model, considering not only which quadrant but where within the quadrant best reflected each member, hence some are placed between two sections. Ben commented that the process was easier with cohort 1 than the Instagram group, possibly due to knowing this group for longer, illustrating some of the key differences between the cohorts discussed in the subsection below.

From this discussion several factors affecting engagement emerged, particularly about the relationships between opposing factors, categorised here:

#### *Between Self and the Group*

There was a distinction between whether young people's activity relates more to self (sender) or to the group (recipient). Most clearly fell into one of these categories, with

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<sup>31</sup> Appendix 7.

four youth members in-between. This seemed to illuminate differences relating to introvert / extrovert personalities according to leaders.

### *Between Noise and Silence*

Engagement fluctuates over time, sometimes illustrated in the graduation from group member to leader. Interaction also changes according to events that take place in the real world as Ben noted: “I think if you come off the back of Soul Survivor or submerge or whatever it is – an event, then they’re very communicative and very interactive with each other because they feel safe around each other’s company.”<sup>32</sup>

In this respect the social media feed tells a story of engagement in the whole of the youth ministry programme, graphing the peaks and troughs through the year.

### *Between In-Person and Virtual Spaces*

There seemed to be a consensus among leaders that engagement within the social media group mostly mirrored how the group behaved during Friday evening sessions too, with some subtle differences. JH, for example, was deemed to be more interactive in-person:

It’s taken JH two or three years before he’s felt that safe here, so I think he’s warmed up over the years he’s come and felt that acceptance for who he is. And I still think that online, he probably finds online communication with anybody pretty weird and a difficult place to be.<sup>33</sup>

This illustrates that leaders were reflecting not only on their impressions of the young people in the social media feed but across the whole ministry programme. The social media feed offers a way in, one view from which to reflect more broadly on the engagement of group members and the movement between different modes of attention.

Using this model alongside the social media feed enabled leaders to reflect on their level of interaction with young people. Most users seemed to have a consistent and natural level of engagement though changes could be seen over time. As well as reflecting, this exercise provoked some thought over how to engage more passive group members and highlighted those who seemed to be the natural leaders of the group.

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<sup>32</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>33</sup> Appendix 5.

### 3.3.2 Differences between Cohorts

From analysis of the social media feed, clear differences between the two cohorts become apparent. As has been stated, cohort 1 contains substantial examples of Christian practice not present in cohort 2. References to Christian practice do exist in cohort 2 but only in relation to planning in-person events and offers of prayers from leaders.

There is evidence of phatic communication in cohort 2, which can be understood to be interactions which appear to be trivial, using repetitive words or phrases as a way of connecting without any intellectual content.<sup>34</sup> Examples of this can be seen as leaders aim to generate more discussion with posts such as ‘heyyyy’ or ‘how are we all doing?’ These are not evidenced in cohort 1 who seem to interact much more freely and naturally.

Ben also noticed clear differences between the cohorts and attributes this to group dynamics: “It’s a less fluent, active group on Insta but I think that maybe reflects the journey of the young people rather than the format.”<sup>35</sup>

Yet leaders perhaps underplay the significance of the social media platform in influencing group interactions. With cohort 1, the choice of platform was obvious and natural, whereas it was noticeably more difficult with cohort 2.

I think there are a lot of options now, where there was just Facebook. Now, I think their most preferred way of talking is Snapchat and that’s a huge... it’s difficult to find ways to use that.

The more you look at it, probably voice recording and voice-notes is the next stage of how they will interact. So, Instagram is almost like the third one they use after TikTok and Snapchat. But TikTok and Snapchat are not appropriate or plausible settings for group conversations so you’re already fighting a difficult battle, I think. But I think it’s more group dynamics than platforms that makes a difference.<sup>36</sup>

If Instagram is deemed the young person’s third-best platform, then surely this will have an impact on their engagement. It is, however, the default choice as the only plausible

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<sup>34</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>36</sup> Appendix 5.

space for group messaging.<sup>37</sup> The social media market has become saturated with an increasing number of platforms, which leaves youth leaders competing for the attention of the group and trying to build community in a space that may not be the young people's preferred platform. Hence, the choice and appropriateness of the social media platform may have implications for quality of engagement.

For leaders too, Instagram is a more alien environment, and they articulated a sense of struggle to engage in this space as it is not their natural habitat. All seemed to find Messenger an easier format to use and have set up their leaders group chat on this platform. The pace of change in social media creates some distance between leaders and young people. In response, youth leaders recruited new leaders from the Messenger group to take on a more interactive role in cohort 2 whilst their presence became more passive.

Differences between the groups also relate to how friendships were formed, as this interview excerpt details:

Ant: If you bring them into this room today (Messenger group) it'd be like they met last Friday. They would buzz off each other even now, and some of them haven't seen each other for ages. When they come back at Christmas they meet up now and again and they're a proper, solid friend group that invested a lot of time in each other's lives over the years.

Ben: that's a result of: they weren't friends before youth group.

Ant: well this is where they've met isn't it.

Ben: yeah. But some of them in the Instagram group were friends before they came to youth.<sup>38</sup>

The Messenger group was formed through their church connections, deepened through the youth alpha course, and then sustained through the social media group. In contrast the Instagram group already knew each other before they joined the Wave youth group, hence their identity is not so closely linked to the youth ministry.

Perhaps there is also something significant about the formation of the first group on social media. The fact that this was new, innovative, and responded directly to their

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<sup>37</sup> Tik Tok is entirely video format which does not allow for group messaging whilst Snapchat conversations are not saved but disappear after 24 hours.

<sup>38</sup> Appendix 5.

needs. In repeating the process for cohort 2, there seems to have been less attention paid to purpose and membership, especially considering the move to a new platform.

Longevity of the group also plays a part. The Messenger group has been active since 2016, although even the earliest interactions demonstrate a closeness of community and examples of Christian practice. It feels as though cohort 2, formed in 2019 are trying to re-form relationships as a group in a new context, and build association with the youth group and leaders through social media, which may be a lengthier process. The impact of the pandemic in 2020 also had a dramatic effect on the use of social media especially in cohort 2.

### *3.3.3 Innovation and the Pandemic*

Having already integrated social media groups into their youth ministry practice, the Wave group were able to respond quickly to the pandemic. Leaders already had experience of moving from one platform to another and had nurtured leaders from one group to another. When it became clear that the Friday night youth group would need to close in March 2020, leaders could quickly adapt, and the structure of the Instagram group changed as a result. 'Source' groups were formed as new Instagram chat groups to which all members of the Friday evening youth group were invited to join. Existing members of cohort 2 were recruited in pairs to lead source groups as a way of keeping in touch with all group members. The 'tsunami army' then became a space to support leaders of the source groups sharing ideas to keep connection within source groups as illustrated below:

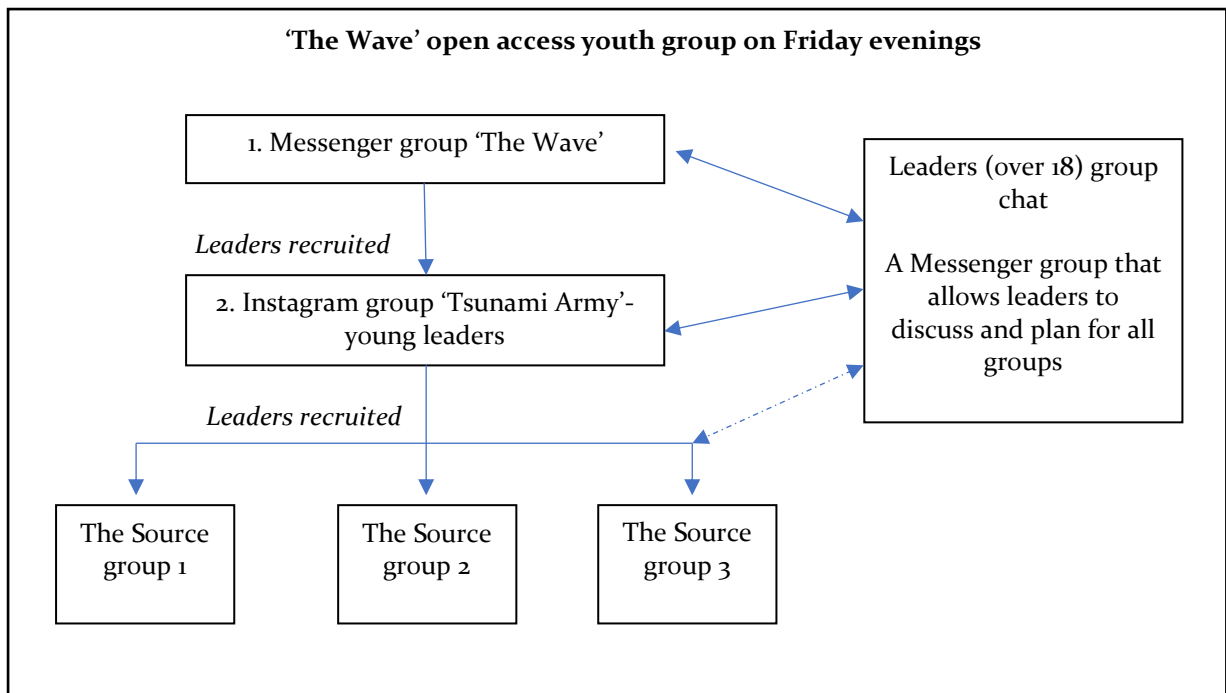


Figure 8: map of social media ministry within the Wave youth group 2016-2020

Here we see social media being used as a tool for designing youth ministry strategy, innovating dynamic responses to changing circumstances.

As lockdown ensued, the Wave organised group meetings on zoom with initial success, but the source groups still had an important role to play:

One of the biggest points of ‘source’ groups I felt, was that you were breaking down what was a large group of people into smaller groups so that everybody then gets a voice. Because some of these more passive people wouldn’t speak in a massive, everybody in, meeting – they just wouldn’t ever speak.<sup>39</sup>

Where zoom became the substitute for the Friday evening group, the source groups were smaller and a more consistent way of keeping in contact.

Despite all this innovation, the group suffered decreasing engagement over the course of the pandemic, describing how it remained high to start with, but as lockdown was prolonged, everything dipped, including social media interactions. Leaders describe how, as time progressed, it became more difficult and demoralising, as increasing uncertainty made planning ahead impossible. This proved to leaders that the use of social media works well in hybrid ministry but is inadequate otherwise.

<sup>39</sup> Appendix 5.

### 3.4 Hybrid Youth Ministry – Learning from Leaders

As leaders reflected on the place of social media within hybrid youth ministry their thoughts were captured on a Venn diagram which explored the distinct contributions of youth ministry in social media and in-person spaces and where they overlap.<sup>40</sup>

This illustrates a two-way flow in youth ministry between in-person group interactions and social media conversations. There are examples of ministry which begins online, such as recommendations for worship music ahead of the Sunday morning gathering, or the information posted about an upcoming residential. Other examples travel in the opposite direction, such as photos of events from the youth group later posted on social media or memories shared of spontaneous ‘natural’ moments.

There is symbiosis in the relationship between the two meeting spaces of the youth group, where the health of interactions in one directly affects the other.

They feed each other. We’ve talked about this as a group. If you’re doing something great on a Friday, and you can take some photos, and share those images online with the group. then, you’re reminding them of how great Friday was. If you’ve got something to promote for the next Friday, you can spin it round the group and the conversation’s almost ongoing through the week then. And there’s a buzz about it, there’s an energy about it... and your conversation on a Friday... it isn’t about what you talked about [last week], you’ve had this continual conversation. You can pick up on a message they sent on a Tuesday, or a song that somebody shared. It makes it a lot easier to have that conversation with young people, instead of the stop-start of seeing them only once a week.<sup>41</sup>

Here there is a continual flow of conversation which helps youth leaders to keep connection with the youth group across the week. This flow resonates with a more fluid church culture that sees the body of Christ as a network of relationships that go beyond the walls of a building, and in this case transcend physical boundaries, operating in virtual space.<sup>42</sup>

Since the pandemic, it has become even more obvious that youth ministry must constantly adapt to the world that young people inhabit. Engaging with social media is one way to exercise this adaptive practice. The Wave’s experience shows that results can

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<sup>40</sup> Appendix 9.

<sup>41</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>42</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002, 40-48.



be mixed; there is no perfect model here, but a process which enables reflecting on and learning from ministry experiences:

Even though the Instagram group isn't as explosive or as dynamic or whatever, there's still so many little things that happen, even by us being broadcasters and senders, enables us to be one step ahead on a Friday. Just little things. There isn't a set blueprint to create a space, but I think it's important to feel safe and comfortable and competent with whatever you're using. But then just learn from it, because then you're not going to get everything as you want but we've reflected a lot and talked about it as a group, talked about where we were and where we are now and how we've grown as leaders. I think the leaders chat has gelled us hugely, to have that extra space.<sup>43</sup>

Social media creates this space for reflection as it captures and preserves interactions. Ant refers to this reflective process as a plan-do-check model for youth ministry: "You plan what you're gonna do, you check it and then think about what's going on and it's a continual loop of improvement, and evaluation because we don't always get things right."<sup>44</sup>

This evaluative process changes practice. As youth leaders, part of the discipline of using social media is to review policies each year with the Church council. As Ben notes, this necessitates a review on the relationship between social media policy and practice: "we need to make sure that the policy reflects the practice or take the practice back to reflect the policy."<sup>45</sup>

This annual review cycle forces leaders to pay attention to the aims of youth ministry. Perhaps the same discipline needs to be prescribed to all forms of youth ministry. This review cycle reminds leaders about the aims of social media use within the wider church context and returns to the heart of what youth ministry is for:

This isn't just a youth support group, this is about evangelism, this is about encouraging faith and difficult questions about faith to be tackled and answered, and allowing that conversation to happen as well. So yes, it is about mental wellbeing, it is about promoting what we're doing on Fridays and all of this but essentially it's got to come back to the purpose of us being here. We're not just a youth group, we're a church, Christian youth group and we're trying to point people to Jesus. And when we start to review policy and what we're doing we realign ourselves with that objective and goal as well. So we can prayerfully say

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<sup>43</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>44</sup> Appendix 5.

<sup>45</sup> Appendix 5.

what are we achieving through this and what do we want to see and what can God do through this as well, which is a question it's always good to come back to.<sup>46</sup>

### **3.5 Summary of the Key Findings**

From the experience of the Wave youth group, it is clear that social media provides an effective group communication tool which allows for instant feedback and dynamic planning. In youth work this enables a sense of community expressed in collaborative ministry with young people. It operates as a safe place to encourage and affirm young people with a chance to reinforce positive shared experiences from in-person group settings.

In some respects, closed-group social media conversations can be viewed as a group diary, collating a story of memories which evidence the openness of relationships between core youth group members. Using humour, emojis and common language, shared expressions convey group identity and capture the in-between moments of youth ministry. Looking back through the feed offers youth leaders a means to reflect on group dynamics. However, there are issues surrounding the boundaries of social media use, which are distinctly different to in-person meetings.

There is potential to use social media to enhance Christian discipleship too and there are examples of personal testimony here. It is possible that social media may capture expressions of faith that would otherwise not be noted. Additionally, it offers leaders the opportunity to reflect thoughtfully on how well engaged young people are within youth ministry and to see progression in levels of interaction, including towards leadership, over time.

There is significance to the choice of platform, where some formats are clearly inappropriate. As the preponderance of choices multiplies this is a complicating factor for youth ministry use.

Social media enables dynamic responses to the needs of young people, both as a way of maintaining communication but also as a tool for designing strategy. Its use works within hybrid youth ministry enabling flow both ways between online and in-person

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<sup>46</sup> Appendix 5.

activities. However, it appears to be insufficient on its own as a model of youth ministry as engagement dipped significantly during the pandemic.

Finally, the use of social media aids reflection on the effectiveness of the whole youth ministry programme, providing evidence from which leaders can review the link between vision and practice. This can be used to impact both the development of community and the formation of a strategy for discipleship.

## 4. Together: Social Media as Community

Any group needs a purpose, and for the Wave social media groups this has been defined by leaders as: “a safe forum for us to discuss, plan and encourage each other.”<sup>1</sup> These aspects of the group will be explored here as part of ‘doing with’. The process through which interactions take place are examined as ‘being with’. Finally, attention to boundaries draws out some of the distinctive dynamics which social media might offer youth ministry.

### 4.1 Doing With

Both cohorts evidence leaders and young people planning events for the youth group together, whether worship services, residential or social gatherings. Social media facilitates this process effectively because ‘feedback loops’ are an intrinsic part of its networking character, affecting both the way the technology is designed and how it operates for users.<sup>2</sup>

Using closed-groups to perform tasks is significantly different to the operation of an individual posting on their own public platform. For the solo user, the number of views, likes and responses to a post indicate its reach and ‘success’ and will inform how future posts are created. This creates demands on users to create, feed, and grow their own selective network with the aim of building up the largest number of followers. Ultimate success would come in the form of a ‘viral’ post which reaches beyond the user’s existing followers into the vast network beyond and results in an exponential rise in those who follow the original post-er in the hope of more of the same. Shorthand for this culture is ‘networked individualism’.<sup>3</sup>

The popularity of social media among young people suggests that this is not something youth ministers can ignore, though concerns over the demands of networked individualism have led to hesitancy and rejection.<sup>4</sup> It has been suggested that the

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix 7.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 65-70.

<sup>4</sup> For example, because the relationships social networks encourage have little depth: Tobey, *Technological*, 65-66, and social media depersonalises relationships and leads to digital strain: Kinnaman, *Exiles*, 116.

dominance of social media shows that young people crave community for deeper connection with others who are like themselves, and yet the technology itself cannot satisfy their craving.<sup>5</sup>

This is a one-dimensional view that sees social media as only concerning posting on public platforms and neglects the wide usage of group messaging services such as WhatsApp and Messenger which create community group spaces where membership is controlled and privacy is assured.<sup>6</sup> Using these forms of social media moves away from networked individualism towards group conversation between people who already know each other and meet in other real-world spaces. This negates the pressures of creating and growing a followership, though the demands to feed and maintain content remains, albeit with a different dynamic affected by group behaviour both within and outside of the social media group.

This feeding and maintaining group-chat content holds less pressure, as it is not held by one individual and does not exclusively depend on this one social media space. Instead, the content relates to the wider aims and purpose of the Wave youth group programme including Friday evening meetings, residentials and church services. The way social media enables a group's 'doing' enacts new dynamics and offers collaborative benefits.

#### *4.1.1 Regulated Improvisation*

There are many examples of planning and organising events in the Wave social media feeds, and a typical example is reproduced in figure 10. In this conversation 4 young people interact with group leader Ben (whose comments are on the right-hand side in blue/purple) regarding an upcoming worship event:

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<sup>5</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 71.

<sup>6</sup> The use of community pages on Facebook is closer to a group messaging approach, though their use is often not private and designed to enlist many followers, to publicise church activities: Williams, *Community*, 381.

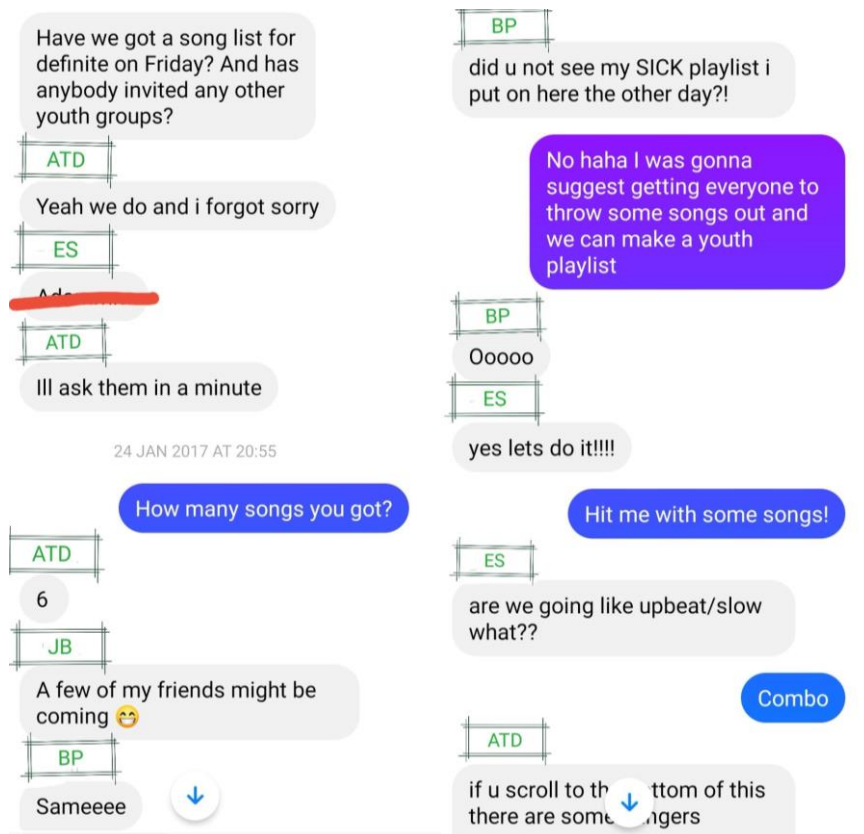


Figure 10: conversation to plan a worship service

In some respects, these interactions mimic real-world conversation with questions and responses, sharing information and assigning tasks, here aided by technology. Feedback is volunteered by group members choosing to participate and keep the conversation going, sharing responsibility.

However, there are other dynamics at play which relate to the way social media operates. Drescher defines these dynamics as “hallmarks of a habitus of regulated improvisation.”<sup>7</sup> They are regulated, in the sense that new norms and behaviours become established patterns of how the group functions, and improvised, as conversations are not pre-planned or programmed but emerge as members check-in. Throughout the feed different individuals initiate questions or conversations which are then open to contributions from others. Sometimes conversations wrap around in-person group meetings where feedback flows between real and virtual spaces. It gives a

<sup>7</sup> Drescher, *Tweet*, 49-50.

sense of group purpose and momentum, owned by all members and enabled through a creative and dynamic method.

Drescher identifies six hallmarks which offer a useful framework for interpreting the nature of a group’s pattern of regulated improvisation activity. The figure below applies these hallmarks to the example in figure 10:

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Immediacy     | Instant feedback. Decisions made on-the-go even at nearly 9pm in the evening.   |
| Transparency  | Honesty: ‘I forgot sorry’, and accountability are evident. The process is open and clear to all group members to opt in/out or read later.  |
| Interactivity | Informal expression and syntax suggest an interpersonal quality. Responses come not just in answer to questions but to register interest and affirm.  |
| Co-creativity | Leader and young people working together on an equal footing. No evident hierarchy or one person directing the conversation.  |
| Integration   | Between technology through Messenger and another app which creates a music playlist. Between online and real world where the conversation here has consequences for the Friday night group. |
| Distribution  | Two members indicate that they are inviting friends along to the event. The work of the group affects young people beyond its membership.   |

Figure 11: hallmarks of regulated improvisation from cohort 1

The hallmark of transparency can relate to authentic expression, perhaps less seen here but evident in other posts. Aligned with this habitus are key youth work values: respect, democracy, empowerment, fairness and equality.<sup>8</sup>

These markers of regulated improvisation create their own set of demands for the work of this community. For Kim these demands have become the core values of digital use: speed, choices and individualism which, he argues, ultimately make our society impatient, shallow and isolated.<sup>9</sup>

These values resonate with a sense of networked individualism based on a one-dimensional view of social media use. In a group conversation such as this, it is easy to see the effect of speed and choices, but without the negative associations of impatience

<sup>8</sup> See for example Sarah Banks, ‘Professional Values in Informal Education Work’ in Linda Richardson and Mary Wolfe (ed.) *Principles and Practice of Informal Education*, London: Routledge Falmer, 2001, 62-72.

<sup>9</sup> Kim, *Analog*, 15-21.

and shallowness. It allows group tasks to be done more quickly and effectively, leaving space for leaders to attend to the process of youth ministry and not just its output. The task is not owned by one individual, but part of the group doing ministry together. Improvisation seems a more insightful summary of the way this task is completed.

This promotes a sense of community rather than individualism. It does, however, make the most of individual skills and open the possibility for group members to offer their distinct contributions. ES is organising, ATD and BP focus on sorting the worship music setlist and JB has invited friends. Ben's responses affirm the process and encourage group members to continue. The youth group are acting as 'producers' here, both producing content for a worship service and using the technology to get feedback towards that end. The term has been coined to represent the democratising of web development, though here the same approach is being directed towards real-world tasks; an example of hybrid ministry.<sup>10</sup>

This is in stark contrast with how the church as an institution normally operates. Traditional church hierarchies are built on a top-down model with authority structures that sanction the activities within the life of the community.<sup>11</sup> Whilst the Wave group has approval from the church council, it operates autonomously from these structures with the leaders regulating ministry activity in this virtual space. In one sense, this is not unusual in youth ministry, yet groups often function in face-forward ministry models that may mirror church structures more than leaders would care to admit.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this reflects the values of broadcast media which have become so entrenched in our way of life that we barely notice them.

Broadcast media ministry relies on one-to-many relationships with leaders who prepare, plan and deliver from the front.<sup>13</sup> Youth ministry has included young people in this process, but doing this in broadcast media mode has elevated the use of extrovert gifts leaving the more inhibited teenager on the side-lines. The use of social media changes

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> New media has challenged religious authority structures, through disjuncture and displacement: P. Cheong 'Authority' in H. Campbell (ed.), *Digital Religion*, New York: Routledge, 2013, 74-75.

<sup>12</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Drescher articulates how this produces sameness and elevates individuals at the expense of community: Drescher, *Tweet*, 102-105.



the dynamic significantly to a many-to-many format allowing more voices into the planning and delivery of worship. This is a significant culture change that will take time to truly embed in cultural practice or habitus. It will bring new opportunities as well as challenges.

#### 4.1.2 Co-Creation

The idea of co-creativity is particularly striking as a new opportunity here allowing for inclusive and efficient planning. Through improvisation, it opens the possibility of innovating new forms of creativity and events. This affirms a theological view of humans as created co-creators in the image of God. We are creators because we were created. So we have a mandate for a creativity that is “guided by loving action, with justice and mercy and a humility that all creative action is ultimately sourced in and dependent upon God.”<sup>14</sup>

As has been seen, some of this creativity is manifested in the planning, doing and reviewing of group activities, echoing elements of practical theology. This cyclical process is an ongoing creativity, a faithful improvisation which includes teenagers in ministry. Like jazz music, there is freedom in this process, which can be messy, and therefore it needs to be rooted in disciplines; the equivalent of music theory and technical expertise.<sup>15</sup> This is where the role of the youth leader as practical theologian is important, to go beyond the cycle of plan-do-review and articulate theological principles which guide ministry,<sup>16</sup> the rocks on which youth ministry can be built.<sup>17</sup>

In response to the pandemic, group leaders became more intentional in asking for input, inviting members to video chats to plan and give feedback which then continues through the group conversation. There is an opportunity to embed this process within the life of the group and conceive it as a theological ritual.

Besides this ongoing creativity, another dimension is creating from nothing.<sup>18</sup> New digital creations are essentially making something from nothing: putting together pixels

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<sup>14</sup> Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 142.

<sup>15</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmann, 2004, 22-23.

<sup>16</sup> Writers have called for a defined theology to guide digital forms of ministry, for example Baker, *Shaping*, 134-136 and Hunt, *Zoom*, 572-573.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, Clark and Rahn, *Starting*, 15-23.

<sup>18</sup> Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 142.

on a screen to make something of meaning for the group. One example is the design of the Wave group logo, shared via social media and reformatted in response to feedback. This then takes its place as the virtual group icon and later printed into a tangible banner for youth services.

The development of the 6-minute service on the Instagram group is another example of creativity, bringing together bible verse, worship music video, and a one-minute reflection from a group member into a 6-minute sequence shared on the platform. Here the technology provides an outlet for creativity through the sharing and refining of ideas. The feedback loop intrinsic within the medium is an essential component for this process.<sup>19</sup>

#### *4.1.3 Feedback*

Whilst feedback is always part of the dynamic of social media interactions, the Wave leaders intentionally seek feedback on youth ministry provision from the group. Below are two comments from young people offering contrary views over the issue of charging money to attend the Wave youth services.

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<sup>19</sup> Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 36.

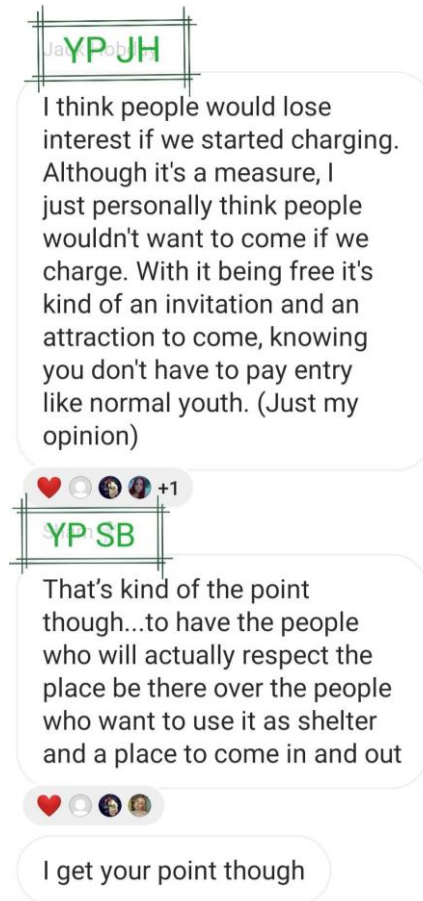


Figure 12: feedback on Instagram

These interactions are from cohort 2 on the Instagram platform which features the ability to 'love' posts as seen here. In recent years Messenger too has added the ability to 'like' posts so that group members can show support without posting a comment. In this case, four other members 'love' the first comment and 3 respond to the second. Effectively, whilst the comments demonstrate opposing views, both are endorsed roughly the same. It could be assumed that the slightly higher number of responses in the first posts deems that the winning view.

The ability to simply 'like/love' a post requires minimal effort, possibly encouraging 'reactive' or 'passive' levels of interaction.<sup>20</sup> It also illustrates a defining characteristic of social media, the feedback loop, allowing users to endorse comments quickly. There is no option to 'dislike' a post: users simply have the option to ignore it. The Facebook company have resisted adding a 'dislike' button to any platforms for fears of sowing too

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<sup>20</sup> Kaye, *Socialness*, 3.

much negativity. They have since created a variety of reaction options which include 'wow', 'haha', 'sad' and 'angry'.<sup>21</sup>

Social media platforms are constantly updating to try and keep up with user demands but any changes have subtle repercussions to interactions which over time could build to substantial changes in communication. Drescher's reflections on the influence of media on habitus tracks changes over hundreds of years,<sup>22</sup> but the speed of change has accelerated and is in constant flux. Previous media revolutions like the printing press essentially stayed the same for centuries, with some technical innovation but nothing that substantially changes the way users interact with the technology. Social media is very different in this respect with owners responding to a whole host of stakeholders, including powerful, corporate voices.

One example of platform changes has been the introduction of emoji reactions which allow users to choose from six different responses to a post, without having to comment. It has always been a feature of Instagram and was subsequently added to Messenger. This is an example of technological determinism, where the operations within social media have implications both for levels of engagement but also for how users express themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The Wave group leaders have identified social media as an effective place to discuss, plan and encourage youth ministry. There is a challenge here as to which values are determinate; group leaders have discerned what a closed-group conversation might be good for and used this. At the same time some platforms have been rejected as unsuitable. More attention should be paid to the underlying norms that the technology embeds and how this affects the group. Articulating core group values that translate from real to virtual space would be helpful here.

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<sup>21</sup> Lisa Eadicicco 'Why Facebook Doesn't Have a Dislike Button', <https://time.com/4235311/facebook-dislike-button-responses/> accessed 15.01.22.

<sup>22</sup> Drescher, *Tweet*, 34-53.

<sup>23</sup> Lundby, *Frameworks*, 227-228.

## 4.2 Being With

The Wave's use of social media demonstrates a commitment to sharing in ministry together. Fundamentally though, the existence of a virtual group space creates a sense of being together even when interactions fall silent. 'Being with' is an important principle that was modelled in the life of Jesus:

If Jesus was all about working for, how come he spent around 90 percent being with (in Nazareth), 9 percent working with (in Galilee) and only 1 percent working for (in Jerusalem)? Are those percentages significant – and do they provide a template for Christian ministry?<sup>24</sup>

Just as 90% of Jesus life is largely undocumented, so the journey of youth leaders with young people includes long periods of physical absence, between meetings and seasons. Membership of a social media group allows young people to maintain presence between in-person gatherings. It provides a dedicated space, present (albeit virtually) at all times which implicitly says, 'we are here for each other'; even when physically apart.

### 4.2.1 Absence and Presence

The dynamics of absence and presence are a significant feature of social media use. For example, a teenager on holiday with family can be physically in one place but their attention is drawn to friends back home, with whom who they maintain digital connection. They are physically present with family, but also absent. Parents might find this annoying as their child is constantly distracted, checking their device for messages, but this is a way of life for the teen:

Far from being a mere diversion, social media is a lifeline through which teenagers are able to maintain and enhance a social presence together amidst the loneliness and social isolation of exurbia.<sup>25</sup>

Most teens have experienced the feeling of being alone whilst in a group; social media provides an escape, a way to connect with 'absent' friends. For Zirschky this is evidence that "teenagers use social media to establish 'full-time intimate communities' that provide for always-on communication and relationships."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sam Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, London: Canterbury Press, 2017, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 31-32.

<sup>26</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 13.

This reveals a desire for deeper connection with others, where there is ‘presence in absence’ to counter ‘absence in presence’. The challenge for youth ministry is to offer this deeper *koinonia* for young people: “an intimate intertwining and sharing of life in which Christ is present with us as we are present with one another.”<sup>27</sup>

The tension between absence and presence is also a theological concern. Faith requires discerning divine action in our world, seeking to articulate where God’s presence might be found. Root suggests that the go-to answer of ‘God is everywhere’ is trite and insufficient. To say that God is everywhere might hold truth, but it is of little help to those trying to discover what difference it makes; the real question then is how to know, feel or sense God’s presence:

Just as we are unsure of where radio waves come from and how and when they get through our walls, we’re not sure specifically ‘where’ God is either. All we can say is ‘God is near.’ But still, we encourage them to pray more, go to church more, read their Bible more, giving the impression that *doing more* will finally lead them to an understanding that God is on any frequency they tune to – everywhere.<sup>28</sup>

Often, the default mode of ministry is to seek God in our doing of ministry together but tuning in to God requires drawing attention to times when divine presence has been felt or seen or heard. There are two examples below of youth group members sharing their experiences of sensing the presence of God, the first following a youth service and the second in response to a weekend away.

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<sup>27</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 14-16.

<sup>28</sup> Root and Dean, *Theological*, 122-123.

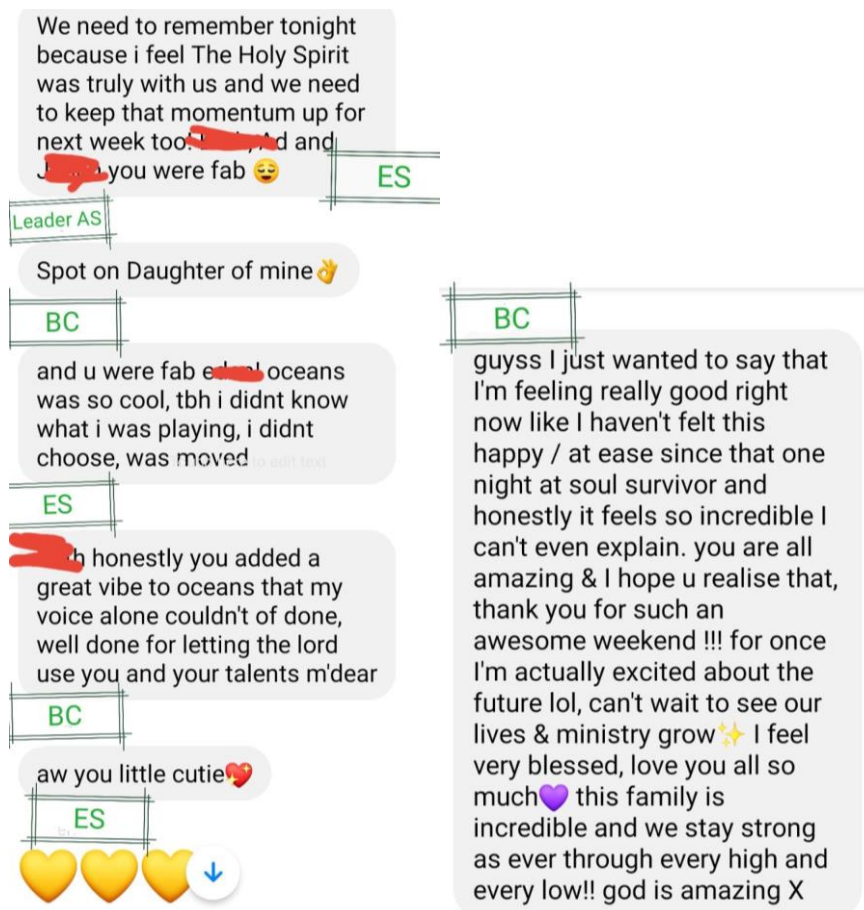


Figure 13: sensing divine presence in cohort 1

These testimonies draw attention to the reality of divine presence, and by implication reveal that this is not always felt. ES urges the group to remember moments where the Holy Spirit was “truly with us”. The social media feed forms a group diary with reminders of divine action. BC articulates a sense of feeling good and knows this because of past feelings. She knows the difference between the experienced presence and absence of God.

This divine action is felt in community experiences: “well done for letting the Lord use you and your talents”. This is a principle from the New Testament, that where two or three gather, so Jesus is present also,<sup>29</sup> perhaps even in a virtual meeting space offering constant, though dispersed, gathering. It is through being together that the group can see and feel divine action in and through the lives of others. Together, they can see their ‘lives and ministry grow’.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 18:20.

Sensing the presence of God also requires acknowledging struggle and times when God feels distant:

Through our shared life, then, we encounter the ‘where’ of God- but only as far as our lives are really shared, only as far as we are willing to see and be near to their nothingness. This can only occur if we see our vocation not as revealing God, bringing God near to them and making faith rational but ultimately as walking near the nothingness of adolescents by being in relationship with them. When we truly share in their lives in this way, we witness to a God who is revealed in hiddenness, who is near in weakness and suffering, and who calls us into the absurd backwardness of following a God who brings possibility out of nothingness.<sup>30</sup>

There is little evidence in the feed of sharing times when God seems absent, perhaps unsurprisingly. One conversation, in cohort 1, around the reality of suffering, and how to explain the reality of God to non-Christians who struggle does come close to acknowledging the reality of a faith which encounters doubt. Setting the group up as an encouraging space perhaps runs the risk of excluding expressions of doubt. What about those who might read of divine presence and yet do not respond. Might there be some who did not feel the same?<sup>31</sup>

Here then we see the social media group used to draw attention to the presence of God through experiences of the Wave community. The challenge is to ensure that all group members can be drawn into these experiences. Attending to times of absence as a reality of faith might help young people to express their faith authentically. This, after all, is the reason to use social media – a place to deepen authentic relationships.<sup>32</sup>

The prevalence of social media use among young people points to an understanding of the relationship between absence and presence; this could therefore relate more deeply to the Christian experience. By using group-chat, the Wave group demonstrate commitment to being with each other, even over physical distance. This speaks

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<sup>30</sup> Root and Dean, *Theological*, 134.

<sup>31</sup> From the social media feed provided for this study there are two members of the Messenger group who have not expressed examples of Christian practice. This might mean that this material has not been submitted, or that they are more passive members of the group.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *Community*, 375-383.



powerfully of a God who is always present with us, even when individuals might perceive God as absent.

#### 4.2.2 Place

If young people spend a lot of their leisure time connecting with friends in virtual spaces, then this becomes a place that they occupy. In this respect, “theological reflection about God’s presence in human places can be extended to a consideration of the internet... If the internet is a place, then we need to spend time considering how best to bring forth the best kinds of human activity there.”<sup>33</sup>

In the examples from the Wave group, social media does not present as the locus of live ministry, but a place to attest to it. This can be seen in posts relating to Christian practices. Whilst group members encourage each other to read Scripture daily, Bible study is not performed together on the social media feed. The 6-minute service presents a form of worship, but this is edited and presented rather than delivered as a live event. During the pandemic, leaders invite young people to live digital group sessions. Lockdown may have pushed leaders towards seeing social media as a space within which ministry can happen in real time.

One of the most striking examples is that of prayer. Many group members ask for prayers from others in the group, and there is always an encouraging response with a commitment to pray. Yet there are no examples of prayers being written and offered within the feed.

This might replicate real-world group practice, or indicate that virtual space is not considered a valid place within which to exercise ministry. Gorrell is an advocate for hybrid ministry, yet she recounts Jesus’ habit of regularly retreating to pray in private and stresses the need to switch off screens (and social media), to be alone in prayer.<sup>34</sup> This is a real challenge within hybrid ministry, to define the role of real and virtual group spaces in this respect. The pandemic has raised the significance of this challenge.

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<sup>33</sup> Baab, *Towards*, 281.

<sup>34</sup> Gorrell, *Always*, 91.

This small corner of the internet is a place that leaders can control and hold to a great extent. They have a role both in drawing alongside young people here and drawing attention to the reality of God in both presence and absence. This requires attention to boundaries to maintain a safe space.

### **4.3 Holding Together**

In some respects, a closed-group space on social media functions with hard boundaries, controlled by the administrator – in this case, group leader Ben. This makes the space easier to control, in terms of membership and privacy, than meeting in a physical room at the church, where others might see members come and go or overhear conversation.

There is also no limit to the number of groups that can be formed, allowing for different cohorts and experimentation with membership size and age. However, limitless possibilities can lead to being overwhelmed with choice and getting lost in an abundance of groups. It places responsibility on individual users to define their own boundaries.<sup>35</sup> This brings extra challenge for users and leaders, with the potential for a never-ending sequence of groups with no obvious end point.

The first cohort group from the Wave remain active on the Messenger platform into adulthood. Across the feed, a shift in relational dynamics is evident between leaders and members as young people cross the adult threshold. Ben has described his own youth ministry experience and feeling of being rejected at 18 when he could no longer attend youth group, leaving a sense of loss. For this reason, he marks every youth group member's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday with the offer of leaders accompanying them to get their first pint.

This shows how wide the gap between youth and adult church can be. Perhaps the social media group is helpful here, offering a model for the transition between different church groups. Two examples of posts from group members as adults but formerly youth can be seen in figure 14 below:

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<sup>35</sup> Faix, *Hybrid*, 68-69.

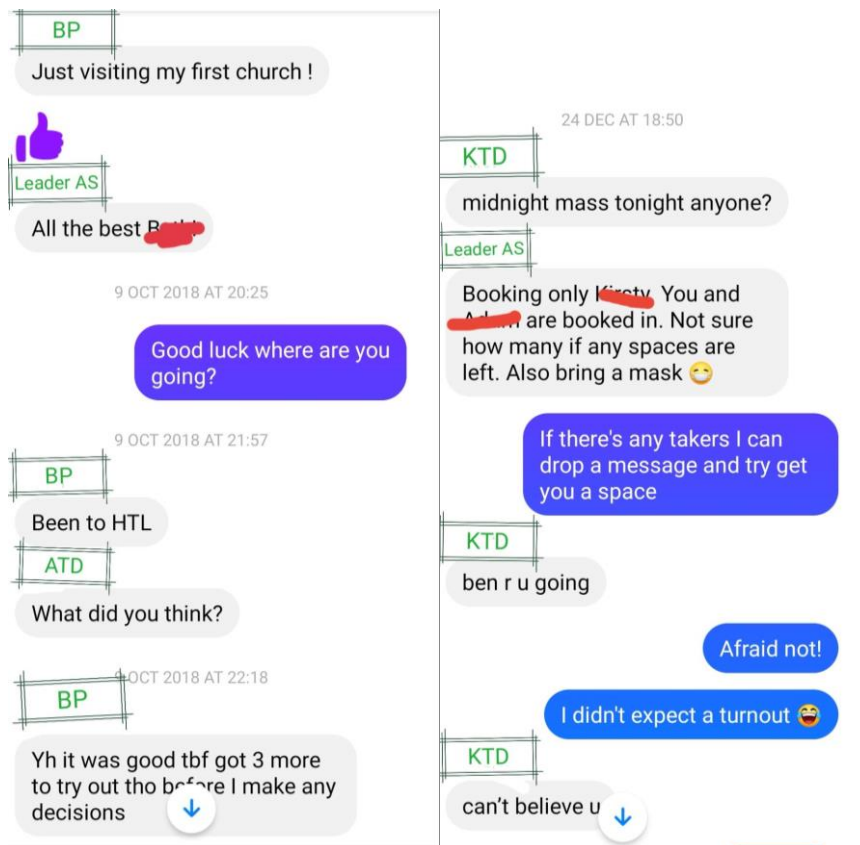


Figure 14: adults (former youth) posting in cohort 1

BP uses the group as a space to feedback on the experience of trying new churches at university and is encouraged to share thoughts and keep going by their peer group.

At Christmas, KTD uses the group to arrange meeting up together for the midnight mass service. Here there is a reversal in the leader-youth relationship where the former group members are now the ones encouraging participation in worship. Social media makes it easy to keep connection because it has never been lost. This means that a discipleship journey might take an individual to new groups and places, but this does not mean losing connection with fellow Christians from the past. It resonates with the use of letters in the New Testament to unite apostles as they spread the gospel message from place to place and might have an important part to play in sustaining discipleship into adulthood, growing a faith community that transcends geographic boundaries.<sup>36</sup> This, in time, might mean a significant reshaping of whole church ministry.

<sup>36</sup> Gorrell compares letters in the New Testament to new media use and refers to 2 Corinthians 10:1 where Paul indicates that his communication may even be bolder in this format, than in person: Gorrell, *Always*, 40.

Bonhoeffer issues a rule challenge for any Christian community, that there would be no secret talk of others. This is not to deny that individual members will have their own private thoughts:

People are actually free to have secrets, to possess experiences or personal information they wish not to disclose. This is no threat to the community. What is a threat, Bonhoeffer says boldly, is the secretive nature of talking about another member of the community without him or her being present.<sup>37</sup>

A social media group enforces this no-secrecy rule as all conversation is visible to all members. This is built-in to the technology. Of course, there is nothing to stop youth group members having secret conversations outside of this group, even through other social media channels. However, there is an opportunity here to articulate a no-secrecy rule as an explicit part of the values of the group.

The closed membership of a social media group creates a sense of safety. The openness of a no-secrecy rule would embed transparency. Making explicit a no-secrecy rule would draw attention to the aim of creating a distinctly different community space. Social media could enable this practice virtually which might then influence real-world interactions too.

As Root notes: “A youth ministry that could create an ethos where young people did not need to keep an eye on others, judging them before they get judged, would be a prophetically distinct community indeed.”<sup>38</sup> Through social media, this would also communicate a desire to operate in a way that is antithetical and counter-cultural to wider social media practices. This adds an extra sense of being a prophetic community; being explicit in this intention is essential to ensuring that this is understood and owned by the youth group.

This does also raise questions about the appropriateness of certain social media platforms. If a group were to use WhatsApp, for example, aside from concerns about age-appropriateness with a UK lower limit of 16 years, the platform also shares every user’s phone number in the group. Sharing private contact information would be in breach of a youth group’s GDPR guidelines. It could also have an unintended

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2014, 205-206.

<sup>38</sup> Root, *Bonhoeffer*, 206.

consequence of generating sub-conversations between individual members with no leadership oversight.

This illustrates some of the subtleties of differences between platforms which can have serious repercussions for how the group operates. In this case it would undermine a no-secrecy rule. Leaders of the Wave have been careful in their platform choice, demonstrating a way of enacting ‘religious social shaping of technology’, which determines that the values of the youth group are foundational and served well by social media.<sup>39</sup>

The boundaries in a closed-group social media space are beneficial in controlling membership but raise new challenges and opportunities for youth ministers. Attending to and articulating values is vital to navigating these new possibilities.

#### **4.4 With and Within**

Incarnational youth ministry has often been understood to represent the ongoing presence of youth workers with young people and, “represents an act of boundary crossing, emulating the way in which Christ became known in culture.”<sup>40</sup> Extending incarnational ministry to include social media use crosses a new boundary. It offers a way of ‘doing’ and ‘being’ with young people, accompanying them on their journey of faith. There is potential for this to develop a group habitus that is not centred around programmes, but a process that draws attention to divine action within the life of the community. A creative process which allows for improvisation and is transparent, open to all members of the group.

Leaders need to attend to their role as regulators in this space and should define group values which could include a no-secrecy rule. Attention to levels of engagement is important here, and leaders should consider how best to interact. One of the dynamics of social media relates to absence and presence with each other. This dynamic can be related to awareness of God’s presence, and indeed perceived absence. There is an

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<sup>39</sup> Lundby, *Frameworks*, 232-233.

<sup>40</sup> Nick Shepherd, *Faith Generation*, London: SPCK, 2016, 40-41.

opportunity for leaders to draw attention to this dynamic so that expressions of doubt can also be shared, alongside those of encouragement.

By being with young people relationally, youth ministry ultimately points towards the reality of a relationship with Christ that is within individuals and the community. Social media creates a means to maintain connection to Christian community into adulthood, forming a potential new eco-system of Christian networks which offer lifelong support for the faithful.

## 5. Follow: Social Media for Discipleship

In his analysis of Bonhoeffer's significance to youth ministry, Root contends that discipleship needs to be concerned with the person of Christ and not just his teaching or ideas. This is the difference between cheap grace that presents young people with an ideology and costly grace which comes with a call to follow Christ: "it is the work of the whole church-community to continue to remind, review and re-examine with young people the call of Jesus that has come to them, the very beckoning that they have experienced."<sup>1</sup>

As part of the whole church, youth leaders must review their approach to ministry. Here I consider strategy and the use of social media as a tool to experiment with and develop discipleship models. I examine engagement levels in youth ministry drawing on examples of Christian practice from the Wave group-feed which serve as reminders of divine action in the lives of young people. Finally, I consider the 'fellowship of believers' in the early church as a model for re-examining discipleship and how this relates to an 'always-on' culture. Within this culture, young people seek a faith which attends to their quest for identity, belonging and purpose and is expressed authentically.

### 5.1 Discipling Strategy in Youth Ministry

Youth ministry has produced many strategic models which aim to draw young people from initial contact in outreach groups to a personal faith commitment through discipleship groups and mentor programmes.<sup>2</sup> Many of these models are formed around an incarnational ministry based on the way Jesus drew crowds (outreach), called 12 to be his followers (discipleship group) and within this were three - Peter, James and John - who spent more time with Jesus, learning to be leaders themselves (mentoring).<sup>3</sup>

These models may operate independently of wider church structures, not tied to a particular ecclesiology but responsive to the unique setting and needs of each youth

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<sup>1</sup> Root, *Bonhoeffer*, 187.

<sup>2</sup> Several of these models are explored here: Dean, Clark and Rahn, *Starting*, 109-124.

<sup>3</sup> These models can either operate as outside-in or inside-out, with examples here: Shepherd, *Generation*, 48-54.

community. Hence, they tend to evolve organically to retain relevance among teenagers.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 15 maps out the Wave’s digital strategy as it evolved from the Friday night youth group membership between 2016 and 2020. The outer group (the blue rectangle) represents the crowd: an open-access group of between 50-60 regular attendees. From this crowd, digital groups were formed in response to youth leaders’ intuitive sense of the need to extend connection with a smaller group of committed members. They formed a discipleship group to be involved in leading the Friday group and participate in a weekly Sunday worship service to run parallel to the main church gathering.

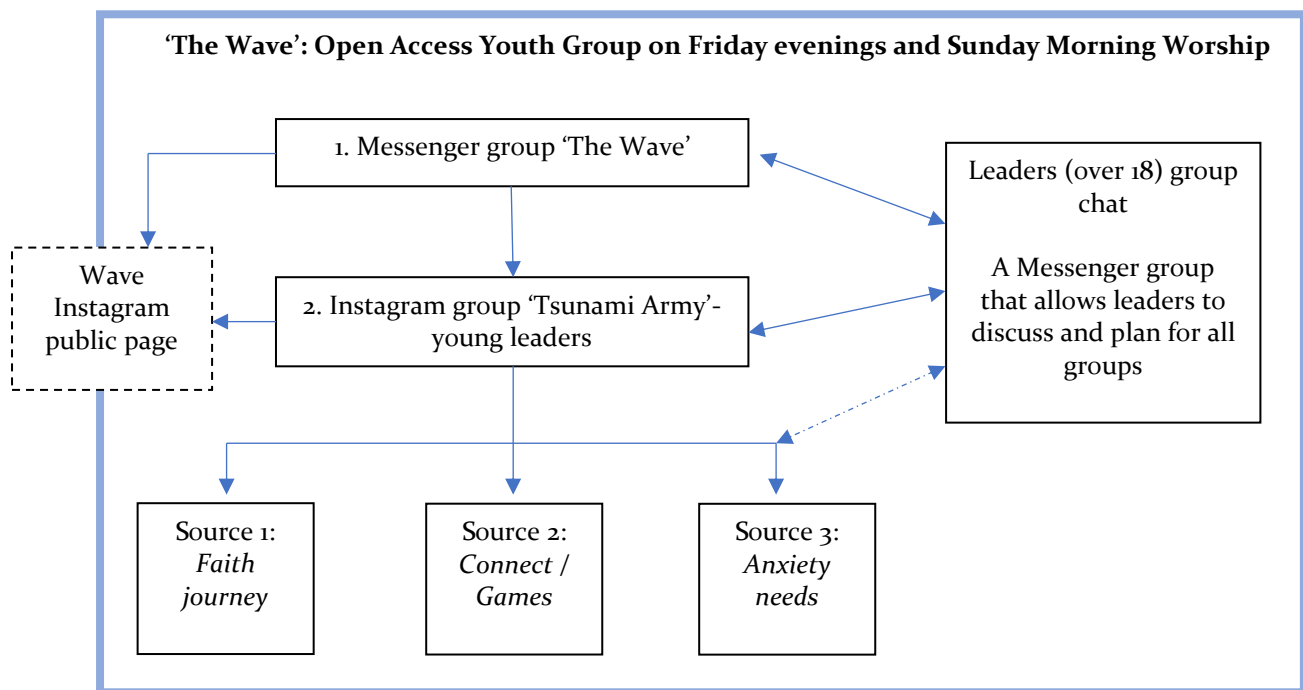


Figure 15: strategy in social media ministry

Whilst cohort 1 uses Messenger, Instagram soon became the default platform of choice for cohort 2 and beyond. Instagram hosts the Wave’s public page, shown here at the edge of the model. This is illustrated with a dotted line as it extends beyond the boundaries of the Friday night group membership, with 415 followers to date.<sup>5</sup>

The public page presents a new form of outreach for the group. Ben has, on occasion, paid to ‘boost’ this page, targeting local teenagers as a way of promoting the open-access

<sup>4</sup> Dean, Clark and Rahn, *Starting*, 110-111.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/thewaveyouth/> accessed 21.01.22



club to new members. Some young leaders from cohort 2 have contributed posts to this public page, including episodes of the 6-minute service. This constitutes a public declaration of commitment to faith which Ben likens to the wearing of a WWJD wristband at school. Here, the social media discipleship groups offer new ways to express faith commitment in a digital sphere which runs counter to the ‘mum’ effect where users hide their Christian identity.<sup>6</sup>

### *5.1.1 Pandemic Response*

In March 2020, as the first lockdown came into effect, the Wave youth leaders were quick to innovate ways to maintain connection with the whole youth group, Taking the Instagram group-chat as a model, young people were invited to join ‘source’ groups. Young leaders from cohort 2 were matched with a source group, each aimed at a different level. Group 1 was formed with those who were on a faith journey, group 2 for those more fringe group members and group 3 focused on those most anxious who needed extra support.

These groups were led by young leaders, with oversight from adults through the presence of a generic ‘Wave’ account. If a leader were to add a comment in the group, they included their initials at the end to indicate their identity. The leaders’ Messenger group provided a space for leaders to discuss and plan activities in all digital groups and to arrange zoom group meetings that all young people could access.<sup>7</sup>

In this pandemic response, social media created a way to adapt quickly and effectively. Ben and the group leaders recollect how this worked very well initially, though as time went on, engagement in source groups began to wane. Group 2 was the first to become mostly redundant as members found other places to connect and do gaming together online. The other groups lasted longer, but leaders have learned that the social media ministry works best in augmenting what happens at physical gatherings and is insufficient on its own.

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<sup>6</sup> Dunaetz, *Mum*, 138-139.

<sup>7</sup> The dotted arrow connecting the leaders group chat with source groups in figure 15 illustrates this oversight: a ghost presence in the form of Wave member account accessed by all leaders.

Pre-pandemic, the opposite was the case. Increased engagement online saw greater attendance at in-person meetings on Friday and Sunday, suggesting that social media ministry offers “a helpful digital means to a greater incarnational end.”<sup>8</sup>

### *5.1.2 Leaders, Calling and Following*

Within this strategy, a smaller number were mentored and ultimately joined the adult leadership team. ES and ATD from cohort 1 effectively became church interns during the pandemic, overseeing young leaders as they took responsibility for source groups. There is sustainability built into this strategy almost by default as adult leaders found Instagram to be an alien environment, and therefore nurtured and released ES and ATD to relate authentically in this space.

Whilst this strategy may seem quite complex, it has grown organically and adapts easily to circumstances. This speed of development, whilst innovative, does call into question how much thought and theological reflection has gone into this model thus far. There is a dynamic of calling and following here that is implicit but not defined. Sweet states that: “leadership is, at best, a function. Followership is an identity.”<sup>9</sup> The function of leadership here has responded to circumstances, and the identity of followers in each social media domain has been considered but needs to be clearly articulated and understood by the young people themselves.

For example, Friday night group members are invited to ‘follow’ the Wave on Instagram. Leaders have promoted the page and celebrated numeric milestones by bringing in donuts for the group when the 300-follower threshold was exceeded. This type of following could be considered cheap grace: low impact, not a big decision or identity statement, which may or may not amount to regularly viewing the feed from the Instagram account.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, for a discipleship group member to publish a 6-minute service on Instagram is a more costly choice, given the number of followers to the page. They open themselves up to scrutiny and feedback from hundreds of others, many of whom may be strangers.

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<sup>8</sup> Kim, *Analog*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Sweet, *Viral*, 63-64.

<sup>10</sup> Root, *Bonhoeffer*, 187.

Membership of digital discipleship groups thus demonstrates a deeper level of commitment and connection between leaders and young people. It is unclear exactly how membership of these groups is determined but it appears to be self-selective through discipleship programmes such as alpha and confirmation courses.

Looking through the social media feed, those, such as ES and ATD, who emerge as adult leaders demonstrate faith commitment and leadership qualities which can be traced through the feed and is noticed and encouraged by other leaders. This new generation of leaders then replicate the process themselves innovating further expressions of faith through digital media. Strategically then, social media offers leaders a means to provide for and discern different levels of engagement among the young group.

## **5.2 Engagement**

Wave group leaders were quick to assess different levels of engagement among the youth group to tailor smaller source groups accordingly. The pandemic meant that this had to be an improvised response, but it shows the need for leaders to be attentive to where young people are, in relation to the aims of the group.

The source groups demonstrate leaders' commitment to all young people; they could have decided to try and keep connection only with those on a faith journey, but instead chose to try maintaining connection with all members. This is youth ministry that sees relationships as an end in themselves and not purely a device to create more disciples.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it is open to the possibility of movement: that a young person's attitude to faith is not fixed or tied to one linear model but fluctuates.

Wave leaders have intuitively discerned levels of engagement with the youth group, in response to the challenges of the pandemic. This research asked leaders to reflect more intentionally over levels of engagement in the group over a longer time period, a new process enabled by the social media feed providing evidence of interactions.

Leaders were particularly aware of a difference between cohorts 1 and 2, drawing attention to differences in the platform choices and the way the groups were formed.

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<sup>11</sup> Root argues that too often incarnational ministry is viewed as a means to an end, and it should be extended to include Jesus' death and resurrection: Root, *Revisiting*, 123.

The most striking difference from the feed is conversations around Christian practices in cohort 1 which are largely absent in cohort 2, instead replaced by more phatic communication.<sup>12</sup> Of course every youth group is unique with its own set of norms and behaviours, and perhaps leaders are too quick to dismiss the more prosaic interactions of cohort 2.

### 5.2.1 Phatic Communication

The average length of a text message has been estimated at 7 words.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile it takes seven minutes on average for a conversation to really get going. This has led to criticism of online communication as concerned with the language of commodity and not community.<sup>14</sup> Yet a glance at your average teenager's phone will evidence a whole host of short and mostly banal messages between friends, through instant messaging apps. Research suggests near ubiquitous use of smartphones among teenagers.<sup>15</sup> A large scale study in the States conducted in 2018 found the proportion of young people perceiving mostly positive effects of social media (31%) outnumbered those who deem it mostly negative (24%). For those with a positive view of social media, connection with family and friends and the opportunity to meet new people were emphasised as the main benefits.<sup>16</sup>

Social media use has been almost universally normalised among young people. In this context, phatic communication has been undervalued as an authentic way of connecting: "Phatic exchange is a social use of language and a foundation for experiencing presence."<sup>17</sup>

For teenagers even the most trivial text conversations communicate shared life together, Youth leaders using this medium in ministry are implicitly saying, "I see you, we are

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<sup>12</sup> Appendix 12 gives examples of Christian Practice conversation which can be contrasted with phatic communication examples in Appendix 13.

<sup>13</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Kim, *Analog*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Ofcom, Online Nation 2021

data. [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf), 5, accessed 29.01.22.

<sup>16</sup> Pew Research Center, 'Teens, Social Media and Technology', <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/> accessed 24.01.22.

<sup>17</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 45.

here together, you are a part of us.” In fact, it shows a level of intimacy that goes deeper than a surface connection: “Only a person who is truly present and involved in your life would know the little details of your life—and only someone who truly loves you would actually care.”<sup>18</sup>

This resonates with a sense of belonging which very often precedes belief in Christian community. “Sacred solidarity” is about being there for each other; it matters little whether this involves sharing about exam stress, using humour, finding characters on Pokémon go, or even just a brief hello. Social media helps to create this solidarity through the week, where leaders can be there for young people rather than simply asking them to be there at programmed events.<sup>19</sup>

For group leaders, their experience highlights differences in the way each cohort group have formed. This does manifest in different ways of engaging through social media, with Cohort 1 evidencing more Christian character. Cohort 2 forms a plausibility shelter – where faith is on the agenda as a potential choice, but not overtly expressed in group interactions. These “places of plausibility are the first requirement for faith generation.”<sup>20</sup>

Youth leaders are familiar with different dynamics between cohorts of young people, usually seen in how committed they are at in-person events. With social media, there is an opportunity to grow a sense of belonging through regular contact, which might appear trivial but is non-threatening and demonstrates a willingness to be there regardless of commitment. This is a digital form of place-sharing that keeps a connection with young people where faith is plausible and may or may not lead to a time where they might express a personal faith for themselves.

### 5.2.2 Place-Sharing

As Bonhoeffer understands it, in a relationship bound by place-sharing, a person is transformed (for he or she finds his or her distinct person). For in becoming the advocate for the other, my very concept of myself within the world is changed; I become the one who is for this particular other, his or her person has a direct impact on my own unique person. In the same way the other’s person is drawn into

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<sup>18</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Dean, *Passion*, 177-178.

<sup>20</sup> Shepherd, *Generation*, 77.

transformation, for as I stand alongside the other, he or she must make room for me in the midst of his or her reality.<sup>21</sup>

Place-sharing is a demanding relationship and therefore Root determines that it should become central to the whole ministry of the church and not a separate youth endeavour. A number of ‘rules of art’ are needed for place-sharing in practice: an ethical, theological and practical steer recognising that each congregation is unique. Social media can provide a space for digital place-sharing where leaders empathise with young people through daily connection.

An expression of place-sharing in the Wave group is where leaders check-in with individuals on Instagram. This practice developed with source groups as a way of showing care through the pandemic. Leaders communicate about any concerns they have for individuals, based on comments left on social media or due to a lack of engagement. Using the Wave leaders’ account, an adult leader then sent a message to a young person, usually in the form of a simple question to see how they are doing or feeling. The use of the main leadership account means that this checking-in practice is transparent and accountable to others.

This is a form of advocacy; a demonstration of support and reaffirmation of presence made by one leader on behalf of all the leaders and by extension, the church. Here leaders act as “adoption guides”, sustaining a relational bridge into Christian community.<sup>22</sup> It shows the young person that they are noticed and invites them to respond. Wave leaders also check-in with the same group members when they can meet in physical groups too.

On Instagram, there is a strong sense that leaders are entering unfamiliar territory, a space that is not their natural habitat but one that is recognised as a significant space for young people. One of the leaders, Gemma, indicates that she only has an Instagram

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<sup>21</sup> Root, *Revisiting*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Chap Clark (ed.), *Youth Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2015, 88-89.

account to connect with the Wave group.<sup>23</sup> This is an example of leaders ‘making room’ in their reality for young people.

This place-sharing practice needs to become a whole-church endeavour, and the Wave’s experience shows how this might begin to take hold, from the ground up. Leaders from cohort 1 have emerged and become adult leaders and place-sharers for source groups. Young leaders from cohort 2 are also encouraged to lead in source groups and perhaps in this respect, young people are being nurtured into place-sharing for one another. This eco-system of social media practice within hybrid youth ministry is still a separate enterprise from the rest of the church congregation. A familiar youth ministry challenge remains; how to bridge this gap between youth ministry and wider church practice. Might this prove to be a bridge too far, and instead new church practices emerge for the future?

### *5.2.3 Measuring Engagement*

The social media feed itself provides a tool for measuring levels of engagement in youth ministry but there is a need to develop models or questions which aid this process. Youth leaders used the Kaye model for this research project, considering youth group members as either passive, reactive, broadcast or interactive communicators.<sup>24</sup> Their thoughts were limited as they were working from memory, rather than reviewing a copy of the feed, though they found the process interesting and challenging.

Where Kaye’s model focuses on how users communicate, Williams offers a subtly different model which considers motivation. This model identifies ghosts (not really present), casual (occasional users), interactive (who respond to others) and intentional (who strategically use platforms to suit their purposes) users.<sup>25</sup>

Both these models, though, are designed for reviewing public-posting on an individual’s social media profile. As has been argued here, the group conversation is a distinctly different space and therefore deserves specific attention. Young people themselves

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<sup>23</sup> Appendix 5, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Kaye, *Socialness*.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Community*, 377.

should engage in a review of the feeds, as their perspective would be most helpful here and could provide new methods, questions, or processes.

Regularly reviewing the feed would also enable leaders to view engagement patterns across the year, noting which moments, events or seasons stimulate the most conversation. This creates the opportunity to redesign the programme to cover any gaps both in time and in types of posts, for example those that evidence Christian practice.

In her guide to 'social ministry', Nona Jones takes this to extremes, offering a suggested engagement calendar for every day of the week. This leads back towards a programme-driven approach which may increase engagement on some level but could produce performative faith responses rather than building authentic community space.<sup>26</sup> It is worth remembering here that our view of a person's faith journey will always be incomplete. There is often a temptation in ministry to produce more activity, but this does not automatically equal a deeper level of engagement.

There is, however, evidence of Christian practices in the feed which give an indication of where some group members are in their faith journey. Before considering examples of Christian practice from the feed, it is worth stepping back to consider the context and purpose of these practices.

### **5.3 The Early Church**

Some writers take the 'fellowship of the believers' passage,<sup>27</sup> and use it as a model for church and youth ministry highlighting key practices: liturgy, hospitality and fellowship, proclamation, teaching and discipleship, compassion, praise and worship, and witness.<sup>28</sup> Kim suggests that this passage gives reason to reject digital forms of ministry speculating that if this took place online, it would lose all impact and influence.<sup>29</sup>

If we are to view Acts 2 as a model for ministry, then we must acknowledge how far our western 21<sup>st</sup> century lives are from this ideal. The early church met together daily,

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<sup>26</sup> Jones, *Social*, 89-91.

<sup>27</sup> Acts 2: 42-47.

<sup>28</sup> This list is from Dean, *Practicing*, 153-154. It is used as an example of koinonia, Zirschky, *Beyond*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Kim, *Analog*, 126.



sharing everything. Their lifestyle and Christian practices were intertwined. Our modern lives and homes simply do not follow this pattern. We are a scattered church where often there is much more separation between gathering as a church community and the daily lives of individual members.

When we gather, our meetings have been influenced by media: forward facing, sitting in rows, listening to those on a platform all resonate with broadcast media values.<sup>30</sup> Social media challenges this and offers a way back to communal living that is closer to a medieval habitus where social reading and oral storytelling were community practices, albeit with a 21<sup>st</sup> century spin.<sup>31</sup>

The use of closed-group conversations on social media forms a way of connecting daily, being attentive and available to each other as a group of equals. How can youth ministers embed Christian practices if they only spend 1-2 hours a week together? The early church is an ‘always on’ model which demands 100% commitment where everything is shared. Social media groups essentially draw closer to this model by providing an ‘always on’ space. It also provides a means of examining practice:

By importing religious practices online, believers have the opportunity to re-examine the context and application of various religious disciplines. This can promote experimentation that transforms some aspects of traditional religious practice in ways that challenge religious communities.<sup>32</sup>

In the Wave group’s experience, it is less about importing practices online, but a hybrid model which enhances and embeds gathered times of worship and fellowship. It allows leaders to re-examine group practices and their impact.

### 5.3.1 Christian Practices

If place-sharing is to have any meaning, it depends on authentic relationships where young people can share with honesty and integrity. Charles Taylor defines an Age of Authenticity where, if it feels good, it must be good: “spirituality is de-institutionalized and is understood primarily as an expression of ‘what speaks to me.’”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Zirschky, *Beyond*, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Drescher, *Tweet*, 61-64.

<sup>32</sup> Campbell and Garner, *Networked*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> James Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014, 140.

This speaks to individualism which has been noted as a defining characteristic of social media. It is also a factor attributed to the decline of youth participation in church with a perception that discipleship is a solo effort. “Resilient disciples” are deemed to be the 10% of youth group members who identify as followers of Christ and participate in Christian practices as part of a church community.<sup>34</sup>

The social media feed provides evidence of Christian practices in cohort 1 that witness to faith development of individuals nurtured and affected by the discipleship group. Examples attest to faith practices that are both inward, such as daily Bible study, and outward focused, like prayer requests for loved ones.<sup>35</sup>

Group leaders sense that social media can be beneficial for “peer-to-peer support and discipleship”, especially through daily reminders linked to online content, for example verse of the day notifications.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, they found it difficult to articulate what discipleship really means. This deserves further attention, especially of leaders own experiences as disciples themselves. The challenge for youth leaders is to consider not just who they are leading, but who they are following. How are they ministered to, as they focus on witnessing to the youth group?

Between cohort 1 and 2, leaders have articulated differences in levels of engagement. In part, this is due to an increasing separation between young people and wider family participation in church. Several of the cohort 1 group are children of parents who are faithful members of the local church, including one whose dad is a youth group leader. In cohort 2, very few members belong to church families. This is of significance for wider ecclesiology as the gulf between church and youth group practices is widening.

Increasingly, Christian faith is an entirely new concept for young people, not one that is embedded in family history. This means that the discipleship group needs to operate more closely to a family model, like the ‘fellowship of believers’ early church model of close community devoted to Christian practices. This involves a huge counter-cultural shift away from individualism towards a faithful community. Social media groups can

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<sup>34</sup> Kinnaman, *Exiles*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Appendix 12.

<sup>36</sup> Appendix 9.

help to this end, but they are still a new, untested innovation which therefore requires deeper consideration on where they fit within ecclesiology.

### 5.3.2 Going Deeper

Both social media and youth ministry have been criticised for being shallow.<sup>37</sup> Yet the Wave's experience with cohort 1 shows progression and depth in the discipleship journey of youth group members. In her book, *Practicing Passion*, Kenda Creasy Dean articulates three stages of Christian practice which offer a scaffold that leads to a deeper faith. Each are illustrated below with examples from the cohort 1 group:

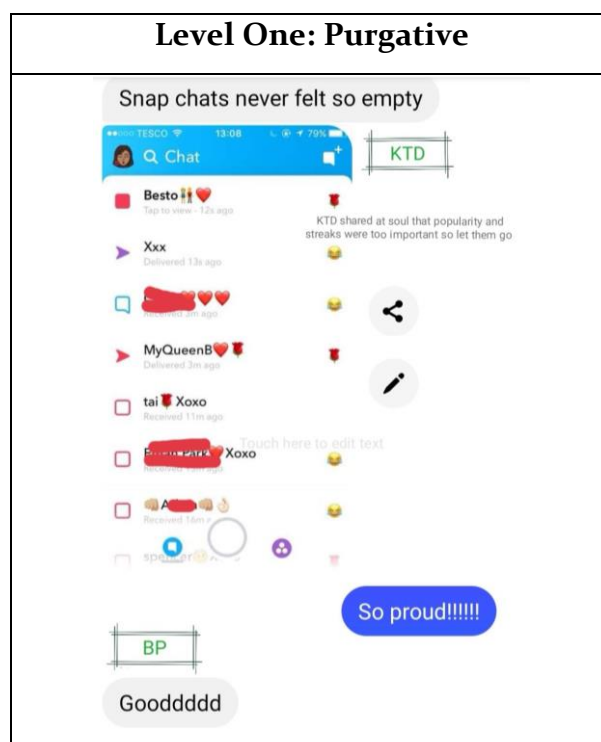


Figure 16: purgative practice

The first of these stages is the purgative: “practices that rid the self of attachments that impede our ability to receive God’s grace, and are especially important for distinguishing the religious self from the social self in the early stages of faith.”<sup>38</sup> In figure 16, an example is given where KTD commits to giving up snap streaks. She is getting rid of a negative social media influence, using the more positive virtual space to express this and receive affirmation from others.

<sup>37</sup> Social media with its abundance of choice, makes us shallow: Kim, *Analog*, 17-19. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, youth ministry has bathed in the shallow end of the theological pool: Dean, *Practicing*, 162.

<sup>38</sup> Dean, *Practicing*, 162.

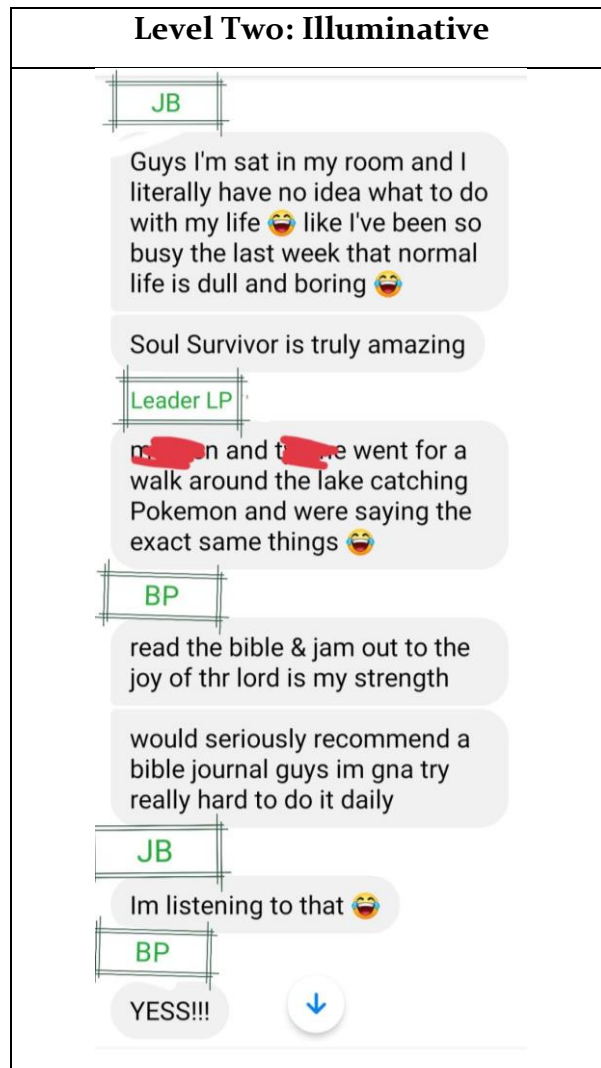


Figure 17: illuminative practice

Second is the illuminative stage, concerned with pursuing “holiness in the company of others.”<sup>39</sup> There are many examples of this stage, mostly centred on experiences of leading worship in the local church, youth weekends away and the annual Soul Survivor worship conference. Dean notes that “Christian identity requires redundancy as well as revelation, a daily rhythm of grace that may or may not be punctuated by ‘spiritual highs.’”<sup>40</sup>

An example in figure 17 illustrates the significance of these inspiring events and the reality and difficulty of returning to normality after their conclusion. JB’s profound experience at Soul Survivor makes the rest of life seem dull in comparison and he is

<sup>39</sup> Dean, *Practicing*, 166.

<sup>40</sup> Dean, *Practicing*, 164.

unsure how to respond. BP makes the connection to daily journaling as way of bringing faith into the more mundane, everyday experience.

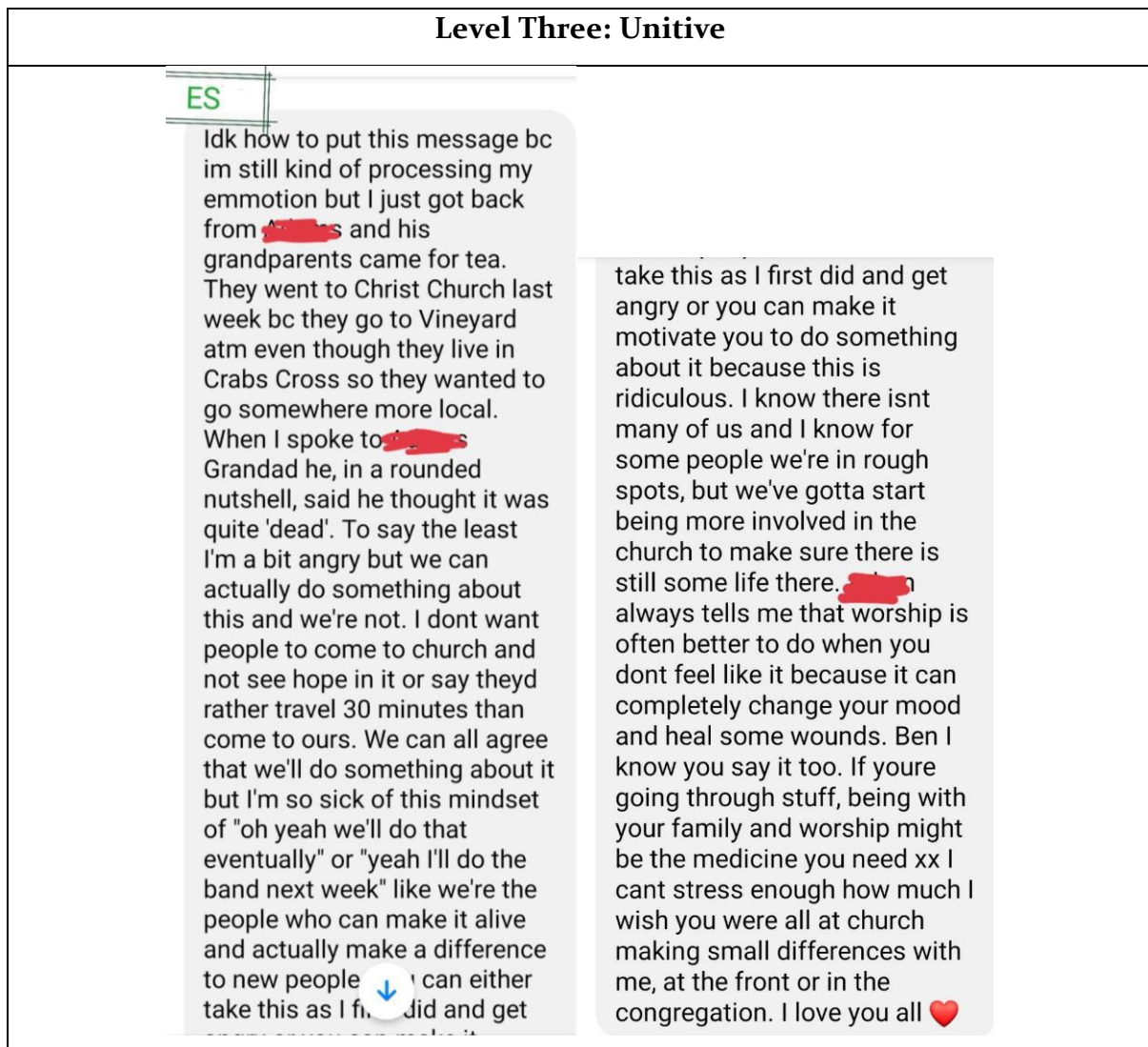


Figure 18: unitive practice

The third unitive stage is considered a rarer form of maturity in faith that would not normally be associated with youth ministry. Yet, Dean argues that where young people are drawn into the passion of God, they venture towards union.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, ES, in figure 18, shares testimony which show a deep sense of personal connection to the body of Christ. Yet there is something lacking here as she recognises how difficult it is to integrate the regular practice of church attendance. She references church as family and

<sup>41</sup> Dean, *Practicing*, 171-172.

feels the gap between youth group and church as a personal source of regret and pain; one that she is motivated to change.

There is a challenge here for the church, to raise its expectations of youth participation in worship beyond shallowness and enable such testimony to be heard. Youth ministry should anticipate responses at different levels, not that one is automatically succeeded by the next, but that faith commitment grows and deepens over time. A model like this offers a helpful framework to reflect on the impact of youth ministry.

The nature of social media lends itself to certain expressions of practice above others. The many-to-many format and always-on dynamic of social media makes it ideal for daily expression of faith, bringing that closeness of community exemplified in the early church, from which these practices stem. Using the Acts 2 passage to reflect theologically on expressions of Christian practice in the Wave groups would help leaders discern what might be missing and where to go next in this community space.

Practices are important disciplines for the believer, but they do not, in and of themselves, define someone as a Christian. They are helpful signs of commitment, but the youth leader needs to encourage practices that point toward a personal faith based on a relationship with Christ. This then goes to the heart of identity: a key concept in the life of the modern teenager.

## 5.4 Identity

Social media allows users to be whomever they choose, creating multiple profiles, sharing images and posts that present the best version of self.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, research suggests that 85% of young people consider that they can be authentic online:

This statistic is fascinating when you consider the levels of staging, planning, editing and filtering that contributed to a young person's posted content... does this suggest that whilst highly valuing authenticity in others this generation have lost the ability to self-reflect and identify in-authenticity within themselves? Has how they view authenticity online changed?<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Lövheim, *Identity*, 44-45.

<sup>43</sup> Youth for Christ, 'Gen Z: Digital Generation', <https://yfc.co.uk/gen-z-the-digital-generation/>, 2019, 36, accessed 27.01.22.

Whilst the teen values authenticity highly, the influence of media must surely affect the online presentation of self. The abundance of choice can be driven by consumerist values: “In digital Babylon, our screens grant us access to a plethora of identity-forming tools, communities and adventures.... What we consume stakes a claim on who we are, and that is the stuff of identity.”<sup>44</sup>

This is not a new phenomenon in youth culture: youth leaders will be familiar with young people following trends and presenting differently in a variety of social settings. What is new is the use of virtual space to experiment with and explore identity. This is an internal preoccupation:

a mission to discover who you most fully feel like you are. Now the young person does this alone, maybe with a friend, but no longer with a neighborhood group. Rather, she’s now in her room under her parents’ (friendly, constant) eye, searching the internet (which again shows that this isn’t quite as purely internal as we assume).<sup>45</sup>

This is not just an internal quest then; feedback from followers means that profiles can be constantly refined to suit the audience, and to build personal brand. Identity, for a teenager, is a shifting sand that depends on feeling. Whilst the teen might feel that they are forming identity as an individual, many external factors affect choices about who we are and who we might become.

Human identity assumes and requires an external person who can acknowledge and affirm us, who can say our name, look us in the face, and tell us it is good that we exist.<sup>46</sup>

Identity requires a witness. We define ourselves in response to those who we choose to be with. In the modern world this can lead us down two possible paths. The way of affirmation, where I can optimise myself, improve who I am and grow in confidence based on the endorsement of others. Alternatively, the way of resignation is to check-out; to feel unable to compete and therefore to disengage. There are many distractions offered by virtual life which can allow young people to check-out at a relatively affordable cost. Entertainment options allow the self to be lost in virtual space, with

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<sup>44</sup> Kinnaman, *Exiles*, 46-47.

<sup>45</sup> Root, *End*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020, 140.

gaming being the most obvious route. For many of us, we oscillate between these two paths.<sup>47</sup>

A closed-group in social media can operate as a space of affirmation. Membership of the group assumes an identity to begin with, both as part of the Wave, and stepping into a leadership role within the group. We have seen with cohort 1 that encouragement is a large part of group interactions.<sup>48</sup> Members praise others for their gifts, for their views and refer to each other as family. The feed operates as a group diary with reminders of the journey of discipleship. Significant moments are recorded, such as confirmation; anniversaries of these key moments are noted and celebrated.

This group can also pay attention to resignation, where young people check out. Leaders have witnessed this more starkly during the pandemic and made attempts to reach out. A consistent, virtual group does, at least, provide an open-door, making it easier for a young person to gently return to the group.

#### 5.4.1 *Groupfaith*

“For identity to deliver meaning it must, in some way, be found outside ourselves.”<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, the goal of youth ministry is to draw young people towards a relationship with Christ for themselves. Our identity as Christians is as followers of Jesus, the person of Christ, not just teaching or ideas.

If youth ministry is going to be for anything deeper than watering value seeds and being a benign, safe place that serves as another tool for happiness, then it will have to affirm this sense of an identity quest—and also challenge it.<sup>50</sup>

Youth leaders should not underestimate their role firstly in affirming young people for who they are. Inviting them to join a group communicates that they matter. For this to speak to identity, then the identity of the group itself needs to be clearly articulated. Secondly, young people need others who can encourage and draw out their unique gifts in a space not driven by values of consumerism but by Kingdom values of love and compassion.

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<sup>47</sup> Noble, *Own*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Appendix 11.

<sup>49</sup> Root, *End*, 138.

<sup>50</sup> Root, *End*, 65.



If identity requires a witness, then youth groups have an important part to play in the process of identity formation. Too often, in youth ministry, this is left to teaching programmes that present the idealised Christian way to be. Shepherd refers to ‘groupfaith’ which requires meaning-making from programmes and practices of youth ministry together:

Bible study groups, the Youth Alpha course, programmes of topic-based discussions, one-to-one discipleship relationships and the intentional use of informal conversations to provoke reflection are all forms of learning; what connects them to the task of meaning making, though, is to allow the space for this learning to be collaboratively set.<sup>51</sup>

Social media can provide this space, precisely because it concerns process rather than programmes. The examples of Christian practices above show how they become embedded not just as personal discipleship but as part of a community. This creates a safe place to explore Christian identity.

In Cohort 2 we see the group function as a plausibility shelter; cohort 1 evidences groupfaith where members share that faith is not only plausible but may even be desirable. Key to this is the ability to share authentically. It is not a forced space where leaders are specifically asking for expressions of faith, but it bubbles up from shared experiences. In this way it is a space that is owned by members and is an example of liquid church:

Liquid church must seek a high level of authenticity in its simplicity and integrity in its allegiance to Christ. In being more true to the faith than we perceive solid church to be we will find the resources to connect with the spiritual aspiration and energies of contemporary culture. The belief that drives this move is simple: people want a real and profound experience of God.<sup>52</sup>

There is simplicity in the creation of a social media group, and integrity is granted partly through the transparency of interactions to all members. Integrity also demands clearer explanation of the purpose of the group too and leaders could play a more integral role in modelling the kind of authentic interactions that real faith demands. Groupfaith is about individual stories shared alongside the stories of others. As Root notes: “Youth

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<sup>51</sup> Shepherd, *Generation*, 133.

<sup>52</sup> Ward, *Liquid*, 76-77.

ministry, then, can be for identity when its focus is on the communion of persons sharing in the lives of one another through discourse.”<sup>53</sup>

The mention of communion here returns to a depth of *koinonia*, where there is meaning-making around group practices that centre on the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

## 5.5 Reflection In and On Action

Our mistake in youth ministry is *not* that we have been closed to experience; youth workers are great at having experiences. And it is not that we have failed to move into action; our calendars are generally filled with planned actions, and we’re often willing to do new and different things. The problem is that we have often failed to attend to deep, rigorous, reasoned reflection; we’ve been too anxious (rebellious) to slow down and think before doing.<sup>54</sup>

Wave youth leaders are good at reflecting in action and social media helps this process. Leaders use a social media group to encourage thinking before posting, and to share questions. In their youth ministry, they use social media to affirm young people and check in on those who have checked out. Thinking and doing become almost simultaneous in an always-on culture.

There is a need, though, to take time for extended reflection on action, reviewing and re-examining engagement in the feed, returning to ministry values and checking that they align with practice.

One of the defining characteristics of Gen-Z is that their world has sped up technologically and yet in other respects, life has slowed down.<sup>55</sup> This is even more the case in a pandemic world. Slowing down is a challenge for youth leaders eager to keep pace with change, but young people can lead the way and act as cultural interpreters:

In a culture in which young people feel suspicious of many traditional institutions, why should they embrace the Church if we have not taken time to attend to the complexity and hidden realities of their lives? This is especially pertinent during

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<sup>53</sup> Root, *End*, 183.

<sup>54</sup> Root and Dean, *Theological*, 45-46.

<sup>55</sup> Twenge, *iGen*, 17-48.

the ongoing global pandemic that will affect them in ways we do not yet fully understand.<sup>56</sup>

Far from being the antithesis of an early church model, social media has the potential to draw young people into a fellowship of believers through digital place-sharing. A closed-group offers a space where the identity of the group and the individuals within it are formed and reformed. This provides a new opportunity to explore Christian practices that nurture an everyday faith and invite young people to a personal discipleship rooted in following the way of Christ.

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<sup>56</sup> Mark Scanlan 'Ecclesiology and Youth Ministry', <https://www.youthpastortheologian.com/blog/ecclesiology-and-youth-ministry>, accessed: 11.01.22.

## 6. Conclusion

Incarnational youth ministry should engage in all the places where young people are, including online. The use of group messaging in youth ministry creates a space that can be shaped around values of ministry, though care should be taken to ensure that subtle changes to technology do not detract from those values.

At the very least, social media can be a valid space for nurturing community and capturing Christian practices, creating a culture where faith is plausible. Even the most trivial interactions on group messaging should not be underestimated, for they build a sense of togetherness in a culture where too much online activity is done in isolation.

At best, it provides a reflective and safe space, a sanctuary to join with others on a journey of discipleship. This being and doing-with enables a collaborative youth ministry that deepens and extends faith commitment. It may even be the case that this can help with the transition from youth to adult, shaping new forms of Christian community that benefit the whole church.

The role of youth leaders is crucial here. In the Wave group, youth leaders have used social media innovatively and strategically, acting on intuition with reflection in action. Their instinct has been to hold a safe space for young people, wary of interacting too much themselves to enable young people to own and shape the space. Leaders have understood that their interactions on Instagram do not feel natural; they are guests in an alien world. So, they have wisely responded by nurturing young leaders to minister on this platform.

Discipleship demands costly grace, and leaders have learned that accompanying young people on social media does come at a price.<sup>1</sup> The demands of an always-on space need appropriate boundaries in place to safeguard all members. Integrating these demands into a new media rule of life could offer two distinct benefits.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, it could define the values of the social media space, a habitus for the community of faith. This could “include specific hybrid spiritual disciplines and Christian practices

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<sup>1</sup> Root, *Bonhoeffer*, 182-183.

<sup>2</sup> Gorrell, *Always*, 152-156.

for regularly attending to God and abiding in God's love in person and online."<sup>3</sup> This might move the group from asking for prayer online to offering prayer in this space, and from suggesting daily Bible study apps to finding a time to commit to read together even while apart.

Secondly, young people could be invited into a process of reflecting on divine action within the group – both online and in-person. Angela Gorrell suggests a model based on the Examen, which offers a way of slowing down, making time for gratitude and review.<sup>4</sup> In this research, youth leaders welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their use of social media; this could become a regular pattern within ministry. Social media is a helpful tool here as it provides a diary of group activity witnessing to in-person events as well as purely online interactions. Some way of compiling and theming interactions which also draws attention to levels of engagement could be very useful here. Models and methods have been adopted in this study, parts of which could perhaps be blended with an Examen approach to aid reflection.

In all of this though, youth leaders must remember that they are disciples too, and offering more of their personal faith story, including the daily ups and downs, hopes and doubts, might just be crucial in the quest to build resilient disciples for the church now and into the future:

What is central... is to help budding youth workers be bearers of reality, to help them to be able to see, feel and attend to nothingness.

This means that we are the ones who must be able to speak of God's absence, hope with young people in darkness and search with young people through their deepest doubt.<sup>5</sup>

In a culture that values authenticity and integrity, youth leaders must not only teach that God is present but also acknowledge times when God feels absent. Social media has a role to play in capturing fleeting moments through the week, those questions of faith and doubt or the quick request for prayer, precisely because it is an always-on space: a place for the daily reality of faith to be expressed and encouraged.

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<sup>3</sup> Gorrell, *Always*, 153.

<sup>4</sup> Gorrell, *Always*, 155-157.

<sup>5</sup> Root and Dean, *Theological*, 135.

## **6.1 Reflections and Recommendations for Further Research**

One key factor that inhibited some youth groups from participating in this study, is the use of WhatsApp by youth ministers, despite the minimum age requirement of 16 years. There is an important issue to be addressed here. WhatsApp is the most common and therefore often the default group messaging platform, which makes it an intuitive choice for youth leaders. However, the mechanics of WhatsApp are such that its use requires the sharing of contact phone numbers with every participant, thereby running contrary to data protection rules and the youth work principle of confidentiality. Some get around this with parental consent, but I suspect other youth ministers are using this platform more covertly. Ethical considerations determined that I could not include groups using WhatsApp with under 16s as part of this research.

Working with the Wave has been a rich and rewarding experience. I am indebted to Ben for his hours of work collecting consent and collating posts from the social media feed, coding names and redacting sections of text. Much time was taken to ensure the ethical requirements were met, and social media feeds were presented in the form of image files. To some extent this made the process of analysis more challenging and laborious as NVivo can import a social media account (given the relevant login details) directly from the web. A direct import would no doubt enhance and quicken the process of analysis as well as easing and facilitating the use of more netnography tools. In retrospect, I would consider a modified ethics submission to consider if this method could be used safely.

This study only scratches the surface of the possibilities for research into social media youth ministry. The nature of group messaging needs further analysis as a distinct form of social media practice. Given the pace of innovation and change in the field, an extended study working with several youth groups as an action learning model could offer fascinating insights. The dominance of social media use in the lives of young people transcends many borders - urban / rural, cultural, gender, sexuality - and yet working across a diversity of groups could discover differences in interactions and their underpinning values.

The learning here draws from youth leaders, and a natural next step would be to enlist young people to directly reflect on their own use of group messaging services in a Christian context. This could include: where faith formation might be nurtured through a social media group and how it might benefit the transition from youth to adult church; managing several concurrent group messaging commitments; and the differences between values and practices on a variety of platforms.

In terms of hybrid ministry, the experimentation and creativity that social media offers could bring enormous benefits to in-person settings. There are many possibilities here, including that of cross-cultural ministry. This study uses a group formed through in-person groups then interacting online. The reverse situation could also be studied, where youth leaders and young people from a variety of settings connect first online and then gather occasionally in-person.

## **6.2 Hybrid Youth Ministry for the Future**

Finally, the idea of hybrid living has become hugely important following the impact of the global pandemic. Whilst youth leaders might be tempted to reject digital ministry after an exhausting period of innovation, many have not yet tried a hybrid approach. This form of youth ministry aims to be the best of both worlds. It offers the potential to reshape a youth ministry that blends apparently opposite dimensions, being both online and in-person, challenging the nature and scope of incarnational ministry.

Social media can be adopted as part of a strategy that shapes vision, as well as offering a responsive and adaptive tool for innovation in response to circumstances. The use of group messaging services enables a closed, private and safe space for young people, which can be linked to platforms that allow for open, public expressions of faith.

Where youth ministry often revolves around programmes of events, social media offers a way of planning these and reflecting on them together. This process is as much a part of ministry as the programmes themselves.

Whilst comments posted represent personal views, they also shape the feel and nature of group faith. Group messaging services can be adopted to enhance youth leaders' accompanying of young people through the week, building a community that cares

enough to share even the most mundane interactions, as well as life-defining moments. As young people transition to adulthood, social media offers a means to maintain connection as horizons expand and new faith opportunities emerge. This has the potential to profoundly reshape whole church ministry into the future.



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# Appendices

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# Appendix 1 – Ethics Approval



Simon Robert Hill  
simon.robert.hill@student.lst.ac.uk

Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2020

Dear Simon,

I am writing to advise you that your case was considered by the Research Ethics Committee held at London School of Theology via Zoom on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2020 and that the following decision was made:

**Your application has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) with the following comments.**

- In the process of approving the application, the REC considered the NSPCC guidance (link included below), of which the student may be aware, but is included for information only.  
<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/briefings/research-with-children-ethics-safety-avoiding-harm>

The Committee would like to thank you for submitting such a complete and thoughtful application and to express its appreciation for this.

May I take this opportunity to wish you every success with your studies.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'KD'.


Kate Douglas MBA  
**Academic Secretary, Director of Academic Support**

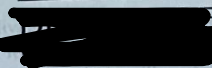




## Appendix 2- PCC Consent

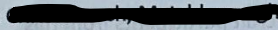


 THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND

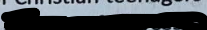
  
**Simon Hill**  
Youth Officer  
9<sup>th</sup> January 2021

### **The Digital Disciples Study: Using Social media groups as a discipleship tool with young people**

Dear  PCC,

I am writing to ask for your consideration and permission to invite members of 'the Wave' youth group from  to take part in a research study as part of my Masters course with the London School of Theology and Youthscape. In order to help you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully for discussion.

#### **What is this research about?**

This project involves a 6-week study with groups of Christian teenagers (aged 13-18 years) and their Youth Leaders associated with churches across the . It aims to discover whether social media can be a safe and effective place for young people to deepen their understanding and experience of the Christian faith using closed (private) social media groups of between 6 and 12 members.

My hope is that we might find ways to use social media which will be beneficial to young Christians, giving them new opportunities to engage with the questions that surround faith as part of daily life in a way that complements existing youth ministry. They will be in a group with their peers, accompanied by their Youth Leaders in a safe space to ask questions, share stories or offer prayer.

The Wave youth group is already operating in this way and I'm very grateful to Ben Arrowsmith for the numerous conversations we've already had about social media use within youth ministry. I'm hoping to be able to reflect on the good work happening through the Wave group whilst also starting similar groups from scratch in other parishes to see if it can work well in a variety of contexts.


#### **What does it mean for our church to be involved?**

Your Youth Leader (Ben Arrowsmith) uses Instagram to connect with members of the Wave youth group. To join the study, I would seek permission from members of the Instagram group and their parents to view the online interactions. I would not join the group, but Ben would copy the postings each week, anonymise them and upload them to a secure folder (using Dropbox) for me to review for the research. My Supervisor, Dr Lucie Shuker from Youthscape would also have access to the folder to review the research.

Ben and other Youth Leaders in the group will also be invited to complete a weekly journal reflection sheet (if they are willing) to review how the group is going and identify any changes that might need to be made. These journal sheets will be also be uploaded to the secure folder.

#### **What happens to the research information?**

All information and data obtained from the social media group will be treated as confidential and anonymised in the final written report. When writing the final research project, real names, church





names and locations will be changed or omitted from the dissertation, and any transcripts of the social media feed will be kept securely in a password protected folder. The research project and any research data will only be read by myself and the examiners, and any data will be securely destroyed once the project has been marked and approved by the Exam Board.

### How do we participate?

The PCC will need to minute approval of participation in this study and confirm this to me by filling in and returning the slip at the bottom of this letter. Please note the following:

- All the data generated on the social media feed for this project is owned by the PCC and subject to the Privacy Notice of the Parish. The PCC will need to ensure that the collection of social media data is detailed in the Privacy Notice.
- As the Instagram group is already running, the study will recruit participants from this existing group. Extra consent from young people and their parents is required to share the social media feed with myself (the researcher). I will ensure all consent is completed, and participants will be fully informed that they are able to remove themselves from the study at any point, should they wish.
- As a private social media group, only those invited to participate will be allowed – Ben will control access to the group.
- Ben as Youth Leader will act as the data controller, passing on the social media feeds with anonymised names to the researcher via a secure Dropbox folder. This data will only be accessed by the researcher and names will be changed or omitted for the written thesis. Other parties who may see some of the anonymised data are the study Supervisors, internal and external examiners.
- Notes made on interactions by youth leaders in their weekly reflection logs will be used solely for the purposes of the research, again with names changed for any reference in the research writing. These logs will be stored securely, seen only by the researcher and only kept for the lifetime of the research project.
- The Safeguarding policy applies to this social media group just as much as to any other aspect of the ministry programme including the safe recruitment of leaders. All participants in the group are made aware that any information relating to potential harm to a young person must be referred to the Parish Safeguarding Officer.

I am very happy to answer any questions or come and discuss the research at a PCC meeting if that is helpful. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Simon Hill

Date of PCC meeting discussion: 19-01-21

I can confirm that the PCC has documented approval of their participation in this study.

<sup>DCC</sup>  
Name (PCC Secretary)

Date

Signature

JUDITH GARFIELD

21-01-21

Judith Garfield

## Appendix 3 – Cohort 1 Consent (Messenger)

### **The Digital Disciples Study: Parent/Guardian Information Sheet**

#### **What is this research about?**

This project involves a study with up to six groups of Christian teenagers (aged 13-18 years) and their Youth Leaders associated with churches across the [REDACTED]. It aims to discover whether social media can be a safe place for young people to deepen their understanding and experience of the Christian faith using closed (private) social media groups of between 6 and 12 members.

My hope is that we might find ways to use social media which will be beneficial to young Christians, giving them new opportunities to engage with the questions that surround faith as part of daily life in a way that complements existing youth ministry.

#### **What does it mean for me to be involved?**

You have already participated in Messenger groups chats as part of the Wave youth group in the past. As the researcher, I would be given copies of interactions from the Messenger group chats, by Ben Arrowsmith, to reflect on common themes and how discipleship among young people works in this forum. The PCC is also aware that this study is taking place.

#### **What happens to the research information?**

All information and data obtained from the social media group will be treated as confidential and anonymised in the final written report. When writing the final research project, real names, church names and locations will be changed or omitted from the dissertation, and any transcripts of the social media feed will be kept securely in a password protected folder. The research project and any research data will only be read by me and the examiners, and any data will be securely destroyed once the project has been marked and approved by the Exam Board.

#### **How do I find out more or take part?**

If you are happy to take part in the research study, then please complete and return the consent form. Please take time to review all the information and decide whether you wish to take part and thank you for your time and consideration. You have the right to withdraw your consent up until two weeks after the study of the group ends, and before the data is analysed.

If you require further information or have any questions, comments or complaints about the research please contact myself on the details below or my first supervisor: [REDACTED]



## The Digital Disciples Study: Participant Consent Form

**Name of Researcher:** Simon Hill

Participant identification code:

**Name of Supervisor:** Dr Lucie Shuker / Dr Chloe Lynch

**Please read and sign:**

Name of person participating in the study: \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that the Messenger group is part of a research study. I have read the information sheet on the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up until two weeks after the research period ends, and before the data is analysed, without giving a reason.

I agree to taking part in the study.

Participant's Name

Date

Signature

---

Researcher

Date

Signature

---

*1 copy for parent/guardian; 1 copy for researcher*

## Appendix 4 – Cohort 2 Consent (Instagram)

### **The Digital Disciples Study: Parent/Guardian Information Sheet**

#### **What is this research about?**

This project involves a study with up to six groups of Christian teenagers (aged 13-18 years) and their Youth Leaders associated with churches across the [REDACTED]. It aims to discover whether social media can be a safe place for young people to deepen their understanding and experience of the Christian faith using closed (private) social media groups of between 6 and 12 members.

My hope is that we might find ways to use social media which will be beneficial to young Christians, giving them new opportunities to engage with the questions that surround faith as part of daily life in a way that complements existing youth ministry. They will be in a group with their peers, accompanied by their Youth Leaders in a safe space to ask questions, share stories or offer prayer.

#### **What does it mean for my child to be involved?**

Your child is already part of the Wave Instagram group chats. They will be asked to sign their own consent form to participate in the research study if they would like to.

This group is also authorised by and under the leadership of the PCC, as with all other aspects of ministry in the life of the church, and they are aware of this research study. As the researcher, I will be given copies of all the interactions from the Wave conversations, to reflect on common themes and how discipleship among young people works in this forum.

The Youth Leader, Ben, may also complete a weekly journal reflection sheet to review how the group is going and identify any changes that might need to be made. These journal sheets would be also sent to the researcher.

#### **What happens to the research information?**

All information and data obtained from the social media group will be treated as confidential and anonymised in the final written report. This means that all young people in the group will be able to share openly with a reasonable expectation that the information will be respected by all participants and kept within the group. The exception to this would be in the event of any information arising relating to potential harm to a young person either in or out of the group. This would be alerted by the Youth Leader to the Parish Safeguarding Officer in line with the Parish Safeguarding Policy.

When writing the final research project, real names, church names and locations will be changed or omitted from the dissertation, and any transcripts of the social media feed will be kept securely in a password protected folder. The research project and any research data will only be read by me and the examiners, and any data will be securely destroyed once the project has been marked and approved by the Exam Board.

#### **How do I find out more or take part?**

If you are happy for your child to take part in the research study, then please complete and return the consent form. Only one parent is needed to sign the consent form, but please make sure that both parents have seen the information before completion. Please take time to review all the information and decide whether you wish to take part and thank you for your time and consideration. You have

the right to withdraw your consent up until two weeks after the study of the group ends, and before the data is analysed.

If you require further information or have any questions, comments or complaints about the research please contact myself on the details below or my first supervisor: [REDACTED]

## The Digital Disciples Study: Parental Consent Form

**Name of Researcher:** Simon Hill

Participant identification code:

**Name of Supervisor:** Dr Lucie Shuker / Dr Chloe Lynch

**Please read and sign:**

Name of Child participating in the study: \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that the Wave Instagram group is part of a research study. I have read the information sheet on the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my child at any time up until two weeks after the study of the group ends, and before the data is analysed, without giving a reason.

I agree to the person named above taking part in the study.

Parent/Guardian Name

Date

Signature

---

Researcher

Date

Signature

---

*1 copy for parent/guardian; 1 copy for researcher*

## Appendix 5 – Transcript of Focus Group with The Wave Leaders

**26<sup>th</sup> October 2021**

Present: Simon Hill, Ben Arrowsmith, Beth P, Gemma, Ant

**Simon: So could you tell me the story of why you started this social media group back in 2016?**

Ben: There was two reasons really. First one, you'd see the young people on a Friday and a Sunday then so much would happen between a and b, during the week, that it became evident that you only ever spend a day dealing with the last week rather than looking forward to the next week, if that makes sense. It's a huge gap and social media and the way young people work now is so much happens online. Back in the day, you'd see your friends at school, go home and then not see them again until the next day. Now they're talking constantly and they're looking for solutions and looking for advice, help and support which is ultimately what led us to thinking that there's got to be some way we can plug that gap.

The other thing we started seeing was that as young people started to get involved in different parts of the youth club, like wanting to be young leaders or helping with the youth service. Then, they would message us, and then you were left with the dilemma that we can't really reply, but we don't want to ignore; so what do we do? so it became quite clear that there's something that needs to happen. So how do we create the space and make it comfortable for us and how do we set it out in a way that feels safe.

We had a youth alpha; this was coming off the back of a youth alpha. I think and..

Beth: yeah I think it was

Ben: yeah and it was like we've got these young people who had to

Beth: we wanted to help keep them growing really, didn't we, and supporting them

Ben: but in a safe way

Beth: yeah

Ben: as we go along the journey, you have to be quite clear how you contain it and how you keep it safe.

**Simon: So was it your idea specifically Ben, or leaders or..?**

Ben: er, I think it came from the young - I'd love to take credit for it – but I think it came from the young people. I think it was, d'you the youth alpha weekend where you think about what's next. We went away for the weekend, and you could see that progression across the weekend, by just being with them. Every time you go away,

Beth: you get to know them better

Ben: You want to keep that momentum going, so it became quite clear from that – we could do something here. The bits combined, that's what led, and I think it was a team meeting where we discussed it and

Beth: yeah I think we thought it was the easiest thing to do.

Ben: yeah

Beth: so we could all be in it, all monitoring it. Like, they could message us whenever they want so it was then just easier.

Ben: and I think because, we were all of a similar age where it wasn't a taboo think to have a group chat, it was a normal part of our experience, if you like. So it was easy to translate that over. Like, does that make sense? It wasn't like.. we're not over there and have never used Facebook, so

**Simon: yeah so you were already connected on Facebook as friends anyway?**

Ben: Yeah we were in group chats

Simon: So why did you use Messenger, I mean if you can remember back five years!

Beth: that was the most popular thing at the time, I think it was

Ben: I think that's what people were using

Beth: That's what people used at that point, I think

Ben: yeah.

Beth and then, er,

**Simon: So, who set it up then? Was that you Ben?**

Ben: yes

**Simon: Ok, and how did you recruit young people? Was it just those from the youth alpha when you started?**

Ben: So, I think we had a youth alpha group one when we first started. That was great for a month or so, and then it became... there was something there, but you've got some people that don't carry on with that journey and some people really extend that journey. And then it was around the time that we wanted to set up a youth service. It became, it was sandwiched between the youth alpha and the youth service. So then, you want young people to be involved in setting up the youth service and it could also be a tool for that. I think so, anyway. We had conversations about yeah we've got this for the youth service and we've got these times to get here for and, does that sound right?

Beth: yeah that sounds about right to me.

Ben: so then the conversation was how do we do it safely? It took a lot of hours and the young people had to sign, the parents had to sign the contract, the young people had to sign like a code of conduct contract.

Beth: and we had to sign one.

Ben: I think I gave you a copy of them

Simon: yes, you did.

Ben: which have probably dated horribly, but we put together this huge thing which said why we did it and explored what.. well like we're doing now really, what's out there, because there wasn't a lot of information out there. So we were like, how do we do this thing?

Beth: it was to safeguard us all really. That was the main point of doing the contracts.

**Simon: and did the membership change much? From what I'm seeing it seems to be the same people, but it looks like a couple of people joined later on?**

Ben: yeah, so there was definitely a core of 5-8 young people that we solidly had growing, all the way through. Then, as the group got older..

Beth: like their siblings got older, and friends came

Ben: and their partners, boyfriend and partners joined.

Simon: So did the group membership mirror another group that met in real life? Or not really? Was it

Ben: Yeah, well it certainly reflected who we had on a Friday, who was part of the leaders

Simon: the young leaders?

Ben: Yes I think so. Primarily them, which wasn't as such a set thing then. But it was certainly those who were involved in what we were doing. We were quite reluctant to open it too much, to not change the dynamics in the group – does that make sense? Cause I think you had to be year 9

Beth: yeah it was, cause we didn't open it up to year 7s and year 8s

Simon: it's 13, isn't it anyway for the platform?

Ben: yeah so then we were conscious of having a new group that reached that age. So then, we wondered what do we do for the next phase? but I think protecting the identity of that original group was important. Probably, on reflection, we maybe let in one or two quite easily off the back of them being involved in something, which then shifted for a while what we did, then it reverted back to what it was,. You probably might not see that because I couldn't get hold of all the permissions.

Simon: So, Ben's filtered the feed for me, so I don't know what he's left out, obviously.

So, how did the leaders get involved? Was it because you were part of this youth alpha thing? Or you were all part of the Friday night group?

Ben: (to Beth) You would have been part of the team at that point

Beth: Yeah, Gemma was

Gemma: Yeah I was part of the team at that point

Beth: My sister was actually one of the youth leaders before and then she left, and there was no female leaders, so I was like, well I'll do it! So I was a member of the group and then I got added that way cause I was part of the youth alpha and we already knew the youth so

Ben: When yourself and Ant joined, and Gem joined a bit later, it was the same time when Phil (former youth leader) moved on and that was when I took over. It's been a consistent team since then, which is quite nice to have been part of that group, and gone through it together. We felt we needed to have more leaders in the chat at the time to make sure we're not the only one point of contact.

And then, there was a lot about how do we know when to speak and when not to speak, do you know what I mean? That was the learning for us.

Beth: Cause sometimes before messaging in the actual group chat, we'd maybe message another leader like, 'oh, do you think I should say something'. Just to like, cause like, you didn't know whether you'd be overstepping sometimes, or you just want to let the conversation flow and see what other people say, so yeah.

Ben: We also set up a leaders chat group at the same time.

Beth: Yeah, we're still using it to this day really.

Ben: Yeah, that's still on Messenger, cause..

Beth: we're all old people (laughs)

Simon: If it ain't broke..!

**Ok I wondered if I could get you to think about... generally what it has been like for you. And we can jot down the positive and negatives from your point of view.**

What have been the real positives and have there been some downsides?

Gemma: how about, what I would describe it as Information flow. We needed to find whether the kids like something or get feedback.

Beth: So, like instant feedback.

Ben: yeah, put information flow. It's nice seeing the group develop, like in something that's really visual, does that make sense?

Gemma: like at the time?

Ben: yeah, you can see them. Maybe a bit like hindsight. You can have a really good night on Friday and then seeing their messages buzzing between each other saying this was great, this was great. That's like, really encouraging and like it's like inter-peer discipleship.

Beth: it's a good way of seeing some that we haven't seen for a while as well and catching up.

Simon: and with some of these things, it might capture things that might not be said. That might be hard to come up to you and say?

Ben: Yeah, positive feedback. You capture the moments from the week as well. Prayer requests or, this has gone really well. Sometimes on Friday, you don't really get to hear about the amazing stuff that's happened in the week, you're just confronted with what's gone wrong. Especially, like depending on what they've faced, but you're more likely to capture those great moments...

Beth: yeah, cause people have been like, or will put on every so often, can you pray for this? this week, or this today cause I've got an exam today can you pray

Ben: or just this was really great, look at where I am, this is where I was last week, which is very different. I do think also, post-covid, sometimes with the young people, they're not really sharing the positive, they're just sharing what's difficult. If they're happy they don't want to talk to you, not so bluntly. I mean you'll have pleasantries, but they don't naturally, well you don't really want them to, I mean, you don't want them to come and spend time with you, when you're here (in the room), you want them to spend time with each other. if they don't, from what I experience, they'll seek us out if they've had negatives, or it's difficult because something's going on. So in the (social media) group you're more likely to have the positives, which I think is important for each other as well, not just us.



Discipleship. That's a bit generic isn't it. But in terms of like sharing a bible verse, sharing a worship song. New worship songs are great to catch.

Beth: cause sometimes we'd send links through wouldn't we, like this is a new song that I've listened to, you guys might enjoy it. Stuff like that. And they've done the same to us at times. So its been quite good.

Ben: you can share moments, can't you. So you hear a new rend collective song, you're more like to, in that moment think oh I'll quickly share it with the group. Where, as the week goes by you might not remember on Friday.

Beth: there's positives that they can contact us. We're available, like all the time pretty much to them, aren't we.

Ben: until the evening! Just put that on record! Pick a time

Beth: yeah that might be a slight negative. At night-time, when they're up at like, 3 o'clock in the morning, when we're all asleep in bed!

**Simon: did that happen sometimes, did you get late-night messages**

Ben: yeah, you'd get it. Sometimes, it's just between themselves, but you'd get the alerts on your phone.

Beth: which I was so grateful that 'do not disturb' exists. (laughs)

Ben: I think that one of our learnings was that, what time do we say, we're not going to reply from? And how do we make sure we hold that boundary? Because it can be very easy to send another message. Like Gemma does at the moment, she'll pick two young people a week to check on them.

Gemma: I'm learning, I don't understand Instagram at all!

Ben: you're doing very well.

Beth: cause to be fair the messaging is quite similar to Facebook, isn't it?

Gemma: oh yeah.

Ben: yeah but you'll get a reply late and it's like, do I reply, so we've got 11pm as our absolute cut off.

**Simon: do you communicate that to the young people aswell? So if you post after 11**

Beth: they might not always get a reply, cause they know a lot of us work or whatever so we'll have work the next day. Some of us do work during the holidays, and obviously we need sleep and stuff.

Ben: it's healthy to have a line otherwise you just keep going.

Gemma: it's tough

Beth: and you'll get burnt out and it's not great.

Gemma: negatives, safeguarding? Cause I remember before, when it was just Facebook, when I wasn't on insta yet, and like Jack messaged me – it wasn't anything like serious, but Ben was just like, don't respond to it, because it's on your personal Facebook account. So I waited till I saw him on Friday, and I was like sorry, or got you to respond (Ben) I can't remember.

Beth: I suppose Safeguarding could go on both in there

Gemma: yeah

Ben: We did have, one of our learnings very early on in the Facebook group you had to accept them as friends to be in the chat, but then,

Beth: I think Facebook changed that a few years after though didn't they.

Ben: Yes. So there's a definite drop off from where we've had to. Cause we've had some we've known for years and we know their families a little bit, and then we've gone- actually, it's different, we need a new group of 10-15 to really get

Beth: cause when they're friends on Facebook, we had to be careful with what we've shared ourselves, stuff we like, and make sure it's not inappropriate things.

Ben: that was part of the policy. So, if you do accept them, you're more muddled. As we've gone on, we wouldn't.. as we've got bigger and as our understanding of Facebook and Instagram, it's changed, actually. And I don't think we'd have them as friends anymore, it wouldn't make sense. Your starting point is very different to back then.

Ben: Over-familiarity is always a danger in the group chat. So, when I read back, in the early days, I look back and read them and I was like, I was a bit too bantery with some of them. As I've got a bit older and wiser... I wouldn't be as, erm, that's something that we've had to meet as a team and start thinking about. How do we understand those boundaries and that was quite

Beth: I think a lot of that was cause a lot of the early group were people who had grown up in the church so we knew them really well, and we knew their families really well. SO, there's a lot that we get now – they haven't grown up in the church, so it's slightly different now.

Ben: yeah. And it's a bigger audience isn't it. You've got more young people, you interact with more young people. But I think that we've generally just upped our game. I think you get better at something and when you start to look back and, it's not horror, I wouldn't look back with horror (laughs) I never said I've done anything too bad, but you look back and think, I was a bit close, the banter was a bit much back then.

**Simon: So is there something there about, because you've got this as a record, does that help you?**

Ben: it certainly, looking back, really helps to understand the journey. You can see it really clearly.

Simon: do you do that looking back bit deliberately, or have you done it just because I asked you for the feed or is it something you've done as you've gone along with it?

Ben: We've looked back a few times at certain parts. So, I remember one incident, where a young person's boyfriend got upset about something – he wasn't a Christian, but he was in the group and when he left, do you remember?

Beth: oh yeah

Gemma: yeah

Ben: when he left, we looked back at before and did we get everything right there and that's when we saw the times when we stopped replying and what happens when you opened the chat and they can see that you've opened it? There's certain moments when you look back and go, you have to

look back and you kind of reflect on is this where, have we gone.. not too far but given them too much license there? And how do we hold that boundary?

But you can also look back if you're looking for something.

Maybe that's something we could do more often, look back and see how have we done there

Beth: to keep reflecting, yeah.

Ben: Again, I think the leaders' chat is really helpful, to always call stuff out between us in a non-judgemental, non-having a go way. So one of the things, is where James was – do you remember the basketball game?

Beth: yeah we brought that up the other day actually. It's not on there anymore!

Ben: yeah, it was an absolute nightmare! And now if they go on it, obviously it doesn't matter if they do it, cause you're not trying to achieve a momentum or, you know they can do whatever they like now. So every now and then, they'll all start playing basketball again just to wind me up! (laughs) cause that was always one of my things – no games, because it just became a distraction. And then, every now and then you get a leader put it on and you'd think (shrugs). But then you'd go to leaders chat and say, I'm trying to keep this off here...

Simon: so you could do that in the leaders space?

Ben: yeah. What else have we got negative and positive.

Simon: well, that's ok for now, so let's move on. **What I'm interested in really is hybrid youth ministry. I'm interested in what is best done in social media, whether it is better in the Friday group or whether it happens in both. What can't you do in social media, as well as what you can? We can start with some of the posts and the types – and then think whether or not it has an impact on real space.**

Beth: prayer requests, worship recommendations.

Ben: worship is definitely in person, I've not seen much effective online. The one I did see that was good was that blessing song.

Ben: also photos.

Beth: Catch ups would be in both.

Ben: stuff that would be in-between the weeks – catching the moment. Instant, knowing someone is there. Sometimes all it is, is you put 'praying' and like it. The hope is that they do go away and pray but you don't know that.

Beth: instant response, maybe.

Ben: being there. Being available and connected.

Beth: Teaching them games,

Gemma: practical games in the room.

Gemma: painting pictures.

Beth: Craft activities.

Ben: it's hard to put down into words isn't it?

Simon: what are you thinking of?

Ben: like, I did have it, but I forgot! (pause)

Peer discipleship is one, I think they do it a lot more effective on social media. that supporting each other. Peer-to-peer support. Put discipleship between – but in essence there's so much you miss by not being connected, that's the major. I do think we should put more this side (social media) because I think the bit you do miss in real life is everything's really focused in zoom calls or doing services that way, it's a lot more: this is what we do, this is what we do, but there's a lot more tiny interactions which you get face-to-face which help to create a lot more safer environment. I think safety is a big one that youth group creates that goes into social media. It's hard to do it the other way round. Trying to create safety in a social media group without having the face-to-face stuff first is... well it's not impossible but hard to do really well.

Simon: so are you saying that it works if you've got the youth group and then the social media group is a small part of it.

Ben: yeah it sort of wraps around.

Beth: Information – messaging. A good positive thing then is everyone knows straight away. You don't have to make, if things do change you can be like, go with the flow, type thing.

Ben: mentoring is also one that's both. I think there's a new way of doing it on social media – one-to-one. Using the youth account rather than individuals. Checking it all through.. though you can't quite go for coffee though! So, there's a balance.

Ben: Bible in the day – a verse a day, kind of. Sharing daily content. Sharing memories as well. Social media, are you thinking just specifically in chat or like social media in general? Cause if you've got, like, what you're posting.

Simon: well, I think it could be general as well.

Beth: Obviously we have catch-ups but I mean, they like just having a chill with us at times and stuff. Obviously, you can't really chill... like on Friday it was a really nice chilled evening. You can't really do that on social media.

Gemma: or like sometimes they'll just come up to you and be like I just want a hug.

Simon: so physical contact.

Ben: non-focused content, which is what you want on social media really. It's a lot easier cause you don't like to have to say we're doing this now. It's a lot easier to get those tiny, little moments in-between. It's a lot more casual, a lot more.. like there's always a point to posting something. Like some of the funniest moments on trips happen when you're just sitting there, and something will happen.

Simon: so those unplanned moments.

Ben: yeah, just like whenever someone posts something on the group chat or on social media or a zoom session there's always like, not an agenda, but a reason or a purpose, rather than just being together. Natural; even a conversation about how someone's day was starts with 'how was your

day?' whereas like at youth, like looking at the light (flickering) you can just share a moment which builds a relationship.

Simon: so, in the open youth group, you have a framed space within which all sorts of things they can make happen?

Ben: There's a natural element. It's a lot more natural in real life. The dream is to try and make it as natural as you can.

Beth: Natural moments then?

Ben: yeah.

**Simon: was there a difference between the platforms on social media. moving from Messenger to Instagram? Has that changed the nature of the group?**

Ben: it's a less fluent, active group on Insta but I think that maybe reflects the journey of the young people rather than the format.

Gemma: When did we move over?

Ben: When we had the main group, the ones that are year 13 now. When they hit a certain age, it became clear, ok we need to start .. as the older ones are leaving, these are our next ones, in about year 10/11. So we set up a Facebook group thinking lets go again, and it was really clear they weren't using it (Facebook).

Beth: yeah they don't really use Facebook.

Ben: but I just don't think they're as socially confident as a group. Like, if you get a good response.. it's more likely if one of them posts in it to have a really good conversation than if we post looking for a response.

Beth: yeah

Ben: it's like, if it's what do you think of this or this? you've got a few responses and it's like oh fantastic, someone replied but. Whereas if you message that group for one-to-one mentoring side, you get quick replies, cause they are most so one in that group it's quite difficult. But then at times it's been fantastic, so it's been different.

Simon: but it's the groups that have been different, nothing to do with the platform?

Ben: yeah. And I think there are a lot of options now, where there was just Facebook. Now, I think their most preferred way of talking is snapchat and that's a huge... it's difficult to find ways to use that.

Beth: yeah to monitor it and what-not

Gemma: cause it's gone

Ben: I mean you can save it, but there's an uncomfortableness that goes with that

Gemma: and its based on flows

Ben: yeah, but they message and voice-record. The more you look at it, probably voice recording and voice-notes is the next stage of how they will interact. So, Instagram is almost like the third one they use after TikTok and Snapchat. But TikTok and Snapchat are not appropriate or plausible settings for

group conversations so you're already fighting a difficult battle, I think. But I think it's more group dynamics than platforms that makes a difference.

**Simon: what about the way the young people have engaged in the platform. Offering model for social media user interactions. First of all, where would you put yourself on the model and other leaders?**

**Then, thinking about the young people and where they go?**

Ben: I can tell you where Ant goes (laughs)

Beth: as leaders or generally

Simon: in this group

Ben: for me personally, on social media on Instagram or Facebook I'm fairly passive but on this group I'd say I'm here (broadcast). Like, I'm the one who gives out a lot of information, but maybe that's my role more than my character.

Gemma: I don't have any social media personally.

Ben: You've got Instagram though

Gemma: Yeah, but I never use it, only for this. I'm learning. I'd say I just talk to the kids. I sort of respond to them and talk to them (reactive).

Beth: I'm a bit passive reactive. I sometimes read it and let other people reply, but sometimes I'll reply if I'm like oh everyone's probably working so I'll reply but if they need to add something else, I'm there in case they need to ask something else straight away. I'm there for them, and you know you can have that conversation straight away rather than them having to wait for you to message back and then you having to wait for them to message back, I just think it's easier. Like sometimes it's easier to reply straight away.

Ben: so, do I need to think about where in this (quarter of model) that I am?

Simon: yes if you want to.

Ben: it's not more looking for stuff back it's posting information

Gemma: yeah but you also respond to them

Ben: if I have to (laughs). But Ant's more.. (interactive)

Gemma: Ant's just a ball of energy.

Ben: Well I think you're more passive (to Gemma) but you won't miss anything

Beth: yeah

Ben: so like, on the fence here, but you can say where you think you are..

*[Ant arrives and explanation of the group model.]*

Ant: so yeah I guess I broadcast, I don't do as much two-way.

Simon: are there other leaders that you would place?

Ben: there's Tyrone. Over times, so Eden last year was on an internship role – so she'd have been very interactive.

Also, with insta, chat if you look back it's all Eden. She does a lot with the young leaders aswell.

Beth: Cause they responded more, and she has a lot of free time and they responded more to her cause she's a closer age to them.

Ant: You can use Eden as an example of what you could do if you had a parttime youth worker here, investing their time, energy and ideas week in week out. Ben's great when he's not at school working. But you're too busy otherwise mate.

Simon: where do you wanna put Tyrone?

Ben: he's in now and again. Really sporadic.

**Simon: What about the young people? Are there any that you think of that you could put instantly in one of those categories?**

Ben: I found that having re-read the conversations, there were a few that really stood out to me. So, in group chat, Eden and Beth P were two that did a lot

Beth: yeah they were very interactive. Posting quite a bit.

Ben: they were the real driving forces.

*[placing young people]*

Ben: It's a lot easier to do the Wave chat than the insta chat

Ant: Definitely. Messenger was, I mean that group. I think it was more the people than the platform. Even so, I don't find insta chat as user friendly as messenger. That's just a personal thing.

**Simon: are there any young people that have surprised you in this? are there any that present differently on the Friday night to social media?**

Ant: I think Jack's a bit more interactive on a Friday isn't he, but I think that's because Jack feels safer in the real setting not in a remote setting. And it's taken Jack two or three years before he's felt that safe here, so I think he's warmed up over the years he's come and felt that acceptance for who he is. And I still think that online, he probably finds online communication with anybody pretty weird and difficult place to be. Is that fair?

Ben: yeah. I think if you come off the back of Soul Survivor or submerge or whatever it is – an event, then they're very communicative and very interactive with each other because they feel safe around each other's company.

I think (it's different) when you go through, especially during lockdown, when you don't know where you stand.

Where with the Facebook group, it just was complete flow from the old youth group here and online, it was a complete flow of trust.

Ant: Yeah if you bring them into this room today, and they're all at University or elsewhere. And if you bring them into this room today it'd be like they met last Friday. They would buzz off each other even now, and some of them haven't seen each other for ages. When they come back at Christmas they meet up now and again and they're a proper, solid friend group that invested a lot of time in each other's lives over the years.

Ben: that's a result of, they weren't friends before youth group.

Ant: well this is where they've met, isn't it.

Ben: yeah. But some of them in the Instagram group were friends before they came to youth.

Simon: ok so this has been their bond in a way, where with the Instagram group they knew each other already.

**Simon: You've mentioned the pandemic. What impact did that have on both groups? How has it affected engagement in social media? as face-to-face groups shut down did this begin to shut down?**

Beth: Not to start with.

Ben: so, we set up something called 'source' groups. One thing we were really conscious of, is we've got a blueprint and everything we want to do sits within that blueprint but expanded so that there's a comfortableness with that. So I didn't want to try and do something all singing, all dancing that we've never done before and then, to not feel safe. So I wasn't going to start a tiktok, do you know what I mean? Cause we haven't looked at how that's safe, whether we're comfortable with it, the pros and cons of that. So everything we did was an expansion of what we've already done.

So what that meant is we could start 'source' groups which were – we made a list of all the young people that we knew had regularly been coming on a Friday, like a week before we all knew we were going to have to close. And it was how do we create groups that can support them throughout the week and then have, like in a youth alpha group you've got spotters in there, so the wave account was in there, which we had access to. Then we had members from the Wave Facebook group being invited to be leaders, and then spotters from the Insta group. so then we had people that didn't have previous interaction with insta. So then, these two groups became very much support networks for the work that they were doing in the source groups. We thought that young people were better off talking to other young adults rather than us old fogies! And we would be there, but not as active and we'd host zooms and we'd host other stuff.

Simon: Did the source groups meet on zoom?

Ben: so, the source groups were group chats that they interact in. We used the other existing groups to be a place of checking in with the leaders of the groups they were in. We had Beth and Eden had a group, Adam and someone else had a group. We'd oversee those groups. In that you'd have, so Eden and Beth's group might have Sian and Julia then a whole load of younger ones that we knew we had on Friday that we were trying to create.

Ant: the other thing is, one of the biggest points of 'source' groups I felt, was that you were breaking down what was a large group of people into smaller groups so that everybody then gets a voice. Because some of these more passive people wouldn't speak in a massive, everybody in, meeting – they just wouldn't ever speak.

Also within the source groups, you've got the relatability between them and the young leaders and Eden and Adam and Amy and those guys. I think there's a sense of relatability. They're the kids that had grown up, they're a few years older than them and there's that relatability so they're more likely to come out of their shells a little bit. And there's a little bit of a lighter touch and they don't feel so intimidated online talking to adults is like, proper fully grown adults, is a little bit weird. So I think source groups, because we made it more relatable in that way and broke it down in smaller numbers, we got a good initial feed into it. It was a way of keeping in touch with them when lockdown happened.



Ben: the impact it had on these two groups was, we then had a platform to say well as you're giving out it's important to check on your welfare too. So the things we did in the source groups was like scaling how are you out of 10, or how's your week been. This was then a bit more advanced in the established groups, with how are you doing guys? Are you worrying about anything? How are you getting on with your groups? And getting an opportunity to talk more about, an excuse to do two-way conversations. And it felt ok to say 'anna I haven't heard from you in a few days, are you alright?' so it almost became alright to call out a passive member, not in a 'why aren't you replying?' but in an 'are you ok?' way, for wellbeing and safety. People know how much this is such a prevalent part of lockdown.

Ant: I think that through the pandemic, people became a lot more honest about where they were struggling with their mental health as well, and the fact that they'd been stuck in the house all day. And they might not have called it mental health, put an umbrella over it and called it that, but they were quite happy to talk about how difficult they were finding it – not being able to go out and see their mates and all this kind of stuff. And the source groups gave people a platform to share that with other people: feeling safe and somewhere to talk about it without really any judgement being cast upon them for feeling like that. The feeling that they were all struggling as a group in the pandemic lockdowns together and there was a place for them to come and express that struggle was a real help for them – initially, certainly.

Ben: we would give them daily challenges to do. So, we'd set the content for the young leaders to go and support the groups. But, like everything... they were actually pretty sustained for a long time... there were 3 groups and each had their own different depth... group 2 was all about the banter and the fun, and we thought about that with who we put in the groups. Group 3 was a bit more emotional, and group 1 was a more stable group. the support was quite sustained until the point when they (government) said, well when we started thinking about reopening for outdoor youth sessions. Because of the stop and start, everything got difficult.

Everything dipped,

Beth: yeah I mean we did quizzes, among us games nights – just something to do for them.

Ant: the other thing is that eventually that kind of.. it doesn't matter how good you are and what you're offering is, it just gets tired by the nature of the fact that you can't escape the reality – you're sat in on a Friday night on an online chat. And then you're mum and dad are in and trying to do their things for the wider house and family, so they decide, right tonight we're gonna have a Spanish night and cook Spanish food and play Spanish games and as family together, and you find that other people are trying to do other things to help that kind of boredom as well. So there was a sense in which people pick and choose. So some people would come in and chat every single week and other people were sporadic. But that's ok.

Ben: the uncertainty was the hardest part because we just did not know how long it was going to go on for. I think if we'd known that ok, we've got a year of online delivery, you could plan it.

Ant: The longer it went on, the more tired everybody was. It becomes a hard place to be for everybody's morale.

Ben: on insta we definitely had the most interaction. A big part of that, but then once we half set up and then got stopped- the Christmas lockdown. That became a lot harder to engage.

Ant: because we haven't got a plan... the nature of it... people stopped getting in a habit. When you get out of those habits, and people got nervous about coming out afterwards. Over the pandemic,

people got out of the habit of meeting, and then online was not quite the same, so with online meetings – how many times did we ever have cameras on? Not many. Just get tired of it.

Different sense of arriving late online and in the group.

**Simon: What have you learned about the impact of having both groups together – social media and in real life?**

Ant: They feed each other. we've talked about this as a group. if you're doing something great on a Friday, and you can take some photos, and share those images online with the group. then, you're reminding them of how great Friday was. If you've got something to promote for the next Friday, you can spin it round the group and the conversations almost ongoing through the week then. And there's a buzz about it, there's an energy about it, there's an interest about it and the young people are like, you know what this is fantastic. And your conversation on a Friday, if you've had conversations online in the chat through the week, it isn't about what you talked about last Friday, you've had this continual conversation. You can pick up on a message they sent on a Tuesday, or a song that somebody shared. It makes it a lot easier to have that conversation with young people, instead of the stop-start of seeing them only once a week.

**Simon: Anything else about what you have learned from doing this?**

Ben: there's not a proven method. Moving from one to the other hasn't had the same..

Beth: you have to adapt to loads of different things. But overall, you can see we have a lot more positives than we do negatives. So it does help, and aid what we do.

Ben: and even where we have, we've obviously got really high expectations about what we want the group to be. Even though the Instagram group isn't as explosive or as dynamic or whatever, there's still so many little things that happen, even by us being broadcasters and senders, enables us to be one step ahead on a Friday. Just little things. There isn't a set blueprint to create a space, but I think it's important to feel safe and comfortable and competent with whatever you're using. But then just learn from it, because then you're not going to get everything as you want but we've reflected a lot and talked about it as a group, talked about where we were and where we are now and how we've grown as leaders. I think the leaders chat has gelled us hugely, to have that extra space.

Beth: you can just message everyone all at once, rather than having to message everyone individually. It's so much quicker and you get replies back straight away.

Ant: I think we're a really close-knit group of leaders. The one thing I would say, that we've learned, that I would advise other people to do, is continually reflect. So I know it sounds a bit, if you go into business you learn the plan-do-check model and everything like that. You plan what you're gonna do, you check it and then think about what's going on and it's a continual loop of improvement, and evaluation because we don't always get things right. I think what's really helped us between us, if we don't like something, even if one of the other people in the leadership group likes it, we can voice a disagreement and agree to disagree or bounce things around until we're happy. But once we've made a decision, we go with it. We'll be like I've said my piece, let's carry on, let's go. And we'll support it, we won't just say well we've made a decision and I wasn't happy with it but we'll just go with it anyway. No, no, we are altogether as a group doing something and all of us support that decision. But definitely reviewing what's going on and as Beth said every group of kids that comes through is not the same as the last group. you've got different things playing out in those communities all the time. You may not be aware of it, but it means that any group of kids that you're interacting with will not be the same as the ones that we've had and we can definitely see two

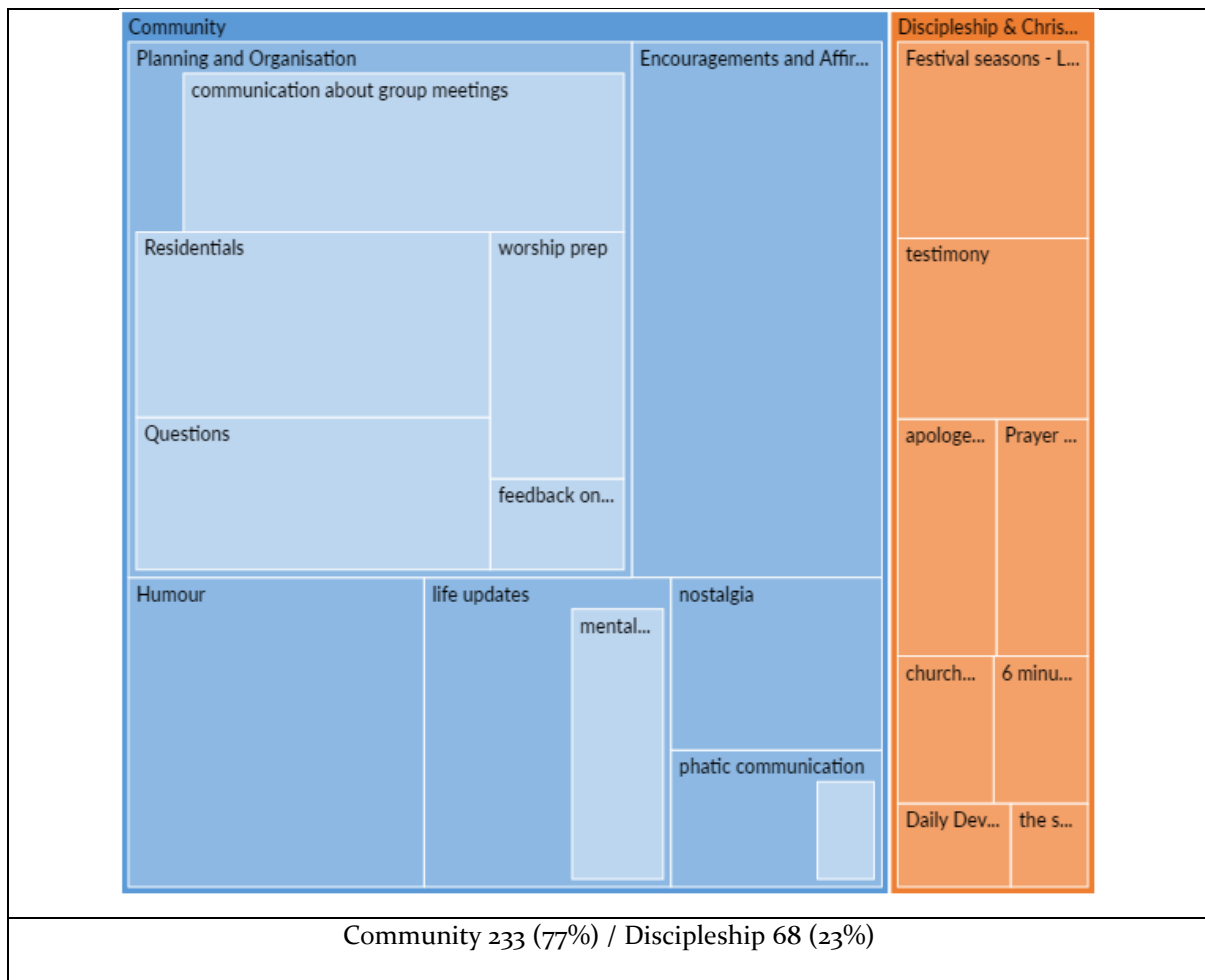
different flavours here, even in our groups from the Facebook guys who were the early adopters and much more close-knit to the current group which are a bit more fragile, I think, at times.

Ben: I think it's interesting when we did a review, because we had to look at the policy every year. And when you look at the policy, it helps you look at it and go, well this is what it says and what we're doing and does that reflect and we need to make sure that the policy reflects the practice or take the practice back to reflect the policy. And we've grown and evolved and sometimes we've changed the policy to be what we do in practice or some of the stuff was there and we need to go back to doing this, this is why it says that. So like, holding that boundary of 11pm. That's something I've really enjoyed as a group doing.

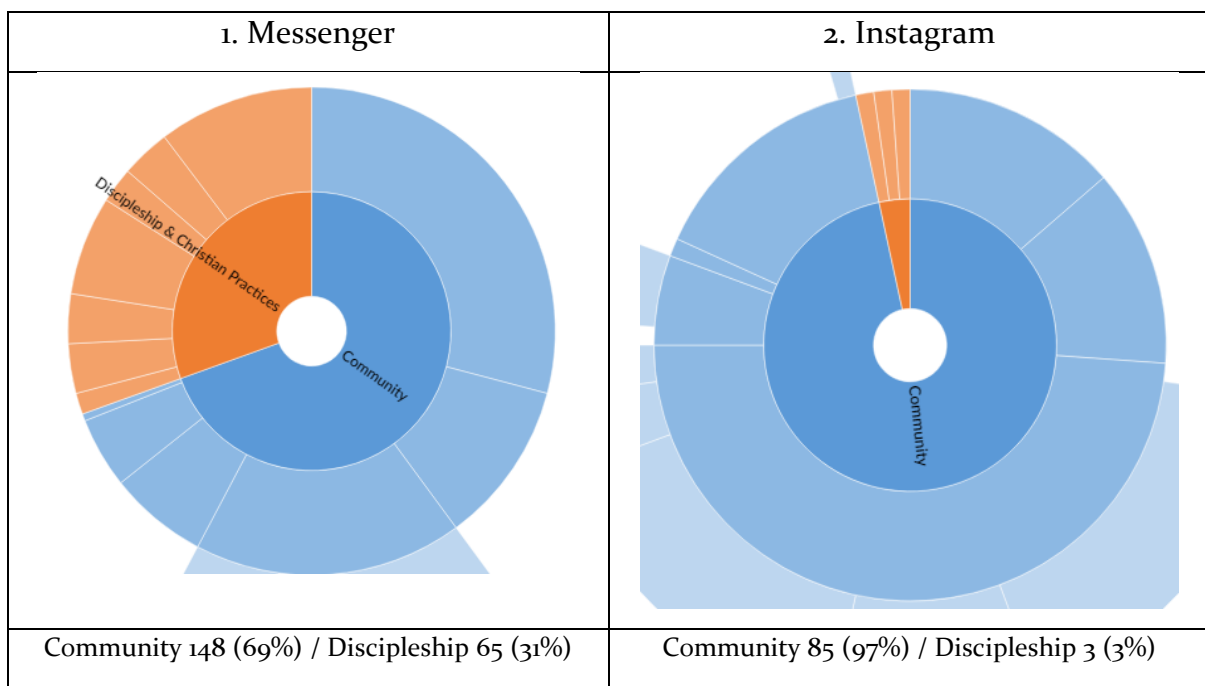
Ant: in doing that, we also remind ourselves the core reasons why we're doing all of this. what the point of this is. This isn't just a youth support group, this is about evangelism, this is about encouraging faith and difficult questions about faith to be tackled and answered, and allowing that conversation to happen as well. So yes, it is about mental wellbeing, it is about promoting what we're doing on Fridays and all of this but essentially it's got to come back to the purpose of us being here. We're not just a youth group, we're a church, Christian youth group and we're trying to point people to Jesus. And when we start to review policy and start to review what we're doing we realign ourselves with that objective and goal aswell. So we can prayerfully say what are we achieving through this and what do we want to see and what can God do through this aswell, which is a question it's always good to come back to.



### 3. Breakdown of Coding References across both cohorts



### 4. Balance of Community / Discipleship per Cohort



## Appendix 7 – Social Media Policy

### **Using Social Media Policy 2018**

#### **Intro:**

As a Youth Group that works so closely with the development of our Young people's discipleship and growth, we have become reliant on using open channels of communication. We use communication to organise The Wave Youth Service as a primary example. The forum in which we do this has been through group chats using the social media sites Facebook and Instagram. Using social media in the digital age we live in is both exciting and scary at the same time; it opens up endless possibilities for encouragement and advertisement, yet can also leave us with the daunting feeling of vulnerability and risk.

In many other Youth organisations the immediate, automatic response to Social media is to fear and avoid its use completely. However I do not believe that in a society and culture where our young people are so connected and active online that we can afford to shy away from using social media sites. Instead I believe it is important that we utilise this tool in the right effective manner that ultimately gives glory to God and develops our Youth on their journey. However this must happen in a safe controlled environment with clear guidelines and expectations on how we use these sites.

The use of social media has been very successful and has, I believe, greatly encouraged our Young people. Whilst there has been no major concerns using this forum of communication, it is important that we continually address and evaluate how we operate as a team. As part of this evaluation process I have conducted some research into good practice, safe working and to coping with the term coined as 'Digital Youth Work'.

#### **What we currently use & Changes 2019:**

Below is a list of the currently active social media forums and tools we use to communicate with our Young People and with each other as leaders.

#### **The Wave Youth Service Page:**

We currently have a page set up with the specific purpose of advertising our youth service – The Wave. The aim is to create an online presence with the purpose of attracting people to attend our monthly Youth Service here at [REDACTED]. This is achieved through posting status' regarding our events and meetings, our service dates and promotional material. This material includes YouTube videos, comments, promotional videos and photos.

This is an open group that can be viewed by anyone on Facebook and can be joined by anyone. It can also have its material shared by other users, this normally occurs for the purpose of advertising or endorsement by parents, other churches and by young people.

The group is currently administered by myself, Ben Arrowsmith, who has control over all the settings and running of the account. This enables the admin to add/remove editors and posts to ensure that all views are reflective of our values. In line with last year's policy I have



added Ant Stokes as a moderator. This enables Ant to view any messages the Page receives and enables him to create statuses and post comments. This helps to create a greater accountability for the use of this group and aids in its transparency. All members of the page have an understanding that any views posted must reflect the values and representation of both [REDACTED] and the Youth Group.

Ben is currently the selected Admin for this group all comments made on this group are a direct representation of both [REDACTED] and the Youth Group. By being managers of this Page we submit to the leadership and authority of the Youth group leadership team, the DCC and to our Safeguarding officer [REDACTED]

**Changes 2019:** With the shift in platform that young people operate on this page has become slightly redundant. Which is reflected by the lack of engagement. However while the young people no longer use this platform it may still be an effective tool to communicate with parents and relay information regarding our rules, events and our ministry. New content will be uploaded this year to reflect this.

**Leaders Group** - Since the creation of 'The Wave' group chat it was also decided that the youth leaders would use a private group chat. This group only has members that are currently leaders of the Youth Group at [REDACTED]. This has been an effective use of communication and enables youth leaders to discuss issues or gives notices in a more accessible way. Steps have been taken to ensure that previous leaders are removed in order to ensure we do not disclose current information about our Young people.

There are no changes to how this group operates however I would like to issue a reminder to all leaders. Comments made on this group are still operating under the representation of [REDACTED] and the Youth group and we still submit to the same authorities. Equally this is not a forum to voice safeguarding concerns or to discuss disclosures made by our young people. Our designated Safeguarding officer is [REDACTED] and any such concerns should be communicated to him through the relevant method of communication. It is then up to [REDACTED] to communicate any relevant information back to us.

**Instagram** – Throughout the last few years the prevalence of the social media site Instagram has dramatically risen. It has risen to such a level that more young people access and communicate through Instagram than on Facebook. Instagram is a social media site that allows users to share pictures and moments to a wider audience. As we are a youth ministry that aims to be on the forefront of digital youth work then I believe it is important that our practice reflects the changing relevance and trend. In response to this a Youth Instagram page has been created. The account will be used to share images from the youth group, advertise events or to generate publicity for the Wave youth group and promote the Christian faith. A letter has been issued to parents seeking permission for their child to have their photo taken and published on any of our social media sites in line with GDPR. Ben Arrowsmith will currently be the only user of this account and will be directly responsible for posting all the content on the site. However to ensure accountability and transparency, Ant

Stokes will be provided with the passwords and will regularly check the account. All comments made on Instagram are a direct representation of both [REDACTED] and the Youth Group. By being managers of this Page we submit to the leadership and authority of the Youth group leadership team, the DCC and to our Safeguarding officer [REDACTED]. The accounts name is 'thewaveyouth\_'

**Changes 2019:** As the Instagram account continues to attract positive engagement and has reached a larger audience, it has become an effective tool for outreach, advertisement and sharing highlights. We have used the Instagram story tool to create online series of preaching called '6 minute services', and various other preaching videos. These are then saved onto the highlights section of the page. Any preaching or 'thought sharing' content that is posted onto the page must reflect the values and ethos of both [REDACTED] and the Church of England and must be made clear that they are an individuals views.

#### **The Wave Facebook Group Chat:**

The group chat was initially created for the Young people that are involved with the organisation and running of the Wave Youth Service. It was deemed an important method of creating a forum to communicate any notices and decisions that needed to be made in regards to planning the Youth Service. It is equally important as the vision for the Youth Service is to enable and empower the Young people to take responsibility and lead the Youth service in its planning and development. It is a private group chat that only has members that are invited into the group and only has current youth leaders who are part of the team. This is also used as a method for young people to present any concerns or questions they may have during the week and presents opportunity to encourage our Young people.

It is our most important method of communication and is often used for young people to inform us of dates that they can attend meetings such as worship practice or inform us when they cannot. It has also been used to share new songs, good videos that could be used or post images. The fact that this group has a strong presence of leaders allows an open and transparent dialogue and in many respects allows us to communicate in an open forum.

**Changes 2019:** As the young people have aged this group has become less about planning for youth services and more a method of communication and maintaining relationships and contact. As the members begin to move away to university this group bares a greater importance to provide support, care and prayer. It will still operate as a method of communication for events and notices etc. It will also remain within the safeguarding requirements and regulations.

#### **New Wave Group Chat:**

As the youth ministry continues to grow and seeks to disciple young people it is important that we continue in our commitment them. As part of our planning and young leadership



scheme we have selected a group of young people that are actively seeking to grow in their faith. As part of this we have created a new Instagram messenger group that has the same purpose as the previous group; to advertise, inform and offer support. It also follows the same safeguarding requirements and regulations. Finally every member has to have parental consent and sign a youth conduct contract.

**Conduct and Guidelines 2019:**

- All Youth Leaders must agree to this policy and sign it, which will remain on file at [REDACTED]
- All parents of the young people selected to be in this group will sign an agreement about our policies and give permission for the use of this forum.
- The Young people asked to join this group must first sign a contract that highlights our rules and expectation to using the group chat.
- All admissions and remissions to this group will be carried out by Ben Arrowsmith as the overall leader of the Youth Group.
- All young people must be 13 years of age or older.
- The maximum age of participants in this group is 18, unless they are part of the Youth leadership team and have been DBS checked.
- Leaders are still held to the same accountability and safeguarding procedures in their interactions and comments made to the young people as it was in person.
- Leaders submit to the authority of the Youth group, [REDACTED] and to our Safeguarding officer [REDACTED]

**Ways to interact:**

- Use the group to communicate information regarding the Youth Service, Friday nights, Trips and Sunday Youth Service
- To ask questions regarding who is attending certain events or practices as a way of measuring interest or availability.
- To organise practices and rehearsals in preparation of a Youth service or other relevant events.
- To encourage our Young people when they share accomplishments or stories of life and faith.
- To post relevant pictures, comments, articles, bible verses and videos that build and encourage the Youth or are relevant to the planning of Youth services and events.
- To advertise events pertinent to the above groups.
- To respond to prayer requests the Young people have.
- To respond to questions the Young people have in regards to faith or topics discussed at any of the events we hold or attend.
- To direct and sometimes prevent off topic or inappropriate conversations the Young people may have.

### Things to avoid:

- Asking leading questions regarding a Young person's perspective, personal or private issues that they may post.
- Avoid 'banter' that could be discouraging or taken offensively.
- Disclosing personal issues or requests for personal prayer – we have the leaders group for this support and the Young people have enough issues of their own to contend with.
- Making personal comments to each other as leaders which could be mistaken as undermining or embarrassing.
- Presenting our own view stance on complex issues i.e. homosexuality, abortion, sex etc. Our role is to facilitate conversation not influence it. This is because our comments can often be misrepresented
- Criticising the Church or its leaders – we are representatives of [REDACTED]
- Sharing private photos that have no relevance to Youth Work or building a Young person's faith.
- Organising trips and outings please use the letter of consent for this. Only give predetermined information i.e. time to meet.
- Playing the games whilst on the group – use other chats to do this in order to keep 'The Wave' concise and focused.
- Offer or guarantee confidentiality at any point.
- Avoid challenging the Youth personally on matters such as attendance, commitment or lifestyle, if a challenge is necessary it will be made in person.

### Other concerns regarding the use of social media:

Finally I would like to end by highlighting a few other expectations and rules put in place regarding the use of social media that do not directly involve the group chat.

**Private messaging:** Please reframe as youth leaders from directly messaging any of our young people on a private message. On any occasions where young people message you directly it is acceptable to answer however please be advised that this is not the forum to offer any advice or guidance and should be as brief as possible. If a young person directly messages you please notify the leader's group chat or [REDACTED] if it is a safeguarding concern. This will help keep an open accountability.

**2019 changes:** As we have discovered throughout the year a young person can often go through distressing issues and often open up during one of our Youth nights on a Friday or a Sunday. This often leads them to seeking advice or reacting during the week via Instagram/facebook messenger. Although this is a reflection of the high level of care and trust we offer as a ministry to the Young people it is still important that we operate with



integrity and within the guidelines of the policy. Yet it would be counterproductive to ignore or disregard these messages. On both the Youth service page and on the Instagram account there is the opportunity for direct messaging which is the appropriate venue for young people to communicate privately any issues or ask any questions during the week. However these still operate within the same safeguarding rules and regulations. It is not a forum to initiate contact with a young person or to offer extensive advice or offer your opinions on personal matters. Equally confidentiality cannot be offered and any safeguarding issues must be reported back to our safeguarding officer

[REDACTED]

**Snapchat:** It is not permitted to add any Youth member on Snapchat under any circumstance.

**Twitter:** The Youth does not hold a twitter account but please reframe from any interaction with the Youth where possible on Twitter. The same protocol applies in regards to private messaging.

**What's App:** Please follow the same protocol as highlighted in private messaging. Avoid contact using this forum.

**Smart Phones:** Due to the use of smart phones where the group chat is accessible on Young people's phones it prevents the need to use personal mobile phone numbers. Ben Arrowsmith and Ant Stokes number has been added onto the youth membership consent form. This allows parents to have a point of contact when needed for Trips etc. Under no circumstance should Youth leaders request the phone numbers of a Young person. Any contact numbers required will be located on the necessary forms. In the rare occasion where it is necessary to require ringing a Youth member, for example at Soul survivor there will be times where they will be away from visibility due to the nature of the camp, a designated Youth leader will be selected who will input the numbers for an allotted time before deleting them.

**Personal use:** Some Youth leaders may have some of the Young people as friends/followers on our accounts. Often this has been necessary in order to connect with them in the group chat. I would firstly ask that we are very mindful who we accept on Facebook and will leave that to your judgement. However I do believe that as Youth leaders we are representing both Christ and [REDACTED] and the Youth group therefore please become very mindful of the content that we post on our personal accounts which could reflect badly on our position as role models. Please avoid using expletives and be mindful what pictures you post of yourself. Please also adjust your privacy settings to ensure that content is limited to who can view your profile which can be done on your Facebook and Instagram settings.

**This Policy works in conjunction to the guidelines and advice published by the [REDACTED] [REDACTED], which is also available on request.**

**Policy Review:** August 2020 annual review. Policy may be reviewed if deemed necessary or if changes are made to our practice.

By signing this policy you are agreeing to the mentioned expectations and rules. Failing to follow these guidelines may result in a review in your position as a member of the Youth leadership team or an expulsion from social media interaction with our Young People. This will be at the discrepancy of the Church leadership team.

Many thanks

Ben Arrowsmith

I agree to the agreement and policy and am signing to confirm that I have read and understand the information provided.

**Signed** .....

**Printed** .....

**Date** .....

## Appendix 8 – Youth Contract

### Social Media Group Chat Youth Contract

As you know as a youth group we have been using Facebook group chats for the last few years as a method of communication to create a safe forum for us to discuss, plan and encourage each other. As our youth continues to grow we feel it is appropriate that we highlight our expectations and give clear guidelines for how we expect this group to be used. Moving forward we would like to invite you to be part of the group chat. However we feel it is right that all participating members agree to and sign a contract on using social media. The main focus of the group is to:

- Communicate information regarding planning youth series and other events.
- To encourage each other.
- To share ideas and thoughts on Youth service and ideas for Fridays/J.AM

Agreement:

- I agree to respect each other on the group chat and talk respectfully to each other.
- I agree to keep conversations appropriate and be mindful what I say.
- I understand that within the group leaders are bound to the same levels of safeguarding and disclosure procedures and cannot offer you confidentiality.
- I agree to avoid directly messaging leaders and will use the group chat to communicate or private message a youth page either on Facebook or Instagram if necessary.
- I agree not to swear in this group.
- I will not bully or become abusive to any other members of this group.
- Everyone's views are valued and are to be respected.
- The admission and removal of members will be carried out by the Youth Leaders.
- I agree that the group's information or settings will only be changed by the youth leaders.
- I am 13 years old or over.
- Avoid playing any games on the group as this can irritate people and clog up the conversation.

I ..... agree to the youth social media contract and would like to be part of this group, pending parental permission.

Signed .....

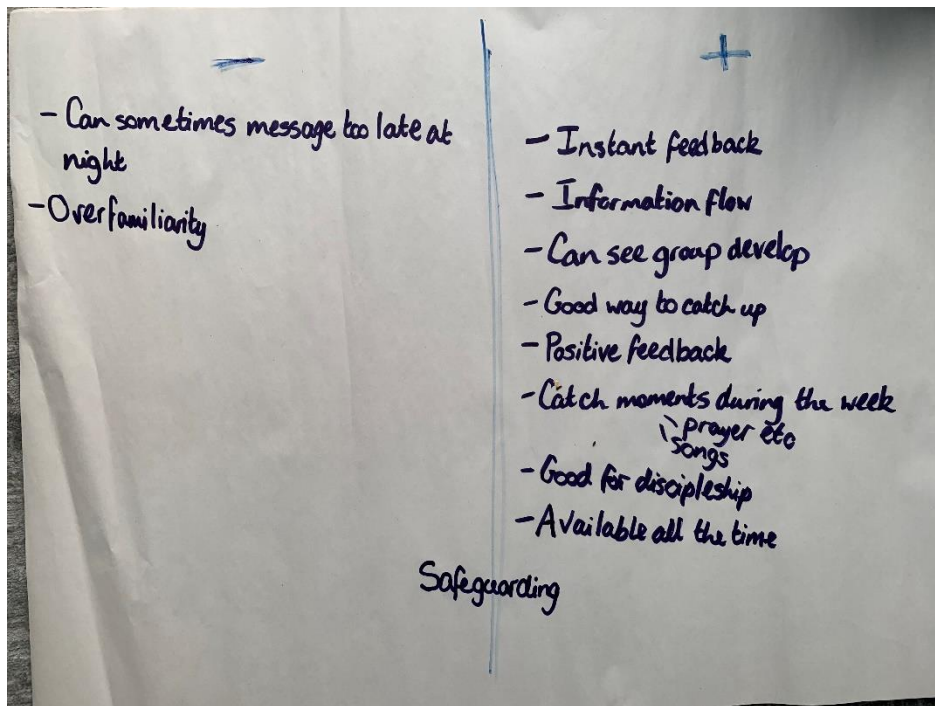
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Date .....

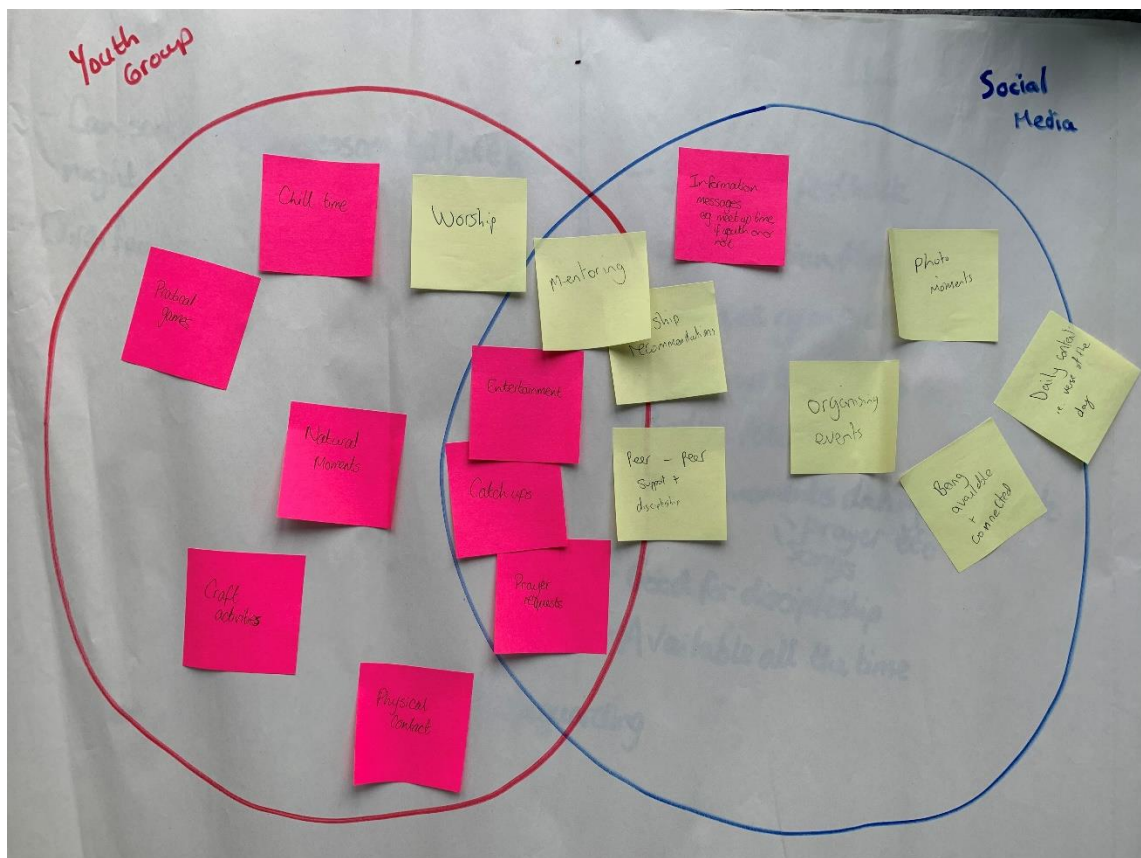


## Appendix 9 – Charts from Focus Group with Youth Leaders

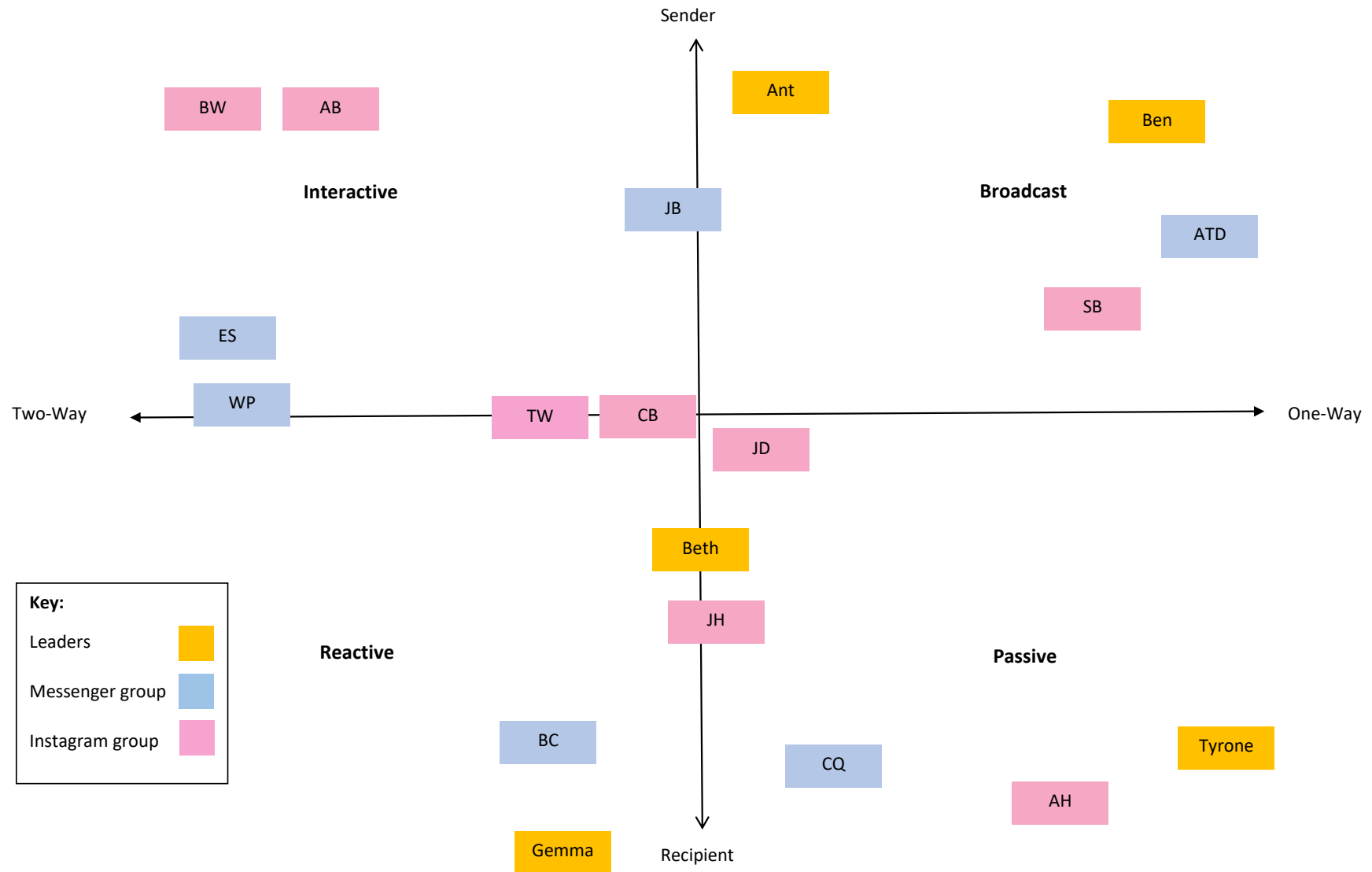
### 1. Positives and Negatives of Social Media Use



### 2. Venn Diagram for youth group (in person) / social media



## Appendix 10 – Levels of Interactivity



## Appendix 11- Examples of Encouragement

Messenger group:

**BC**

just wanna say thank you for such an incredible weekend everyone, it's been so amazing & i feel so so blessed, i'm so grateful for every single one of you ✨ you're all so so wonderful

**BP**

Aww I love u x

**KTD**

So are you!!

Can we send all photos as well pls x

**ES**

i love you all sm 🍷

**WP**

GUYS IT WAS BRILLIANT LOVED TONIGHT LETS DO THE SAME NEXT TIME EVERYONE PLAYED A HUGE IMPORTANT ROLE thanks for such a great night

**BP**

alright calm it kermit 😂

mah i agree x

**ES**

Well done everyone!!! 🍷🍷

What a group of inspiring young people!

**BP**

Absolutely my favourite time of year x blessed to have you all in my life to encourage my faith and various other things x thank you all so much for today, it really made a difference x

I know [redacted] and [redacted] are so blessed by you all really impressed challenged and moved by your authenticity and passion

Roll on submerge!

**Leader AS**

Proud of all of you today. Not just the speaking bit but also where you are ↓ your journeys with God



BC

guys my top uni offer has just changed to unconditional !!! 🎉

Leader AS

Yes!!! Congratulations [redacted]

ES

Well donee ahhh x

BC

thank you!!!! ✨ sooo happyyyy

Well done [redacted] proud of you!!!

BC

thank u!!!! 😊

19 FEB 2018 AT 14:08

ATD

Congrats

BP

Just visiting my first church !



Leader AS

All the best [redacted]

9 OCT 2018 AT 20:25

Good luck where are you going?

9 OCT 2018 AT 21:57

BP

Been to HTL

ATD

What did you think?

10 OCT 2018 AT 22:18

BP

Yh it was good tbf got 3 more to try out tho before I make any decisions

BP

3 years of baptism/ conformation today [redacted] [redacted] - love journeying with you all ❤️❤️



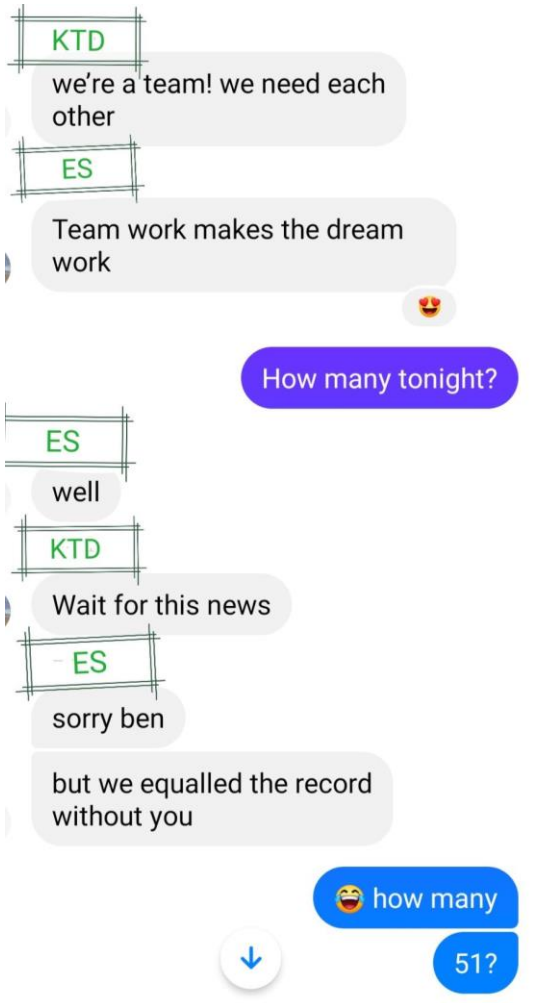
JB



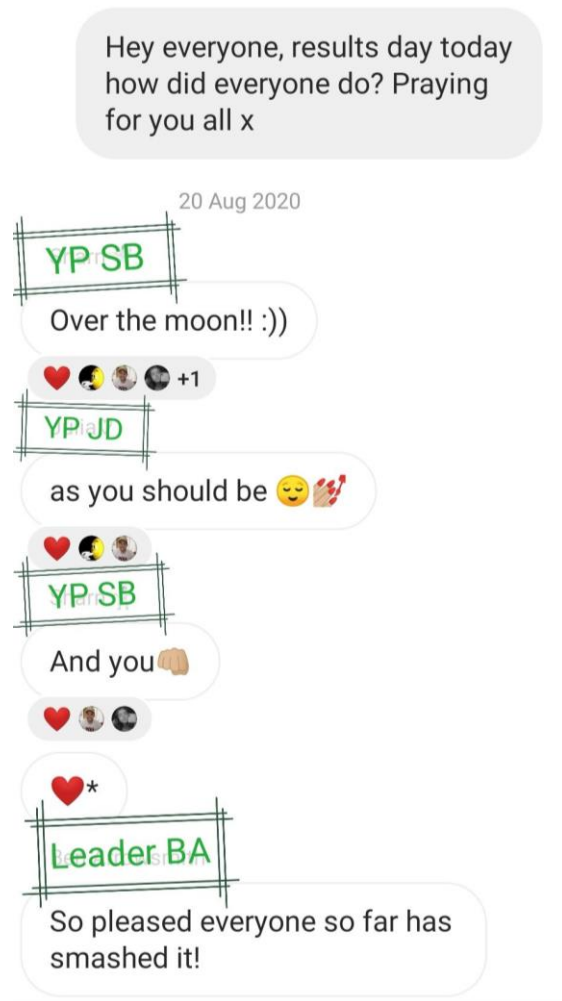
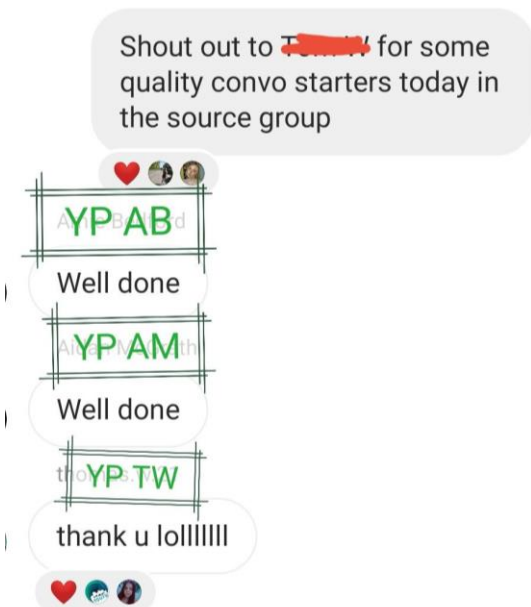
15 MAY 2019 AT 16:25

ES





Instagram group:



## Appendix 12 - Examples of Christian Practice

### 1. Personal faith - testimony

**JB**

Guys I'm sat in my room and I literally have no idea what to do with my life 😩 like I've been so busy the last week that normal life is dull and boring 😩

Soul Survivor is truly amazing

**Leader LP**

me and t went for a walk around the lake catching Pokemon and were saying the exact same things 😂

**BP**

read the bible & jam out to the joy of thr lord is my strength

would seriously recommend a bible journal guys im gna try really hard to do it daily

**JB**

Im listening to that 😂

**BP**

YESS!!!

**BC**

guys I just wanted to say that I'm feeling really good right now like I haven't felt this happy / at ease since that one night at soul survivor and honestly it feels so incredible I can't even explain. you are all amazing & I hope u realise that, thank you for such an awesome weekend !!! for once I'm actually excited about the future lol, can't wait to see our lives & ministry grow ✨ I feel very blessed, love you all so much 💜 this family is incredible and we stay strong as ever through every high and every low!! god is amazing X

**BP**

Love you beth, very glad to hear that ❤️

**JB**

😊💙

**Leader TW**

😂

**BP**

"all this time ive been living but at last i feel alive"

11 JAN 2016 AT 21:04

**BP**

remember when blaine was saying about his wife going into another room and stamping her feet and jumping and cheering cus she was excited about jesus and didnt know what to do with herself?? this is literally me

2. Faith Community

2a. Reflecting on Worship

We need to remember tonight because i feel The Holy Spirit was truly with us and we need to keep that momentum up for next week too. [redacted] and [redacted] you were fab 😊

Leader AS

ES

Spot on Daughter of mine 🙌

BC

and u were fab e [redacted] oceans was so cool, tbh i didnt know what i was playing, i didnt choose, was moved

ES

[redacted] honestly you added a great vibe to oceans that my voice alone couldn't of done, well done for letting the lord use you and your talents m'dear

BC

aw you little cutie ❤️

ES



Hebrews 12 verses 1-2 "And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus."

1 song 1 prayer 1 verse that's our Lent challenge guys we talked about at jam today

ATD

Oooh nice, ill try

ES

It reminded me that each of us have our own path marked out. None of us are worthless, we each have a part to play.

BP

also up-ing our attendance rates to church\* cough\* [redacted] and will \*cough\* INFILTRATE

2b. Apologetics

ES

guys i need your help with a project im doing!

Give me as many presumptions non christians have about Christianity as you can

they can be as simple or as controversial as you like

BP

Anti gay

No sex till marriage

Anti abortion

ATD

Never do anything wrong

JB

That Christians are perfect

Oh jinx ad lol

Anti suicide

Go to church € Sunday

KTD

That Christians can't swear

Not in this chat they can't



Don't believe in Halloween 🧛

JB

Anti other religions like think we're better than anyone else

7 NOV 2018 AT 19:28

WP

Think that we know the answers to everything and how to handle every situation because we're "do gooders" which everyone should be anyway 😊



## 2.c Daily Bible Study Suggestions



Hey lads hope u all good - wanted to share this w you - doing this course atm and this one idea I thought was cool - basically I think like everyone needs one!! Spiritual first aid kit - doesn't need to be set out like this but have one so whenever ur feeling low or anxious or under attack or anything u don't have the stress of thinking what to do u can just turn to this. I attached mine to show u but I forgot to take a picture of it before I filled it in sorry so just ignore my writing! This is also the course which is 42 days so I'm doing it over lent - would highly recommend also X

👍👉 4

ES

s- scripture (right down verses that stuck with unfrom what u read)  
o- observation (what does it mena)  
a- application (how it applies to your life)  
p- pray abojt jt  
like write it all down then u can look bk at ur journey

like just a plain notebook & use thst

BP

ah that's awesome

JB

Sounds interesting

Might try it lol

## 2.d Prayer Requests

JB

Can you pray for my friend please? She's stressing over exams, expectations and she's having family problems whilst her mums got cancer. Thank you

Leader AS

Yes

JB

Thanks 🙏

ATD

Touch here to edit text

Will be praying

ES

Will do 🙏 x

Leader TW

Yes yes yes !! X

JB

Thanks yous x

Leader AS

Pray for 🙏. She's in her AGS interview now.

JB

Oooo gl 🙏!!!!

21 MAR 2017 AT 16:06

ES

Thank you all 🌹

WP

Can we pray for my best friends nan she has just had a heart attack and they are uninformed of what is happening

Leader AS

Yes

No problem.

10 SEP 2017 AT 12:06

WP

Of course ❤️

ES

thankyou

ATD

Hey guys, I'm about to go in for a job interview, please can you pray for me 😊



KTD

Will do but where when who??

Good luck

Leader AS

Hi [redacted] No worries. Praying now! Was thinking about how things were for you yesterday. Catch you later. God's got you safe in his hands remember that.

26 FEB AT 14:07

BP

Good luck!

## 2.e Reflections on the local church

ES

Idk how to put this message bc im still kind of processing my emmotion but I just got back from [redacted] and his grandparents came for tea. They went to Christ Church last week bc they go to Vineyard atm even though they live in Crabs Cross so they wanted to go somewhere more local. When I spoke to [redacted] Grandad he, in a rounded nutshell, said he thought it was quite 'dead'. To say the least I'm a bit angry but we can actually do something about this and we're not. I dont want people to come to church and not see hope in it or say theyd rather travel 30 minutes than come to ours. We can all agree that we'll do something about it but I'm so sick of this mindset of "oh yeah we'll do that eventually" or "yeah I'll do the band next week" like we're the people who can make it alive and actually make a difference to new people. I can either take this as I first did and get angry or you can make it motivate you to do something about it because this is ridiculous. I know there isnt many of us and I know for some people we're in rough spots, but we've gotta start being more involved in the church to make sure there is still some life there. [redacted] always tells me that worship is often better to do when you dont feel like it because it can completely change your mood and heal some wounds. Ben I know you say it too. If youre going through stuff, being with your family and worship might be the medicine you need xx I cant stress enough how much I wish you were all at church making small differences with me, at the front or in the congregation. I love you all ❤️

  
KTD  
I agree



## 2.f The 6-minute service

Right guys so I'm going to try and do something for the rest of this month.. whether you watch it or not is completely up to you.. 1 of the biggest pieces of advice I give people is to spent time with God and build a relationship in our every day lives.. so I'm going to start our daily 6 minute services... every day I'll throw out a worship song a Bible verse and a 1 minute sermon video. At the end of the month you can tell me if it's worth carrying on with. But the challenge is to give it ago and see if it makes a difference!

ES

LADS I JUST HAD A SUPER COOL IDEA

HEAR ME OUT RIGHT

Leader AS

Stop shouting...

ES

6 minute service for every day of advent (1-24) but on the Wave insta!!

And we could do it in albums so itd look like an advent calendar when its done

Any volunteers to do 6 min service today?

KTD

Someone will

Haha why not do a joint 1

KTD

That's what we're thinking but like we might not like depends if we can find something to do it on annat

Anything you want! And send a picture of you 2 looking Christmassy for insta!

2 DEC 2017 AT 19:53

KTD

We've got family coming round I know it's bit late on saying but we can do it tomorrow?? Do

## Appendix 13 – Phatic Communication

thewaveyouth\_ named the group Tsunami Army

Hello

YP AB  
Heyyyy

05 Mar 2019

🐰❤️ Ducky 🐰❤️

hiiii

05 Mar 2019

YP TW  
Heyyyyyy  
Leader ES  
☕☕

Mewtwo raid at 6:45 RZ  
supermarket help needed!

20 Sep 2019

YP JH  
At Tenacres?

Rz supermarket

YP JH  
Are you there?  
Chat went through a stage to arrange  
pokemon go events

On way

21 Sep 2019

▶ Photo

YP AB  
Who's coming church  
tommrow x

Leader ES  
Hi YL how are we all doing? xox

YP AB  
Good thanks you? X



04 Apr 2020

YP TW  
good thanku!! x



Leader ES  
yeah im good! whats everyone  
up to today? X

04 Apr 2020

Instagram user

sitting on the sofa watching  
edits lol





Year 11s how are you coping?

~~YP JD~~

stressed

~~YP MC~~

That ~~is~~

~~YP CB~~

very stressed

~~YP TW~~

i'm so annoyed

~~YP JH~~

I'm on the verge of crying because all my work was for nothing basically

~~YP BW~~

how

And we have to go with grades which half of us only took as practice

~~YP JH~~

~~YP CB~~

i'm just frustrated and feel like all my works for nothing tbf

~~YP JH~~

Literally everything was a waste

~~YP CB~~

and after all that work we probably won't get prom or hoodies or anything we looked forward to

~~Leader AS~~

~~YP~~ what's your plans for September (grades aside for a mo)

~~YP JH~~

Sixth form