CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY
DIGITAL YOUTH MINISTRY

by Jeremy Steele

A crash course (in training or education) condenses lots of practical material so that you can read and understand it quickly. A crash course is not where we strap you behind the wheel of a youth ministry bus, point you downhill towards a target and say, *"Hope you don't crash!"* as you hit every bump possible on the road ahead.

Each of these crash courses in youth ministry are loaded with practical tips and basic wisdom that you can read today and put in to practice tomorrow. If you are a part-time or no-time (amazing volunteer!) youth worker, these crash courses are especially for you. (They're also great for anyone leading a youth ministry. Just saying.)

Additional crash courses are available at:
UMCyoungpeople.org/CrashCourses

Further training for a variety of leadership roles in ministry is available in the e-learning section of Discipleship Ministries' store at:
store.UMCdiscipleship.org/product-category/elearning

INTRODUCTION

THE YEAR 2007. IMAGINE THAT DISTANT PAST WHERE ONLY ONE SET OF SIBLINGS IN MY YOUTH GROUP HAD THE RECENTLY RELEASED IPHONE, AND TEXT MESSAGES FROM T9 PHONES OR BLACKBERRY HAD JUST STOPPED COSTING TEN CENTS EACH TO SEND.

The year 2007 was the first time I had a parent come up to me asking about a new messaging app. The app didn't have any of the features that scare parents these days, like disappearing messages and accounts whose screen name can be changed at will; it was a fully public app available for download. Anyone could be on it and say anything, and the parent found inappropriate messages sent to her kid from another kid. Both were in the youth group. (Sarcastic hooray!)

The parent showed me the messages and asked me what I was going to do about it. This parent said I needed to do a lesson on these apps and why they were evil. Then she said, "I don't even think any of your volunteers even know this thing exists!" Know what? She was right. They didn't know it existed; in fact, none of the volunteers even had a phone that could download it!

That same conversation has played out thousands of times since as new apps have continued to facilitate and

magnify some of the worst tendencies of teens. And, as soon as youth volunteers and parents were aware of an app, a new one cropped up that they did not know. Before we go any farther, let's make something clear. You do not need to be an expert on all the current apps that teens use. Checking out the ones you hear about and making policies where needed is important, but don't think you have to become an expert on the teenage digital experience. There is simply no way to stay current about specific apps or platforms because of the speed with which they can boom and bust in popularity. Digital youth ministry is more about principles that guide interactions through technology as opposed to expertise or policy in specific apps.

01 THE 30,000 FOOT VIEW: APPS AND THE REAL WORLD

ONE OF THE BIGGEST ISSUES PEOPLE FACE AS THEY CONNECT WITH AND MINISTER TO TEENS IN THE DIGITAL SPACE IS HOW THEY THINK OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DIGITAL WORLD AND THE NON-DIGITAL WORLD.

Teens (and let's be honest, many adults now leading ministries...the oldest millennials are now forty years of age; how's that feel?) have grown up as digital natives and feel the same way about picking up a smartphone and sending a video message to a friend as earlier generations would have felt about picking up a telephone with a fifteen-foot wire attached to it or reading a newspaper that made their fingertips black. To the teens in your group, technology isn't newfangled; it is just the normal way they live. As proof of this concept, play a game of charades with youth and give the clue "phone." Odds are, they will hold the back of their hand out, then rotate it so that their palm faces their face and begin imitating a video call or act out using their palm as a touch screen. That is much different from previous generations who would put their hands in a "hang loose" kind of shape and hold their thumb by their ear and pinky by their mouth to simulate a phone receiver!

We need to approach the digital world with the credibility it deserves and do ministry there in ways similar to the way we would do it in the real world. After all, it is a reality that youth live in daily! For example, when you see a student posting about a difficult time or asking for prayer, posting an actual prayer in the comments can be incredibly meaningful to the student in the same way it would if you did it at a youth gathering. Likewise, the digital spaces that your youth ministry occupies (like an Instagram account, etc.) are not just interesting places to post pictures or make announcements. They are opportunities for real life-transformation and engagement with youth in your ministry and with those who have never physically set foot into one of your in-person ministry activities. How you engage in digital communities has a significant effect on the lives of the students in your group.

It is important to realize that while digital interactions can have real world impact, differences also exist between in-person and digital interactions. Notice how we keep saying "digital" instead of "virtual"? We do this purposefully because of the connotation that if something happens only "virtually" there's not a "real-world impact." Digital interaction and presence absolutely carries over into the physical world and affects the youth in our ministries deeply. Therefore, digital youth ministry needs its own set of boundaries and rules to help protect the students and adults who are connecting digitally.

For example, in the physical world, you can go for a one-on-one conversation in a crowded youth room and still be visible to other adults so that everyone can see things are on the up and up and transparent. In the digital world, when you move into a one-on-one conversation, it is almost always completely invisible to anyone else online, making it much more similar to pulling a student out of a group meeting into a room with no windows to have a conversation between the two of you. Thinking through the safety implications of the digital world is absolutely essential in being able to minister effectively there.

02 SAFE SANCTUARIES IN A DIGITAL WORLD

HOW ARE BOUNDARIES, APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR, AND DIGITAL INTERACTION EXPECTATIONS COVERED IN YOUR HEALTH AND SAFETY POLICY (OFTEN CALLED SAFE SANCTUARIES OR ABUSE-PREVENTION GUIDELINES)?

At the core of most abuse-prevention and risk-reduction policies is the "two unrelated adults rule." For in-person gatherings, this means that there should be two unrelated adults present at any time there is a ministry activity involving children, youth, or other vulnerable people. That same rule needs to be defined and applied in digital space. For example, every video conference or call should have two-unrelated adults present and in the virtual meeting room before admitting students from a waiting room. Every account should be administered by two unrelated adults, and whenever possible, direct messages should be groups, including two unrelated adults.

Most Safe Sanctuaries policies also do a good job of defining different expectations between things that happen in public spaces like a coffee shop and those that happen in private spaces like a youth room or office. That same work needs to be done in the digital space. Your policy needs to define well what is public

space and what is private when interacting digitally. Then expectations should be set for what happens in those spaces.

There are a number of issues that flow from these questions, especially when used to look at your specific context and how your ministry and your students use technology. If you'd like to look at more information and sample policies, Discipleship Ministries and Young People's Ministries continually offer resources, articles, and support at **UMCdiscipleship.org**. The online meeting aspect of Safe Sanctuaries is explored in some depth in the article, **"Safe Sanctuaries: Supporting a Shift to Online Youth Ministry Meetings"**.

03 FRIENDING, FOLLOWING, AND COMMENTING

PART OF WHAT MAKES DIGITAL INTERACTION, ESPECIALLY THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA, COMPLICATED IS THE DIFFERENCE IN STUDENTS' AND ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS.

Several years ago, I was sitting in our small-group room waiting for the teen guys in my small group to arrive. While I waited, I was doing what everyone seems to do now that smartphones are everywhere: filling every extra minute with mindless social media scrolling. As I scrolled, a picture from one of the guys in my small group and his homecoming dance date appeared on my screen. I liked the picture and kept scrolling.

Fast forward about an hour, and as our small group was ending, that student walked out slowly, and once he was the last person in the room, he turned around and said, "Thanks for liking my picture. I really appreciate it!" Then he left. I sat there on the couch in a state of shock at how big an impact my split-second tap on my phone screen had. I'm glad that my liking this picture was a positive experience for that young man. The experience helped me reflect on how, in the digital space, we cannot be sure of how our comments, likes, or interactions will be taken. We may do something unintentionally, or perhaps even with the best of intentions, but once

we interact digitally, we can never be sure how that interaction will be taken and processed by the person on the other side of the interaction.

One of the most helpful things you can do when thinking about how you engage on social media is to sit down with a group of teens and quiz them on what the students in your area think about different actions on social media. Over the years, I have been told that liking a picture from the church account doesn't matter that much, liking from my personal account is important but that if you like an old post or picture, that can be, in their words, "sketchy." And as I have traveled around the U.S. talking to teens in different places, I have heard the opposite of every one of those sentiments. Reactions, comments, and more can mean different things, in different places, at different times. So, perhaps a sit down with your most social media savvy youth is in order every year to help you stay on top of what youth believe is the underlying motivation behind comments or reactions you post.

Before you start making policies about social media activity regarding youth ministry, here are a few questions to ask your students:

· What social media platforms are you most active on?

· How do you use each of those platforms differently?

· What does it mean when someone friends you or follows you on those platforms?

- What does it mean when you friend someone on a platform, and that person doesn't friend you back?

- What does it mean when a brand or organization friends you or follows you on those platforms?

- What do you go to the church account (if you have one) to find?

- What activity would be weird for a brand or organization account to do?

- What activity would be weird for an adult to do on these platforms?

- What platforms are parents not on?

- What platforms should the church be on/not be on?

But what about the parents? When you say to a student, "I just followed you," they automatically think about someone being able to like a post; but when you say to a parent, "I just followed your kid," some may have stalker alarm bells go off or at least have questions about the types of boundaries you as the leader are setting. Just as there is a culture around the use of social media among kids, there is also the same culture among adults. And that culture can have a much wider range because of the diversity of age and comfort with technology. Sitting down with a group of parents to ask similar questions to the ones you asked of the students is equally important as you create digital youth ministry boundaries and guidelines.

The ultimate goal is to establish some guidelines and basic expectations of how you and any other volunteers related to your youth ministry engage with students in social media and how your official church accounts do the same. There are few universal tips because, as previously mentioned, it is difficult to publish an eBook (or local church policy, for that matter!) and have it stay current. That said, here are some reasonable guidelines that churches are using right now:

- Adults don't initiate social media connections (friending, following, etc.) with students but can respond in kind (following back, etc.) when a student connects with them

- Adults are allowed to initiate social media connections only with kids in their small group.

- Only public commenting is allowed. If private messages are received, the adult is expected to offer an in-person conversation and ensure that the youth knows those private messages will be shared with another adult connected to the youth ministry.

- Adults are expected to refrain from deleting comments, posts, and other social content, especially those involving students.

- Official church accounts are proactive in reaching out (following, etc.) to new students and visitors as soon as possible.

- No official presence on social media platforms that allow disappearing messages/posts.

Digital engagement with young people is a must now and in the future. Setting up clear boundaries and expectations with church staff and volunteers can help adult leaders meaningfully connect with youth and their parents online. Effective digital youth ministry may allow you to connect with youth who would never step foot inside your physical church building, either by choice or because of geography. Digital youth ministry, done well, can complement in-person youth ministry activities. We can carry relationships, conversations, and discipleship seamlessly between the physical and digital worlds where youth spend their time.

04 UNDERSTANDING & PROCESSING ONLINE BULLYING

MANY ADULTS IN YOUR MINISTRY (AND PERHAPS YOU) GREW UP WITHOUT THE THREAT OF ONLINE BULLYING.

Bullies are timeless, of course. We've each had experiences with them, but before the age of constant connection, bullies had to do their shaming and demeaning in person in the real world. Because of that, it can be hard for adult leaders to know what online bullying looks like, much less how to spot it and stop it. So, we'll start with what it is and move from there to how you can help as a caring adult in the life of the teens in your ministry.

Online bullying resembles in-person bullying. It uses similar tactics, but it can explode and spread at lightning speed to hundreds and even thousands of people in seconds. You might discover horribly mean comments mocking a student on their post in public, and they may send worse things through direct messages. Escaping digital bullying is difficult as well because bullies or people who pass on bullying messages never need to take a break. The interactions don't start and stop with the hours of the school day.

The ability to both take and send pictures instantaneously can get out of hand, especially with young humans who are in a developmental stage where their brain's forecasting and self-control areas aren't working well (learn more on how to understand what's happening in the adolescent brain in our *Crash Courses in Youth Ministry: Speaking Adolescent*). Not only will students ask for, take, and send inappropriate images, they will forward and share those with others who might edit those images to mock students or add text to make them a meme. Too often, this will happen without those youth being able to forecast the impact of their choices.

All of that can be done with anonymous/fake accounts. But there's an even crueler and potentially dangerous use of fake accounts: impersonation. Depending on the platform, creating an impersonation account might require a couple minutes to download a person's profile picture and set up a new account using a fake email address, or it could be as simple as changing the visible name in your own account to someone else's name and then, voila! You can harass, shame, and humiliate people to damage a third person's reputation.

I have had students do this on Snapchat. The bully impersonated another student by changing the student's name. The bully sent inappropriate messages to a third student who screenshotted the messages and showed them to their mother. She showed up in our offices, asking for contact information for the student who had been impersonated. The parents and the student who was being impersonated were both completely surprised

(as were we because this was so out of character). Eventually, the bully was found out due to bragging, and I was terrified at how simple it had been to mess with the life of another kid.

This ability to impersonate other people leads to the first thing you can do: Engage the issue, but don't jump to conclusions. Sometimes things are not as they seem. Before contacting students or parents, get someone to help you look a little deeper. See if this platform lends itself to easy impersonation, so that you can go in understanding what is possible.

The second thing you need to do is to not ignore online bullying. Sometimes adults can think that the bullying happening online is somehow less important than if it were happening in person. That kind of thinking protects only the bullies. The kids on the receiving end of the bullying are longing for someone to see something and say something to help. You should be that person.

The thing that students need on both sides of bullying is help processing what is happening. One of the most dangerous aspects of online bullying is that it removes the negative emotional feedback that happens during in-person bullying. When you have to see the look of hurt on someone's face or see the damage that has been caused to people or their life, that can be its own deterrent to future bullying. When that ability to witness the harm of bullying is removed, students whose brains are still developing (seriously, you should read that *Crash Courses in Youth Ministry: Speaking Adolescent*) can have a

hard time thinking fully through to how deeply what they are doing is hurting others.

At the same time, students on the receiving end of bullying need help making positive connections with friends who can be a support network for them as they come to terms with how they were treated by another teen. As you support them, you need to remember something that is vitally important: you are not a counselor. Online bullying can create serious emotional damage; and if you suspect a student is dealing with depression, anxiety, or other emotional issues, you need to be ready to refer that student to a licensed professional to help him/her heal from the wounds inflicted online.

A third thing you can do is to host educational events for parents. Parents have a thousand things on their plate, and many don't have the extra bandwidth to do quality research online about how to identify and stop online bullying. Finding a local counselor or other expert who will do a workshop for parents after they get off work will help turn the tides for your students.

CONCLUSION

THE DIGITAL WORLD OF MINISTRY IS BOTH POWERFUL AND DANGEROUS, BUT WITH THE RIGHT GUARDRAILS IN PLACE, IT CAN BE A WONDERFUL PLACE FOR SPREADING THE GRACE AND LOVE OF GOD.

Without leaving your office, you can give a virtual high-five to a student, sing happy birthday to another, and post a prayer for a third. If you'd like to think in more detail about some of these topics, check out our resource list below! United Methodist Communications offers a significant number of articles to help churches navigate digital ministry and social media well.

OTHER RESOURCES

- ["Five Shifts for Online Ministry with Young People"](#) by Eddie Erwin & Jeremy Steele

- ["Free Lesson Videos, Zoom Games, and Training on Using Digital Technologies for Faith Formation"](#) by Amy Shreve

- ["Responsible Social Media"](#) from Discipleship Ministries

- ["Three Simple Rules of Social Media"](#) by Eric Seiberling

- ["Helpful Social Media Articles"](#) from ResouceUMC.org

- ["Six Questions Every Church Social Media Policy Should Answer"](#) by Jeremy Steele

- ["Social Media and Spirituality: The New Reality for Churches"](#) by Rachel Gilmore