***“What is the need right now around which I’m willing to show you my need and let you basically create something new together to mark, to witness, to invent: start with the need”*** - Priya Parker

* **Why should we engage with Children and Youth Online**?

**The time isn’t now, it was yesterday**. We must engage in online ministry practices because the digital revolution is well underway. The future is digital. Although we may resist this, feel fearful or perhaps even deny it, there is no stopping it. We knew this prior to the pandemic, that Anglicans have been dealing with denominational decline, and that we likely won’t have a future beyond 2040 if we don’t make some radical changes. Then in the blink of an eye, we were forced to adapt…. So here we are in May of 2020 and Christian organizations are finally wondering about engaging with children and youth online. It’s a wonderful time because we are pioneering a whole new way of connecting.

Let’s identify a few more key reasons …..

1. **It’s how kids learn** - they have been using digital platforms for entertainment, socialization and education - it’s their comfort zone. When we use technology we are meeting them where they are. It is probably the **most empathetic approach** to engaging with them because it is likely their favourite
2. **Reach more people** - connect with new kids who may have never been able to come to your church, may have been too shy or far away etc...
3. **It’s Efficient:** Less supplies, less cost, less set up, less clean up, less environmental impact, less stress
4. **It’s Safe** - alleviates some safe church concerns, (pitfalls to be reviewed) travel, health and hygiene risks
5. **They need you / their faith community-** this provide consistency, pastoral support, and a reassuring presence (especially during stressful times)
6. **They need each other** - this will allow them time to hang out, listen, learn and grow their faith together
7. **Focus on content** of lessons versus primary needs and concerns ie. needing help going to the bathroom,

**What are some Potential Pitfalls?**

* Requires access to internet connection and communication device
* Technical problems /navigating new tech and supporting participants
* Stress and learning curve concerns
* Safe church issues regarding dress code / nudity or partial nudity
* Vulnerable living situation for the participant
* Inappropriate language from members in the home
* Lack of human connection
* Unhealthy levels of screen time
* Zoom bombing / pornography / profanity
* Distracted participants / behaviour problems
* Risk of Participants in “unsafe church” location ie. washroom, bedroom
* Intergenerational limitations
* **How do we do it**? *Best practices for most impactful online ministry*

This brings us to the question of how we were currently offering children and youth ministry using the face to face model.

**How are you doing it now?** How is it working? What needs to be revised? What needs to be improved? What needs to change? What is the most effective / fruitful aspect of my ministry?

If you are willing to take an honest and critical examination of your programs this is the most helpful first step.

In addition to this self evaluation, it would be helpful if you were willing to do an anonymous digital survey and circulate to your families and supervisors, mentors to solicit honest feedback.

Why? We aren’t always objectively capable of evaluating ourselves. Sometimes too critical and sometimes not critical enough.

Make a list of strengths and weaknesses as this will help with the **evaluation** process - consider sharing and listening to others in your community or when we break out into small groups next week (Homework)

We have a new opportunity to **review and evaluate** our programs - the way we meet, how and why we meet and to use this data to inform how we shape our online offerings.

Technology offers us endless possibilities to fulfill our wildest youth ministry dreams! Including all of the ways we love to connect such as Games, Art, Prayer, Meditation, Music, and a plethora of community and faith building activities. Your digital ministry offering doesn’t have to be polished or free of glitches. In fact, perfection is the enemy when it comes to this type of engagement! What it should do is reflect your core values, hopes and dreams and ultimately to reflect the specific **purpose** of your time together.

Take a moment to consider what you hope to accomplish- what is the **purpose** of your meetings? (Homework)

-share ideas about faith and make space for doubt

-have fun and be together as friends who like crafts and silly songs

-learn about the bible and why it matters in our lives today

We need to establish meaningful and sustainable digital connections and develop strategies to connect with your young people. This is largely a trust building exercise and involves several steps. You must first convince the families that the time they will spend online is worth their while and that you are a trustworthy recipient of this commitment. Let’s be honest, there are many ways one can spend their time online and *kids church* may not always make the top 10! . Hosting an effective zoom session, for example, involves more than just scheduling the zoom meeting and showing up. I would encourage you to approach this in the following way...

**Step 1.** **Invite:** **Create a Compelling Digital Campaign**: (share via email, social media, website etc.) Collect email addresses from the existing church database. If this doesn't exist then phone or text your members to solicit this information. Create a targeted email campaign introducing yourself and stating the purpose for your new ministry. A video would be ideal but a blog-style introduction can be effective as well. **Your gathering starts with the invitation.** Emails and posts are most effective when they are dynamic and focused, this may include visual elements, videos, photos etc. and **sets the tone for your digital gathering.**

**Step 2.:** **Connect**: Build a Facebook Group and make it worth people’s while to visit and contribute. Thiswill allow your community to interact with one another. You may contribute by asking questions, sharing pics, highlights from meetings, quotes, jokes and to stay connected in between gatherings. Can be a place for parents of younger children and/ or a group for older youth themselves. Use polls to get feedback, ask provocative questions, Post videos, scripture passages, and prepare for gatherings. Share highlights from previous gatherings etc.

Staying connected and inspiring meaningful participation in the group requires regular and diligent communication (the list of creative ways to engage is literally endless) Have Fun!

**Step 3. Gather!** Use Zoom, Google Meets Facebook messenger groups video chats etc. to host an online ministry session. Focus on community, relationships and connections.

Set clear rules and guidelines, host short sessions and focusing on the basics ie. turn microphone on, raise hands

**What is the purpose of your gathering?** It is important to take ownership of your role as host and be generous with this authority ie. fair and considerate that participants' needs are being met, voices are heard, there is fairness and adequate distribution of air time and that the **purpose of your gathering remains the focus of your time together.**

**Step 4. Follow up:** Via phone, text, email, Facebook Group + include this as part of your strategic social media campaign . If they weren’t present, inquire as to why and if they were then be generous and express your appreciation for having been together. Keep building the momentum in between gatherings and remind your community that you care and are invested in them and their faith formation.

What has scared me? Learning new things, making mistakes, losing control

I look forward to hearing more about what scares / stops you as we delve deeper into the topic in the coming weeks.

Review...

1. Digital Revolution leaves us no choice - the time isn’t now it was yesterday.

2. A ministry audit is a helpful way to shape your online gatherings - figure out what’s working and what isn’t. Take a good honest look at your existing offering.

3. Gatherings must be purposeful and well hosted. **Be generous with your authority**

4. Relationships and connections are crucial for all ministry but in particular for online ministry and involve organized and intentional communication practices.