

## Digital, Mobile, and Social Ministry & Youth How to Deal With, Manage, and Incorporate Cell Phones into Ministry with Youth

*"Distracted from distraction by distraction." -T.S. Eliot*

Since cell phones have made their way into our youth rooms, we have struggled with the tension of them being a good tool of outreach while at the same time being an easy distraction. It teaches us in Ecclesiastes 3 that there is a time for all things. We will explore a time to embrace and incorporate cell phones and a time to ban them.

### Social Media

Social media, through various forms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), has grown from a fun way to connect with friends to an integral part of everyday life. They have become the way in which we communicate with each other. Some may still be keeping a distance from surrendering to the cell, while others have firmly embraced them as a necessary part of life.

### For Youth Workers

As with anything else in working with people, minors especially, there must be boundaries set. If you are going to accept or follow people in your church or in the youth group through social media, be sure you know what's on your page, the photos you've been tagged in, and the pages you have "liked". Then ask yourself if you think it's appropriate for church. A general rule of thumb is to not post or send anything you wouldn't show to the Session. Another option is to have two separate accounts: one where you can fully express yourself to friends outside of the church, and another that is specifically for ministry. Again, it comes down to setting boundaries and holding yourself accountable.

### Embracing Social Media as a Ministry Tool

#### Facebook Groups:

Most everyone at your church, including the youth, likely has a Facebook page. Facebook has taken over the world and has been embraced by both young and old. The best part is that it is free, easy to use and checked at least daily by most people. Creating a "group" for your youth group, church, or small group is a great way to communicate upcoming events, social gatherings, small groups, post trip pictures, introduce Bible study topics, or have a group conversation.

### **Tweet Worship:**

Did your eyes just shoot out of your head? More churches, ministry groups and worship teams are encouraging the use of Twitter during gatherings. Youth (and others in different settings) are encouraged to tweet during worship using a common hashtag. By doing this they are engaging with the spoken word – paying close attention as they respond in real-time to sermons, prayers, stories, and testimonies. They will be waiting for that take home message or powerful challenge from the pastor, so that they may be the one with the most retweets. Furthermore, the tweets can be used as a tool for members who could not make it to the service to catch updates in real-time or to reflect later on what happened in the worship service. From here, the worship planners may also use the tweets as a tool to record what gets tweeted most often and use it later in worship services. For instance, if one particular hymn gets many tweets and retweets then worship leaders may consider using it more regularly. At youth group the tweet can be reviewed or discussed – reiterating once again the message from worship. A youth worker recently shared a story about a youth group using Twitter during worship. They explained that an evangelistic gift came from tweeting worship as friends of the youth took notice of the tweets and responded or came to worship the following week.

### **Poll Everywhere:**

Poll Everywhere is a downloadable program that allows for real-time response to either a multiple-choice question or open-ended question. This program, and programs like it, can be used during youth group so that youth are both entertained by their phones and participating in the lesson. Examples of questions are: “Who preached the first Christian sermon at Pentecost? A. Jesus B. Simon C. Paul D. Mary”; or “What does this parable teach us about how we are supposed to live?” or “Which day is best for you to take food to the local food bank? A. Monday the 15th B. Wednesday the 17th C. Friday the 19th D. Sunday the 21st”; or “What prayer concerns do we bring today?” Although this program is a wonderful way to use technology in a new way, there is a warning that goes along with the use of open-ended questions. When asking an open-ended question, the youth may feel their serious response may not be taken well from their peers and they may feel the need to be silly. In this case, an open-ended question may simply be better asked verbally so the response does not linger on the screen awaiting judgment.

## **Mobivity:**

Mobivity is a text message marketing solution that makes it easy to send out mass text to your group. Marketing statistics show that an estimated 90% of text messages are read within three minutes or less of their receipt. Using this technology, you are more likely to get your message out quicker and more efficiently than sending an email or calling on the phone. By using Mobivity or a competing text message-marketing firm, you can send a quick message daily to one to three different groups. Think about sending out a last-minute text saying, “We are late coming back from the trip” or “Youth cookout has been canceled due to bad weather.” You could also send out daily Bible verses, inspirational quotes, reminders . . . the list goes on and on.

## **When to Consider Restricting Cell Phone Use in Ministry?**

### **Trips:**

There are pros and cons to restricting cell phones during trips.

- The pros include always having a way to get in touch with the youth. For example, at a large camp or conference where your group is spread out, you have the comfort of being able to call or text to ask about their location. It also gives them a means of being in contact with their family in case of an emergency.
- The cons include a lack of focus on the experience of “getting away”. Trips are an opportunity for young people to leave the normal and enter into “God’s time. To see things they don’t normally see and to have conversations with people without the distraction of a phone or a computer screen. This side says that during the trip the youth should be focused on service to God, group building, and personal spiritual reflection.

These things are limited when cell phones become involved. Having a phone can also keep the youth in touch with what's going on (teenage drama) outside of youth group or a conference.

Whatever side you choose, be flexible. For example, the conference you are attending or program you are involved with may choose to use phones during certain aspects of worship. This, of course, would then be an acceptable time for cell phone use.

**Snapchat:**

Snapchat is a free application that allows you to send a picture that will only be available to view for a few seconds before it is deleted. Use caution with this app because it can easily be used inappropriately and there is no proof stored by the app of what was sent. It is advised that youth workers not use this app but simply receive messages from youth group members and church members.

**Cell Basket:**

If you choose to ban electronics during worship or youth group, do so in a creative way so that the youth don't feel intimidated or like they are being punished. An easy way to do this is to have a cell phone basket by the entrance of a room where the youth are encouraged to drop their phone when they enter. This way they can grab their phone if needed but are not constantly grabbing for their boredom clutch.

**Power Down Liturgy:**

Incorporate a time in your liturgy or in the weekly rituals of your youth group to "power down" phones. Literally take time to invite members to take out their phones, silence them or turn them off, and center their attention on God and the community surrounding them.

**Author:** Nick Setzer and Mia Levetan

**Editor:** Kelly Boone Sloan

**Project Manager:** Gina Yeager-Buckley