

SEEDCORN RESEARCH PROJECT

*“Practices that Enable Encounter:
Pedagogical Strategies in Gospel
Communication: A Study of How
Christian Youth Workers Share the
Gospel with Young People”*

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‘Practices That Enable Encounter’ – Pedagogical Strategies in Gospel Communication

Introduction

This research project and report comes at a fascinating juncture in the ongoing story of what tends to be called youth ministry, though could equally be termed Christian youth work. The Church of England have made ‘growing younger’ a central tenet of its current vision and strategy, with this aim expressed in two significant goals:

- Doubling the number of young active disciples in the Church by 2030; and,
- Training up to 30,000 children’s and youth leaders in a similar time frame (27,000 volunteers and 3000 to be employable). This is commonly known as Project 30k.¹

Both goals are aspirational and seek to reverse longstanding trends in numbers of children and young people attending churches and in those training for youth and children’s ministry,² and significant money is being invested by the national Church to help work towards the goals and buck the trends. However, in both areas there is evidence of recent upturn.³ This research project and report on findings seeks to offer helpful insight that can assist in the movement toward these goals by finding its point of departure as the assumption that understanding and communication of the gospel is central to both – that any ‘young active disciples’ will be formed in response to the form and content⁴ of the gospel that is communicated, and a central part of the task of those recruited and trained to be part of the 30,000 youth and children’s leaders will be communicating the gospel.

The research takes three forms:

1. A literature summary to engage with articulation of the gospel, both what is at the centre of it and how it is communicated, in a range of examples of youth ministry literature, mainly from the last ten years
2. An online survey completed by individuals with at least five years’ experience in Christian youth work in either employed or voluntary capacities.
3. Two focus groups around an accompanying study day in which ten respondents from the online survey gathered for deeper reflection on the themes that emerged from the survey and through participating in a theological study day.

The findings and conclusions from this research are threefold:

¹ See <https://www.churchofengland.org/30kproject> (accessed 30/7/25)

² David Howell, “Longitudinal research into student numbers on higher education programmes in Christian youth work/ministry and Children’s work/ministry programmes – 2011-12 to 2023-24”, available here: <https://cte.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/04/Student-Numbers-Report-v28Mar24.pdf> (accessed 30/7/25)

³ Dr Rhiannon McAleer & Dr Rob Barnard-Symmons, *The Quiet Revival*, The Bible Society, 2025

⁴ Debate as to how such these are separate

1. The significance of practices that enable encounter within gospel communication for the current generations of young people.
2. The potential in but absence of artistic approaches to gospel communication
3. The importance of group theological reflection to equip and enable Christian youth workers for gospel communication.

The research is situated within the broad methodological framework of practical theology, in that it seeks to learn from the practices of churches and individual Christians.⁵ This research could be understood as drawing on the model of the four-voices of theology in which espoused and operant theologies contribute in important ways to theological understanding. The research data gathered from participants will be espoused but drawing on reflections of their operant theology.⁶ In a similar vein, the theological contribution brought by experienced Christian youth workers in this might be seen as ‘writing the body of Christ’,⁷ as it will be theological insight that comes from the work of the Church as it seeks to live out Christ’s command to go and make disciples.⁸

Literature Summary

This section of the report provides a literature summary to explore some of the ways in which the gospel, and gospel communication, is discussed within the youth ministry literature, recognising that in the field of youth ministry in particular the literature often expresses a written reflection on what has become accepted practice.⁹

The Uniqueness of Christian Youth Work

It is not possible to discuss Christian youth work without also briefly recognising the relation to statutory youth work in the UK as this has been a thread of discussion within the literature. The origins of youth work in the UK finds its roots in Christian work with young people, be it the Sunday Schools, organisations such as the YMCA, or the birth of uniformed youth work like the Boy’s Brigade or Scouting movements.

The ongoing debate about the relationship between these forms of youth work can be seen in the degree level courses offered to train Christian youth workers – the decision as to whether such a course should include the statutory JNC qualification or be more theologically based is an ongoing debate for those running such courses.¹⁰ As is the extent to which the values and practices of statutory youth work should influence or shape Christian youth work.¹¹

⁵ Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry and Life of the Church* (Baker Academic, 2017), pp. 9 – 25.

⁶ Helen Cameron et al, *Talking About God in Practice*. (SCM Press, 2010), pp. 103 - 6

⁷ This is one of the methods for Theological Reflection detailed in Graham, Walton, Ward *Theological Reflection Methods*. (SCM Press, 2005).

⁸ As in Matthew 28:18 - 20

⁹ My book / thesis

¹⁰ With a shift away from JNC affiliated course within theological colleges in recent years.

¹¹ Andy du Feu, *Looking Good Naked: Youth Work and the Body of Christ*. Resource Publications, 2020, pp. 8 – 14

Expressions of this debate come in form of integrated approaches such as that classically expression by Danny Brierley in his appropriately titled *Joined Up*,¹² in which he argues for an overall view of Christian youth work and ministry that is committed to expressing statutory youth work values,¹³ whilst adding the fifth value of incarnation that he sees as developing a theologically articulate vision, and enhancing the other four.¹⁴ Contrary to this Andy du Feu suggests that there is no fundamental requirement for Christian youth work to adopt such values, coming as they do from a particular social and political context, rather than from the Christian story and community. This, du Feu, argues, is the proper starting point.¹⁵ Ashton and Moon suggest something similar when they argue that Christian youth work should remain distinctively Christian, with its anchor point being the cross of Christ.¹⁶ Although offering seemingly contrasting points of view these different approaches contain implicit approaches to and understandings of the gospel, and how the gospel operates in relation to the wider contexts of society and culture in which young people exist. Without being able to get into a detailed analysis of how the integrated approach of Brierley or the more distinctive approach of Feu or Ashton and Moon do this, we might say, along with Pete Ward in his classic *Youth Work and the Mission of God*:¹⁷

We do youth work as Christians for no other reason than we tell the gospel story.

We may wish to frame our practice in terms of educational theory, counselling, community work, sport, leisure provision, any number of theoretical models of working with young people, but to do so as Christian youth workers is to seek to integrate these perspectives into the overarching nature of the larger gospel story.¹⁸

It is this notion of doing youth work as Christians for no other reason than to tell the gospel story that is central to this research report and will be explored through this literature summary. This literature summary will highlight themes in the youth ministry literature around the content and aim of gospel communication, as well as the role of place and space in the forms that communication of the gospel might take.

The 'What' of Gospel Communication

To begin with the focus on the story of the Christian faith Pete Ward, expanding on his articulation above that we do youth work as Christians to tell the gospel story, focusses in on some aspects of what this telling the gospel story might mean. He begins though not with telling through spoken word and content, but with relationships and socialising.

¹² Danny Brierley, *Joined Up: An introduction to youthwork and ministry*. Authentic Media, 2003

¹³ These values classically articulated as Voluntary Participation, Informal Education, Equality of Opportunity, and Empowerment.

¹⁴ Brierley, *Joined Up*

¹⁵ du Feu, *Looking Good*.

¹⁶ Mark Ashton and Phil Moon, *Christian Youth Work (2nd edition)*. Authentic Media, 2005, p. 30

¹⁷ Pete Ward, *Youthwork and the Mission of God*. SPCK, 1997.

¹⁸ Ward, *Youthwork*, p27

Relationships, Ward argues, ‘are the fuel on which youth work travels’.¹⁹ This is not simply a means to an end however, as Ward’s understanding of the gospel is that in the incarnation the self-expression of God is inherently physical and social, so that time spent with young people is a telling of the gospel story. He cites American youth ministry expert, Dean Borgman, as saying that Christian youth workers are called to ‘waste time’ with young people.²⁰ Alongside this socialising however, Ward highlights some other specific aspects of content that he views as inherent to the gospel. These include the self-denial of the cross, which Ward expresses as juxtaposed to the celebratory engagement with physical human life expressed in the meals and healings articulated in the Gospels.²¹ Redemption and repentance, transcendence and immanence, and hope are further themes that Ward cites as core to the shape of the gospel.²² In these themes communication by words is intricately connected to communication by relationship and socialising – for example, the need to preach repentance is essential, without repentance we risk a gospel without God Ward says, however the exact form that repentance takes depends on the context and situation of the young people we are working with, so that repentance requires relationship.²³ There is therefore implicit complexity within this - the gospel is not a simple thing that is easy to communicate to young people. Ward’s focus on transcendence and immanence as part of the shape of the gospel reinforces this as he plays with the mystery and unknowability of God alongside the proximity of God’s self-revelation in Jesus.

This complexity contrasts with the urging of Ashton and Moon for simplicity in gospel communication for and with young people. The youth worker must, they argue, ‘be able to explain very simply how someone can respond to the gospel’ and that to do this it is important to have a ‘simple gospel outline at [his / her] fingertips’.²⁴ They then articulate one such outline that follows a classic three-step gospel formula of something to believe, something to admit, and something to do.²⁵ They admit that there are weaknesses with this approach and no simple summary expresses everything of the gospel. Of interest though is the contrast with Ward’s approach which suggests that the content and communication of the gospel is inherently tied to relationship and contextual understanding.

Ward further expresses this in *Youth Culture and the Gospel*. In a chapter provocatively titled “Why doesn’t Jesus preach the gospel?”, Ward pushes back against the gospel summary approach commended by Ashton and Moon, claiming that this never appears to be Jesus’ own approach, rather Ward suggests that Jesus ‘says different things to different people’ based on how he took account of the ‘social situation, religious background, and relative position in life’ of whoever he came into contact with. The gospel, Ward goes on to say, is effectively Jesus himself.²⁶

¹⁹ Ward, *Youthwork*, p. 43

²⁰ Ward, *Youthwork*, p. 29

²¹ Ward, *Youthwork*, pp. 28 – 9

²² Ward, *Youthwork*, pp. 25 - 42

²³ Ward, *Youthwork*, pp. 30 - 31

²⁴ Ashton and Moon, *Christian Youth Work*, p. 214

²⁵ Aston and Moon, *Christian Youth Work*. P. 215

²⁶ Pete Ward, *Youth Culture and the Gospel*, Marshall Pickering, 1992, pp. 116 – 7

This approach, which focuses the content of the gospel on the person of Jesus Christ, prevents gospel communication from becoming detached from the narratives of the four Gospels in the New Testament. It forces a regular return to these to dwell with the person of Jesus. This also places gospel communication in the events of Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. This points to a further way of understanding the content of the gospel – as event. Salvation is achieved, says James KA Smith, not by a doctrine or teaching but by something that happens, by an event.²⁷ By being an event, salvation is also something experienced or encountered, not merely cognitively understood, with such an encounter having a pedagogical impact through repetition or ritual. Worship therefore offers such shaping or formational encounter.²⁸

The gospel as event is developed by Jason Lief, exploring how the event of the gospel is subversive – a happening that serves to undermine worldly power structure bringing freedom from such structure, rather than imposing new ones. This is a weak theology, expressed by Jesus' suffering on the cross, and as such encounter Christ is to encounter power expressed through weakness. There is a tension expressed in this idea of freedom brought about through weakness as core content of the gospel – the concept of freedom is suggestive of something positive, whereas weakness tends to be perceived in the negative within contemporary culture. Pushing this further, within what Lief describes as the 'global technocapitalist' worldview,²⁹ and Andrew Root describes as the 'age of authenticity', both within a secular social imaginary,³⁰ the concept of freedom can be understood as the freedom to be oneself, to have or to get what I want, and the freedom from any overarching dogma or expectation.

Such an individualist approach to freedom is easy to be co-opted as a pseudo-gospel. This is demonstrated in the much-discussed research in the USA that led to the conclusion that the faith many young people growing up through youth ministry programmes develop is not a classic Christian faith, but rather what was dubbed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) – essentially a Christianity-lite that prioritises individual happiness and being a good person, only turning to God as needed to pursue those ends.³¹ Whilst this is research that is specific to the context of the USA and has not been repeated in the UK it has found resonance here and offers an important word of warning – if one of the goals within the CofE's current vision and strategy is to develop 'young active disciples' then the challenge is to ensure that these are disciples of Jesus Christ, rather than adherents to MTD or a similar pseudo-gospel.

One way of framing the gospel perhaps inherently carries this risk – that of seeing the heart of the gospel being life in all its fullness for young people.³² Andrew Root discusses the importance of a similar concept, that of the vision of the good life that drives worldviews and

²⁷ James KA Smith, *How to Inhabit Time*. Brazos Press, 2022, p. 13

²⁸ James KA Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*. Baker Academic, 2009

²⁹ Jason Lief, *Poetic Youth Ministry*. Cascade Books, 2016, p. 27

³⁰ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*. Baker Academic 2017, pp. 4 – 9

³¹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

³² As in John 10:10. This was a key verse cited by the practitioners in the survey aspect of this research.

the Christian story. At the heart of any worldview, Root argues, is a vision of the good life.³³ Expanding on this the vision of the good life at the heart of the gospel, Root argues, is joy – this is the end (as in the telos) of youth ministry, young people experiencing joy.³⁴ It is here that the risk of collapsing into MTD is apparent, but Root makes clear that this vision of joy is distinct from happiness, and the individual happiness at the heart of the individual vision of MTD specifically. Rather, the joy Root speaks of is the joy of transformation that comes as the story of Christ's death to resurrection becomes the narrative shape of our own lives, and the lives of young people:

The story is about being dead, and being made alive, to live forevermore, flourishing in and through death... [Jesus'] life story becomes the shape of our own story.³⁵

Here the gospel contains a very specific vision of the good life, or life in all its fullness, that is deeper and richer than happiness as it is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and contains the means by which the experience of death in all its forms is dealt with and transformed. Elsewhere, Root describes this through the lens of faith. To help people experience faith, he says, is to invite them to prayerfully share articulate experiences of negation, through which God can meet them as a minister and begin the process of transformation.³⁶ Here the 'what' of the gospel, joy of transformation through bringing our experiences of death into the narrative of Jesus' death to resurrection, becomes one and the same with the 'how' of gospel communication – stories. Root is clear that the process through which this happens is creating space through which stories can be told and heard, in the context of the gospel story.³⁷

Whilst moving beyond the supposed good of individual happiness within MTD, this vision of the gospel as the joy of transformation through Christ can still feel quite individually focussed whereas Lief's concept discussed above of the gospel as freedom from oppressive power structures is more global in its scope. A similar concept is articulated by Elizabeth Corrie, who frames youth ministry as 'peace education',³⁸ in which the gospel is understood as non-violent action that leads to societal change, again challenging oppressive power structures, be they political, societal, or religious: 'Jesus... makes clear that non-violent actions, rightly understood and enacted, is an expression of Christian discipleship.'³⁹ This kind of freedom, Corrie goes on, is not ancillary to gospel faith but is the 'deepest expression of it'.⁴⁰

With the 'what' of the gospel rightly focussing on the person of Jesus Christ, through him being the gospel in his person, narrative arc, or his actions (or all three) it is important to

³³ Andrew Root, *The End of Youth Ministry*. Baker Academic, pp. 5 – 18

³⁴ This is whole thesis of Root, *End of Youth Ministry*.

³⁵ Root, *End of Youth Ministry*, p.168

³⁶ Root, *Faith Formation*, p. 150

³⁷ Root, *End of Youth Ministry*, pp. 149 - 170

³⁸ Elizabeth Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education*. Fortress Press, 2021.

³⁹ Corrie, *Peace Education*, p. 152

⁴⁰ Corrie, *Peace Education*, p. 171

consider research exploring how young people react to the Jesus we see in the gospels. The recent ‘Translating God’ research from Youthscape did just this.⁴¹ Presenting some classic gospel encounters to groups of young people the researchers found at times the young people were uncomfortable with the interaction of Jesus, preferring to consider the sovereignty of God the Father, rather than the personal closeness of Jesus.

Furthermore, while the idea of a loving and powerful God was helpful and acceptable to young people in this research, they were not so naturally drawn to the weakness or suffering of God in Jesus Christ that the likes of Lief and Root point to as being key to gospel faith in the contemporary climate.⁴² Connected to this the research discovered that young people do not immediately relate to the concept of individual sin and the need for being saved personally from something. Here then, there might be resonance with Root’s call for there to be space to share stories of negation, experiences of death, as a way of framing sin and redemption – sin as being that which leads to experiences of death and redemption being the experience of joy that comes through the transformation of these being re-narrated through the narrative of Christ’s death and resurrection (though acknowledging the tension with the weakness of this). Ultimately, conclusions from this research suggest that themes within the gospel that are most pertinent for young people are love, hope, and life.⁴³

All of these are acknowledged as being framed outside of the Christian narrative; however, care is taken to note specific expressions of these themes that encapsulate the gospel. Love, for example, is a theme young people are open to as a characteristic of God, but this must be broadened from the general to discuss ideas of sacrificial love that serves and puts others first. Similarly, hope needs to be shaped around the Christian vision of a time when all things will be made new and heaven (whatever we mean by that) comes on earth. There must also be a nuanced exploration of how we live in the tension of hope and current experience of pain.⁴⁴ The third theme of life, is related to the idea of the good life – ‘young people are drawn to the idea of having an amazing life’⁴⁵ – but this needs to be framed within the gospel story and challenging ideas such as losing one’s life to gain it. As helpful as these research findings are the conclusions also point to challenges – concepts such as the cross, sin, and the need for an intervention 2000 years ago do not immediately resonate with young people.⁴⁶ Reflections on the theme of ‘life’ and are implicitly echoed in a recently published article reflecting on shared themes within the origin stories of evangelical youth work in the UK, USA, and Australia. One of these key themes was the importance of creating enjoyable spaces for young people. Young Life, originating in the USA, carried this idea at the forefront, articulating that their summer camps would be the best week of a young person’s

⁴¹ See <https://www.youthscape.co.uk/research/translating-god/home> (accessed 30/7/2025)

⁴² See above

⁴³ See Youthscape and Scripture Union, “Feel Good News: what young people really think about Christian beliefs”, 2024. Part two of the *Translating God* project.

⁴⁴ Note how the importance of stories of negation helps here

⁴⁵ Youthscape and Scripture Union, “Feel Good News”, p. 112

⁴⁶ Youthscape and Scripture Union, “Feel Good News”, p. 112

life and that it is a sin to bore a kid with the gospel.⁴⁷ These ideas carry echoes of living life in all its fullness; however, countering boredom may not be the central way in which creating fun carries gospel resonance for today's young people. It is, rather, the authors argue, in the development of spaces to play that one can switch off from digital engagement, and in the possibility of a form of sabbath rest.⁴⁸ It may be that in these areas, an attractive, gospel-informed vision of life can be articulated to young people.

The 'How' of Gospel Communication

In much the same way as it is not simple to separate the form and content of something, and the medium is very much the message at least to some extent,⁴⁹ it is somewhat artificial to separate the what from the how of gospel communication. As seen above, when discussing the 'what', the 'how' is often implicitly contained. See for instance the call of Ashton and Moon for youth ministers to be armed with a simple gospel summary they can share when the opportunity arises – the how of a simple summary is intricately tied up with the what of the content that such a summary might contain.

David Bailey's research into how Christian youth workers articulate the work they do is also informative here. Asked about the how of their work, the two most common responses were through relationships and being like Jesus.⁵⁰ Though as Bailey notes, these phrases tended to operate as 'shorthand' with little detailed substance of what this means from a detailed theological point of view. While Bailey is making a wider point, of interest to the topic of this research is the way in which the 'how' here is focussed on the youth worker themselves – they become the substance of gospel communication. This is both helpful and somewhat problematic. By the youth worker being so central in this way it ensures that gospel communication is embodied, rather than detached propositional truth, however the risk is run that the youth workers become the object of faith perhaps in their own eyes, or that of the young people (or perhaps both). Helpful then is Andrew Root's classic challenge to and affirmation of relational youth ministry in which he argues that relationships as the 'how' of the gospel communication must avoid being a tool for influence but rather framed as the place of encounter in which the true object of faith, Jesus Christ, is present.⁵¹ This affirms the relational heart of youth ministry whilst challenging the potential of the youth worker seeing aligning their person and presence too closely with the person and presence of Jesus.

Nick Shepherd argues for practice-based communication of the gospel.⁵² From the baseline claim that for young people operating within a secular social imaginary faith is as much a matter of identity and belief it follows that this the area gospel communication needs to

⁴⁷ Mark Scanlan, Gretchen Schoon-Tanis, and Ruth Lukabyo. 2025. "Roots, Threads, and Possibilities: How Learning from Some Origin Stories of Evangelical Youth Ministry Can Help Navigate a Challenging Future" *Religions* 16, no. 2: 101. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020101>

⁴⁸ Scanlan et al, *Roots, Threads, and Possibilities*.

⁴⁹ Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish*. SCM Press, 2010, pp. 1 – 27

⁵⁰ David Bailey, *Youth Ministry and Theological Shorthand*. Pickwick Publications, 2019.

⁵¹ Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*. IVP, 2007

⁵² Nick Shepherd, *Faith Generation: retaining young people and growing the church*. SPCK, 2016.

engage with.⁵³ Building on this Shepherd's framework is one in which a interaction of practices is key – practices that enable young people to engage with questions of identity, reliability, and plausibility.⁵⁴ Meaning that faith will arise from the gospel insofar as helps young people to make sense of who they are, equips them for life, and seems to a viable approach to life. There are hints here of the idea of the gospel as presenting a vision of the good life, though being practice-based, with practices rooted in the Christian story and tradition, there is perhaps less risk of collapsing into a pseudo-gospel.

Ultimately, Shepherd argues that effective transmission of faith, what we are taking to be gospel communication, to young people in contemporary culture relies not on a simplicity of message but on a matrix of practices that allow for the story of faith, the experience of faith, and an encounter with the object of faith (i.e. the person of Jesus Christ). Specifically, he suggests the following centring and specific practices that might help accomplish this:⁵⁵

- Plausibility – making distinctive Christian places through:
 - Presence – creating distinctive space in which Christian faith can be inhabited.
 - Groupfaith – the youth group meeting in distinctive space as the place in which faith is explored and wrestled with together
- Identity – meaning making for Christian identity, through:
 - Testimony – telling and hearing stories of each other's faith
 - Encounter – mediation through participation
- Reliability – making faith work in real life, through:
 - Attendance – youth group as ritual
 - Discernment – interpreting and acting.⁵⁶

There are of course resonances here with the role of story and testimony in Root's discussions of how joy through transformation of death experiences is central to the gospel vision of the good life, life in all its fullness, that Jesus offers. The way in which the practices encouraged by Shepherd work as a matrix, not in isolation is also noteworthy – the storytelling Root emphasises happens within, and helps create, a distinctively Christian place, and is only impactful as attendance allows. The matrix of practices for which Shepherd advocates has resonances with the conclusions on how to share the gospel in Youthscape's Translating God research. Here the conclusions are that stories (what we believe and affirm), practices (what we do together), and relationships (how we treat each other) are all crucial.⁵⁷

Story and space are discussed as vital components of the 'how' of gospel communication in other examples of recent literature. The power and importance of story as key to the 'what' of such communication is detailed at length by Brian Hull and Patrick Mays.⁵⁸ Story, rather than

⁵³ Shepherd, *Faith Generation*, p. 121 – 2

⁵⁴ Shepherd, *Faith Generation*, p. 117 – 149

⁵⁵ Centring practices for Shepherd are those that can be attributed to historic practices of Christian faith.

⁵⁶ Shepherd, *Faith Generation*, p. 117 – 149

⁵⁷ Youthscape and Scripture Union, *Feel Good news*

⁵⁸ Brian Hull and Patrick Mays, *Youth Ministry as Mission: a conversation about theology and culture*. Kregel Academic, 2022, pp, 141 – 3

propositional, approaches to truth are foundational to the way we as humans develop worldviews and understand our place in the world.⁵⁹ Stories, they say, tend to be more invitational and less confrontational, they can also emerge more quickly from a posture of listening first – both these approaches are seen in the way Jesus told stories (i.e. the parables) as a key component of his ministry, inviting listeners to respond to the ambiguity and oftentimes introducing a story in response to a question asked.⁶⁰

Furthermore, these characteristics of a story can enable gospel communication to take into account the culture or life circumstances of those with whom we are engaging,⁶¹ while also enabling them to find themselves in the story. Giving specific examples of storytelling methods Hull and Mays discuss testimony, thus echoing Shepherd and Root, but also the practice of ‘storying’. This involves a leader telling (not reading) a story from scripture and then inviting the listeners to make and share observations of what they notice. This might involve questions being asked by the leader and listeners, some which might have clear and confident answers, whereas others might not.⁶² Intriguingly and somewhat tantalisingly Hull and Mays conclude their discussion of story-telling by briefly mentioning the rise in creativity that young people can exhibit and are enabled to participate in through the digital age – sharing and telling stories in a variety of ways using a range of media. The authors point to how such creativity does not only play out within digital media but also through more traditional creative arts such as songwriting, spoken word, and painting.⁶³ These creative arts are rarely discussed in the youth ministry literature and little-used by practitioners,⁶⁴ but emerged as a theme picked up Andrew Root in input connected with this research project.⁶⁵

The question of space within gospel communication is raised by Shepherd’s matrix of practices for faith transmission. This is theme picked up Lloyd Harp who argues for the use of what he terms, ‘middle spaces’ in outreach work with young people.⁶⁶ Middle spaces are locations that are owned by neither the youth worker (and by extension the Christian community or church) or the young people. This then is a slightly different understanding of space than in what have become traditional approaches to incarnational youth ministry that involve meeting young people in their spaces.⁶⁷ However Harp argues for a use of space that is equally not church-based. Using spaces that he describes as ‘middle spaces’, provides a sense of neutral ground in which exploration with young people is facilitated. The significance of space is similarly discussed in amore conceptual rather than geographical sense by Scanlan, who argues that youth groups by their very nature provide neutral spaces that are ambiguous in their very nature by being neither fully church nor fully not church,

⁵⁹ NT Wright says something similar in his *New Testament and the People of God* (see p. 69)

⁶⁰ Hull and Mays, *Youth Ministry as Mission*, p. 152

⁶¹ As per Ward above.

⁶² Hull and Mays, *Youth Ministry as Mission*, p. 156

⁶³ Hull and Mays, *Youth Ministry as Mission*, p. 157

⁶⁴ See presentation of research to below

⁶⁵ See appendix for summary of direct input from Andrew Root.

⁶⁶ Lloyd Harp, *Middle Space Youth Work*, Monarch Books, 2022

⁶⁷ See Ward, *Youthwork* and Richard Passmore, *Meet Them Where They’re At*. Scripture Union, 2003.

even if meeting in a church building location.⁶⁸ It is perhaps then a combination of consideration of location and as well as how the space is conceived that is significant in gospel communication. As Shepherd discusses, the creation of distinctive space might be crucial.

Summary

In summary, this exploration of literature that relates to theme of this research – namely gospel communication among young people – through the lenses of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of communication three overlapping aspects might be discerned:

- **The story of the Christian faith**
 - Seen within the centring of the gospel as the rationale for youth ministry practice, as well as the call to be able to share simple summaries of this story, and to narrate our own and young people’s lives, especially experiences of negation within the framework of the narrative of Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- **The experience of Christian faith**
 - Articulated, for example, in Shepherd’s call for gospel faith to be communicated through practices that speak to identity, plausibility, and reliability, as well as the idea of the gospel carrying a specific vision of the good life that might allow space to play. The larger-scale narratives of freedom from oppression speak to the experience of the Christian faith and gospel that moves beyond the individual.
- **Encounter with the object of Christian faith.**
 - Ultimately, the gospel is the person, presence, and ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ, the object of Christian faith. The purpose of any gospel communication is to enable, or point to, an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ.

⁶⁸ Mark Scanlan, *An Interweaving Ecclesiology: the Church, Mission, and Young People*. SCM Press, 2022, pp. 159 - 167

Summative Report of the Research

Questionnaire Summary⁶⁹

As part of the St Mellitus College Seedcorn Research Project, a survey was conducted to ascertain what pedagogical strategies youth workers with 5+ years' experience use in their communication of the gospel with young people. Across 3 months, 38 experienced Christian youth workers responded to the questionnaire, sharing their responses as to how they communicate the gospel to young people. Participants, all with a minimum of five years in youth ministry, averaging 16 years, offered insights into their understanding of the gospel, communication strategies, effectiveness, and the challenges they face. Most respondents were aged 20–49, with a concentration in the 30–39 bracket. They represented a mix of full-time (50%), part-time, and volunteer roles, with nearly half holding formal youth work qualifications. The vast majority (79%) work for or with local churches, with 47% holding a formal youth work qualification.⁷⁰

Respondents were asked to define the gospel in their own words, with "Jesus" and "love" emerging as the most frequent themes, underlining their central role in gospel communication. When asked (Q.17) *“On a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 is not at all effective, and 10 is completely effective, how would you rate the overall effectiveness of your gospel communication among young people?”* the average self-assessed effectiveness score was 7.13 out of 10. Youth workers reported using various pedagogical methods, with shared experience (4.37/5) and storytelling (4.11/5) rated highest. Talks (3.84/5) and media use (3.79/5) were also common, while creative (2.84/5) and visual (2.47/5) arts were used far less frequently. Common resources included the Alpha Youth Series, Bible Project, Youthscape materials, and key biblical texts such as John 3:16, John 10:10 and Luke 15.

In asking youth workers to summarise the gospel in 100 words or less (Q.16) and what their key bible passages (Q.19) were in communicating the gospel, it was noted that John 3:16, captures the global element of faith “God so loved the world” but also the individual element of this verse. In the gospel summaries the largest focus was on individual salvation. With that arose questions around how we communicate a gospel that captures both the global and individual aspect of faith and if one more significant over the other.

In addition to gospel articulation, non-verbal communication of the gospel was also explored as a part of this project. Many respondents (24) agreed, totally or somewhat, that the gospel can be communicated without words, through love, action, hospitality, and authenticity, citing “how actions speak louder than words” and “authentic living” as key components in sharing the gospel amongst young people. However, 11 respondents expressed caution or disagreement, emphasising the importance of verbal articulation to avoid misinterpretation.

⁶⁹ See further detailed summary in the appendices

⁷⁰ There is a possible correlation between holding a youth work qualification and length of ministry. As noted, it was challenging to find people with 5+ years youth work experience.

Challenges facing youth workers include digital saturation, short attention spans, and low biblical literacy among Gen Z and Gen Alpha. Yet there is also a strong sense of opportunity: young people are seen as spiritually open, hope and justice-oriented, and eager for authenticity and meaningful relationships. Most workers operate primarily in church settings, with fewer using community, home, or online spaces regularly. Social media and online tools were not widely used, though recognised as areas for growth. Storytelling and shared experience proved the most popular in gospel communication, with engagement with the arts proving least effective or least utilised.

The research points to the need for ongoing theological and pedagogical training, resourcing for creative and digital communication strategies, and intentional reflection on how relational and embodied ministry can help communicate the gospel in ways that resonate with younger generations.

Focus Group Summaries

The focus groups consisted of ten experienced youth workers who had completed the questionnaire. They represented a range of contexts for their youth ministry, including large and small local churches, national and diocesan level roles, as well as one employed by a parachurch organisation. There were six male and four female youth workers present, with over a hundred years combined experience in youth ministry.

We held two focus groups at the beginning and end of a theological study day. The opening focus group picked up on some key themes from the survey, exploring them more deeply, whereas the focus group at the end of the day reflected on the morning's conversation, whilst also drawing on the topics raised in the study day.⁷¹

Below, we detail the key themes from the conversations in each focus group, making connections with the survey findings and aspects of the literature summarised earlier. In the write-up below, we have collated the distinct voices of the participants into a single summary 'voice' of the focus group. This is not to eliminate the individuality of those involved but rather to recognise that the themes and concepts developed through analysis of the discussions and articulated below are those for which there was palpable agreement and resonance within the focus group. In this way, through these themes, the group could be considered as speaking with one voice.

Morning Focus Group

Theme 1 – individual vs global gospel

⁷¹ See summary of this content in the appendix

The opening discussion focussed on the bible verse that was most cited in the survey in relation to Gospel communication – John 3:16.² The question posed highlighted that this verse contains both a message of individual – whoever believes – and global – God so loved the world – salvation, whereas the gospel summaries from the survey almost exclusively focussed on the message for individual people.

In keeping with the idea from the literature summary that relationships are the fuel on which youth ministry travels, and that ‘through relationships’ is a key element of the ‘how’ of gospel communication, relationships were a central theme in this discussion. The focus on the message of the gospel for individuals was seen to be a result of a relational focus, that centred on young people themselves rather than on events that draw them in. This was linked the drive youth workers feel, develop through training and instinct, to work contextually. This naturally focusses the youth worker on the particular, rather than general. We might say on the ‘whoever’ in front of them. Context, it was noted, is individualised both in the sense of being specific but also that the cultural climate is one in which the individual is paramount. Individualism is linked in this way to inclusivity. To consider each young person individually is to allow for them to feel welcome and able to join in.

When pushed about a larger vista for understanding and communicating the gospel, rather than the conversation turning to discuss the global vision found in scripture of all things being made new,³ or the sense of freedom from oppressive or violent forces as discussed by Lief and Corrie in the literature, the focus group turned to the role or place of big events in communicating the gospel to individuals. Discussion of seed sowing, invoking the parable of the Sower as example,⁴ and the role of activities such as school assemblies in cultivating a context through which opportunities for more individual response might emerge. One participant shared an example of mentoring some teenage boys in a local school who at one point recalled the message the youth worker had shared in an assembly quite some time ago.

Of interest here though is the way that the gospel is understood primarily as a message of hope and salvation for humans to respond to individually, rather than something in which the structures of human society and / or the created order itself might be transformed and freed from bondage. It was noted however that some classic apologetic questions are still pertinent to young people – questions around suffering and social justice are key and present potential stumbling blocks for young people hearing and responding to the gospel. There are perhaps resonances here with the *Translating God* research finding from Youthscape that young people seem to be surprisingly comfortable with the idea of a powerful, sovereign God who is ultimately in charge despite present conditions, though the connection between the sovereign and powerful God with the intimate and relational God revealed in Jesus Christ was less apparent.

The final aspect of this opening discussion to highlight is the impact of digital culture in the way young people engage in communication forms. There was a feeling among the group that the culture of social media in which communication in the form of posts broadcast to large groups of followers may evoke a quick reaction in the form of likes or shares, but not much

longer-term impact, spills into the offline world such that larger group communication may rarely land in a lasting manner. There a sense of being able to open a conversation in a larger gathering but not getting the response, as this will come individually through relationships.

Theme 2 – open but distracted young people

When asking what the opportunities and challenges are for effective gospel communication among young people in the current climate the survey produced two fascinating but potentially juxtaposed responses – young people were seen to be a generation who were open yet distracted.

The sense of openness resonates with other recent research,⁵ and as noted in the summary of findings from the survey is related to an awareness of spirituality, a lack of prior baggage when it comes to the Christian faith, and a willingness to think deeply or wrestle with big questions. Furthermore, the desire for a hopeful message that might counter the despair of a messed-up world.

The challenge of distractedness was focussed on the role of technology in two distinct but related ways – the impression that social media engagement has led to shorter attentions spans and a tendency toward boredom as well as the number of voices competing for attention of young people makes it tough to be heard.

The focus group participants considered the question of how the paradox of open but distracted might impact gospel communication. One participant opened reflections on this theme by sharing the experience of working with young people in a school-based group where it was often difficult to engage the young people even though they wanted to be there, because they were coming from lessons in which they were required to focus and behave. They were not in the right frame of mind to listen, however a switch in the format of the group from teaching to practice-based input in which the young people were asked to do and / or focus on something (even something simple such as a lit tealight candle. Here the openness and distraction came together in a form of communication – draw them into action, encourage embodied responses, the participant concluded. Young people are open to having a go at spiritual practices and action can counter the distractedness as it engages a wider range of senses. In agreement to this another participant reflected on cultural reflections from author and thinker Tyler Staton that young people don't need 'convince me' approaches but 'show me' approaches.

Drawing young people into active, embodied practices and responses opened a discussion about different ways this might look in engaging the open / distracted paradox. One suggestion is that this begins by recognising that for young people who are used to being always on and engaged in some stimulation, stopping can be disarming. Consequently, the provision of safe spaces is essential – spaces in which young people can relax and feel able to switch off from digital engagement for a period. There are resonances here of the importance

of space, be it ‘third spaces’ or otherwise, from the literature summary. Play was discussed as important within this,⁶ allowing young people the opportunity to relax and have fun with each other might mitigate the distractedness and cultivate an environment in which the cultural openness of young people can emerge. It is important for adults to model something of this as well – it is all well and good lamenting the digitally shaped distraction of young people whilst not recognising the pull it has on adult youth workers too.

Furthermore, drawing young people into embodied actions and responses, with something to do that helps with focus can assist those with forms of neurodivergence who naturally find listening and engaging otherwise more difficult.

Theme 3 – shared experience and storytelling

The survey highlighted shared experience and storytelling as the most common or popular forms of gospel communication among young people. The focus group provided an opportunity to explore what made these effective and necessary strategies, as well as demonstrating how closely related they are.

Although this connection wasn’t made directly by participants there is of course commonality between the idea of embodied action and shared experiences, which might be considered communal embodied action. Fascinatingly the first response from the focus group participants connected share experience and story as such experiences are a form lived out story, bringing authenticity to what is talked about in the group. Shared experience creates connection with and between young people, while being able to demonstrate what it is that we believe as the Christian community.

Alongside this is the sense of adventure that can come from shared experience. There was a reflection that young people risk lives that are dull, so creating opportunities to do things together helps young people escape boredom and can connect this adventure with the Christian gospel. Again, although not a connection made directly, this relates to the concept of life in all its fullness that was highlighted as a key biblical concept in the survey and explored as the vision of the good life in the literature.

Some participants in the group had attended a public lecture hosted by St Mellitus College with Andrew Root the night before and cited the themes from his lecture as key to understanding this too. In this lecture Root offered a critique of what he termed the ‘therapeutic turn in youth ministry’ in which, mirroring moves in contemporary secular culture and reflected in the pseudo-gospel of moralistic therapeutic deism, inner happiness is the ultimate good or goal. This innerspace he contrasted with ‘inter-space’ which exists between persons in relationship and in which both the other and Christ might be encountered.

Shared experience creates corporate moments in which such ‘inter-spaces’ are created and experienced. This was connected by one participant to the concept of ‘mutual exchange’⁷ in

which the other, in this case young people, know that their voice is heard and they have the space. This creates agency and ownership for the young person, and it is in this space that each other's stories can be heard and that the story lived out can be repeated in stories told. There was a sense that storytelling and story sharing is a form of shared experience and is creates the relational interspace in a way that more propositional teaching doesn't. Furthermore, as with Jesus' use of storytelling in his ministry, such interspace allows and almost expects corporate reaction and response to the story that is told and experienced.

Theme 4 – Life in all its fullness

The final theme explored in the first focus group sought to unpack the idea of life in all its fullness which is central to John 10:10, the second most cited Bible verse by the survey respondents in relation to gospel communication. The question was simply asked what might fullness of life look like for young people in Generations Z and A?

Some of the responses seemed to flow directly from the discussion that already taken place in the group – love and being loved, belonging, connection, and relationship were widely mentioned. Alongside this were broader concepts of wholeness, purpose, and shalom to perhaps bring a sense that through the gospel of Jesus Christ life might be held together as it is supposed to be amid the turmoil and challenges of life. This is echoed in the theme of hope that was also discussed here – life in all its fullness has a future dimension, that we might begin to experience now as shalom or purpose. Fascinatingly, two participants picked up on ideas of cost and suffering, both related to the idea of being called to something in the gospel.

Bringing these different ideas together then a vision of life in its fullness or, to use the language discussed in the literature summary, of the good life, is knowing love through connection that brings hope, wholeness and purpose, but that, like Christ submitting to the cross, entering this fullness of life might involve some form of cost or suffering.

Afternoon Focus Group

This final focus group provided an open space for participants to reflect together on themes that had emerged from the morning focus group discussion as well as the input and plenary sessions throughout the theological study day. The ideas from the study day that were at the forefront of participants minds were the two narratives of secular spiritualities of the 'inner genius' and the 'heroic', both of which offer some echo of the Christian gospel but detached from the narrative arc of Jesus life, death, and resurrection. Both however provide implicit salvation narratives, but one in which the salvation story is focussed on the self, rather than the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Fascinatingly, given that cost and suffering were mentioned in relation to life in all its fullness is the first focus group, the alternative to these secular spiritualities was titled by Root as the way of surrender and confession. Implicitly this being a way of letting go of and

decentring ourselves and allowing our lives to find meaning not in our own narrative arc but in surrendering to, and therefore participating in the, the death and resurrection of Christ.

The conversation that was sparked with these ideas at the forefront began with a reflection on the importance of lament as a Christian practice that carries rich promise for youth ministry. Lament might be valuable as it provides a means through which negative emotions, experiences, and stories might be brought appropriately to God and processed. The role of the Psalms and therefore the arts in articulating lament was mentioned within this.

A further reflection offered was of the importance of helping young people see the worldviews they are living under and that the study day had given some language to help with this, perhaps making it easier to articulate why the secular worldviews young people live under are not satisfying. A challenge raised within this conversation was that surrender and confession that are key to the gospel are not modelled in ways that young people naturally understand and they are difficult to communicate. Two ideas were mooted to perhaps engage with this – sacramental theology and the monastic tradition – both of which point to practices as central to the communication and lived experience of faith. Raising the theme of sacramental theology led to a conversation about the role of Eucharist in youth ministry, as well as the challenges of this in some traditions. It was noted in the discussion that there were connections with earlier focus group focus on shared experience and embodied practice being as key to gospel communication with young people.

A critical moment in the discussion came when a participant, reflecting on what had been discussed throughout the day, suggested that what was key were: *practices that enable encounter*. This phrase seemed to capture some of the core ideas emerging from the conversations – for example around shared experience, embodied action, openness and distraction.

In response to this summary phrase, the researchers facilitating the focus group,⁸ took the opportunity to offer reflections on the way certain themes seemed to be coalescing around the concept of practices that enable encounter. Specifically, the way in which shared experience, storytelling, the importance of connection with the Christian narrative, a vision of the life in its fullness that includes cost but leads to wholeness, as well as the significance of surrender and confession in countering the self-centred, secular spiritualities of inner genius and the heroic all point to the central significance of the sacrament of Eucharist.

In the Eucharist, the gospel narrative is retold, in a shared, embodied practice, that makes space for surrender and confession, enabling encounter with the risen Jesus, signposting hope until he comes. This is the ultimate practice that enables encounter and might be reclaimed as a vital component of gospel communication with young people in this cultural moment. And that the sacramentality of this core practice of the Christian community might signpost to the sacramental possibility in other shared experience and ritual, as well as the importance of such practices being embedded in or narrated through the central story of Christ's death and resurrection.

Although not encapsulating every idea or theme from the survey and focus groups there was a sense of agreement and resonance from the participants that sacramental practices that enable encounter, with the Eucharist as key, was a helpful and accurate (if somewhat surprising some acknowledged!) way of drawing many of the key themes from both focus group discussions and the study day together.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Drawing together themes and areas from across the literature summary, survey responses, and focus group discussions there are three conclusions and recommendations we would like to make:

- A focus on practices that enable encounter within gospel communication
- A renewed focus on the role of art and the artistic to facilitate gospel communication
- Ensuring space for corporate theological reflection for Christian youth workers.

Practices that enable encounter

Central to gospel communication for young people is the shared experience of embodiment, which enables encounters with one another and Jesus Christ. Such shared experiences enable relationships, connect with the openness of young people, whilst also being embodied and active, help to mitigate the distractedness noted among young people.

Practices that enable encounters should be rooted in the Christian narrative, either through the nature of the practice itself or the way stories are told as part of the shared experience. In this way, the practice might become sacramental as it facilitates an encounter with Jesus Christ. Reclaiming Eucharistic practice is key as it brings shared experience, encounter, and narrative together in the classic sacramental ritual of the Christian community. In addition to this, embodied practices such as moving toward the altar or lighting a candle in prayer allow young people to physically experience the activity of prayer in ways that encourage their whole selves to participate in these moments of encounter.

Practices that enable encounter truly consider the pedagogical difference in how we all experience faith, and ensure activities are a reflection of embodied practice.

The place of the artistic

This is noted as a key theme largely in its absence from current practice, as highlighted in the survey responses. It is an area that was also previously only mentioned in the literature, albeit briefly, in relation to storytelling.⁷² This theme was also absent in the focus group conversations, other than a brief mention in relation to the practice of lament being expressed through the poetic. The artistic however was identified as one way of creating the ‘inter-space’ that is necessary for encountering others in relationship.⁷³

⁷² See reference to Hull and Mays in the literature summary above.

⁷³ This was reflected on in Andrew Roots, SMC/Youthscape lecture.

The absence of artistic approaches to encounter and storytelling in the practice of Christian youth workers suggests that this is an area in which further discussion and perhaps training is required. For creative arts to be utilized in youth ministry, it needs to be participatory.

Andy Root's photography example was practical because it involved content creation with both parties, and a facilitator was present to teach photography skills. Moreover, young people are constantly taking photos, so it was a familiar practice that was slowed down to encourage encounters and sustained engagement. Any engagement with art usually stems from some form of participation, an emotion that it evokes. Within this shift in the role of the artist in youth ministry, we hope this will highlight the fact that the deepest form of beauty lies in our connections, and art pushes us deeper into connection with one another, and God.

Spaces for corporate theological reflection for youth workers

One outcome of the methods used in this research, especially the focus groups that topped and tailed a theological study day for youth workers, was the value found by the participants in the space provided for both receiving input and reflecting together about their practice in light of that input. This resonates with findings from previous Common Awards Seedcorn research, which found that Christian youth workers were naturally reflective in their work but felt that more space was needed to be more intentional about this. Additionally, opportunities for reflecting together with others were desired but often absent.⁷⁴

Consequently, we recommend that TEIs consider hosting further study days for Christian youth workers, providing space for theologically rich and challenging input alongside opportunities to reflect and think together about practice in the light of this input. Gospel communication with young people will be enhanced by such opportunities for learning and reflection.

⁷⁴ Published by Youthscape Centre for Research as, Phoebe Hill, "Theological Reflection in Youth Ministry", 2020.

Appendices

Questionnaire Visual Report

This report was given to participants of the focus groups for discussion.

St Mellitus College Seedcorn Research Project⁷⁵
“Pedagogical Strategies in Gospel Communication: A Study of How Christian Youth Workers Share the Gospel with Young People”
Conducted by Dr Mark Scanlan and Jessica Norman.

TL;DR

This research explores the pedagogical strategies employed by Christian youth workers with **five or more years of experience** in communicating the gospel to young people,⁷⁶ focusing on their understanding of the gospel, their approach, effectiveness, and the challenges that they face. This study surveyed **38 youth workers**, with an average of **16 years of experience working with young people**.

Overview

- **38 respondents**, most respondents aged 20–49, with a concentration in the 30–39 group
 - Average experience in youth ministry: **16 years**
 - Employment:
 - 19 full-time (on average 18 years experience, 10 with formal youth work qualification)
 - 9 part-time (on average 11 years experience, 7 with formal youth work qualification)
 - 9 volunteers (on average 9 years experience, 3 with formal youth work qualification)
 - **47% hold a formal youth work qualification**
 - **79% work for the local church in some capacity**
 - **Activities include:**⁷⁷
 - **Church:** youth worship, small groups, Bible studies.
 - **Community:** schools work, lunch clubs, detached youth work.
 - **Online:** social media engagement and digital content.
-

⁷⁵ A research project funded by the Common Awards Seedcorn Grant.

⁷⁶ A requirement of this research was that participants had 5+ years' experience of youth work, which reduced our sample size, as many invited to participate did not yet have 5+ year's experience in youth work.

⁷⁷ Youth work meeting spaces:

90% met weekly in church.

51% met weekly in the community. 21% did not at all.

15% met weekly at home. 66% did not at all.

13% met weekly online. 79% did not at all.

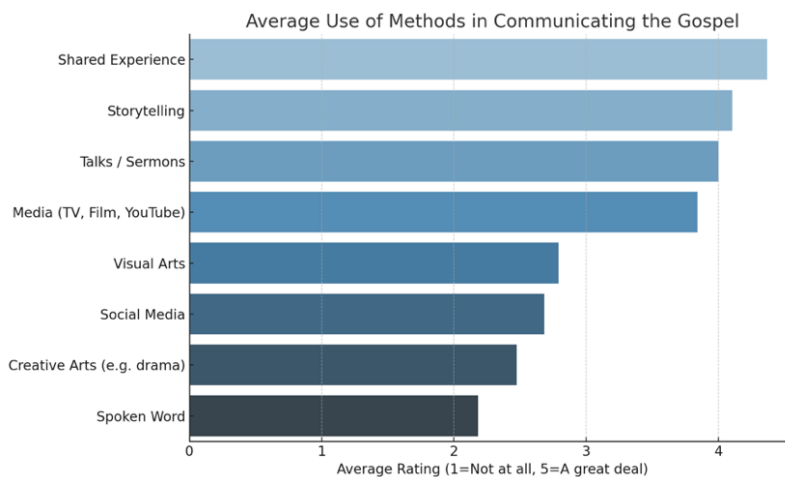
Gospel Communication

The most common themes in respondents' summaries of the Gospel are "Jesus" (60 mentions) and "love" (41 mentions), highlighting their central importance in gospel communication. Keywords highlighted in this image:

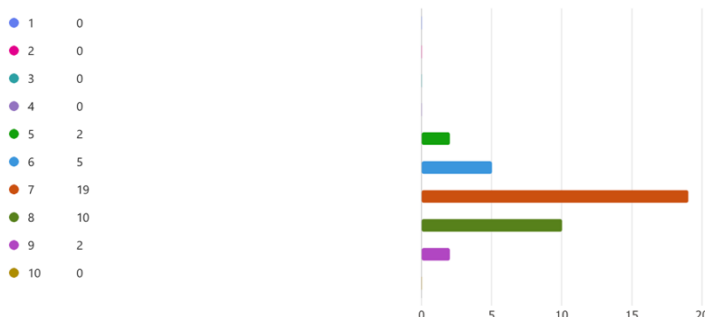
Love
Forgiveness
Grace
Jesus
Relationship
Sin
Cross
Resurrection
New Life

Q.17: *On a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 is not at all effective, and 10 is completely effective, how would you rate the overall effectiveness of your gospel communication among young people?* **7.13**

- **Most-used pedagogical tools (rating 1-5):**
 - Shared experience (4.37)
 - Storytelling (4.11)
 - Talks/sermons (3.84)
 - Media (YouTube, film) (3.79)
- **Least-used (rating 1-5):**
 - Creative arts (2.84)
 - Visual arts (2.47)
 - Spoken word (2.18)



17. On a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 is not at all effective, and 10 is completely effective, how would you rate the overall effectiveness of your gospel communication among young people?



Non-verbal Gospel Communication

Key themes in explanations about communicating the gospel without words include "**love**" (23 mentions) and "**action**" (19 mentions), suggesting an emphasis on demonstrating the gospel through behaviour and relational interactions.

"It is possible to communicate the gospel to young people without direct verbal communication or words."

- Totally agree: 9 — "Actions speak louder than words", "authentic living", and visual storytelling.
- Somewhat agree: 15 — Belonging before believing; the power of welcome.
- Neither agree nor disagree: 3 — Concern about misinterpretation without verbal context.
- Somewhat disagree: 6 — Emphasise teaching and articulation of the gospel.
- Totally disagree: 5 — Words necessary to communicate theological meaning.

Resources for Gospel Communication

Summaries of the Gospel commonly include:

- Relationship with Jesus
- Hope, forgiveness, and restoration
- Kingdom values and justice

Most common biblical passage cited for gospel communication: John 3:16, John 10:10, Romans 5:8, Luke 15, Micah 6:8

Key resources: Alpha Youth Series, Bible Project, Youthscape, Energize, books, podcasts, Logos, Young Life

General reflections:

Challenges & Opportunities with Gen Z and Alpha

- Short attention spans and digital saturation
- Spiritual openness but low biblical literacy
- A need for authenticity, relational engagement, and embodied witness

Summary:

- There is an openness to the gospel amongst young people at the moment
 - o They are open to meaning and hope
 - o Keen to engage in big questions
 - o They long for authenticity
 - o To see social justice and transformation
- However:
 - o Persistent distractions and the attention of young people make it difficult to engage
 - o They are open, but not necessarily willing to engage with the idea of absolute truth
- The online space is seen as both a challenge & distraction, as well as an opportunity, and social media is not used by many youth workers in sharing the gospel.
- There is a possible correlation between holding a youth work qualification and length of ministry. As noted, it was challenging to find people with 5+ years youth work experience.

- Storytelling and shared experience proved the most popular in gospel communication, with engagement with the arts proving least effective or least utilised.

Implications of this research:

- **Training:** ongoing theological and pedagogical training to enhance confidence and effectiveness.
- **Resourcing:** invest in digital tools and arts-based strategies to diversify communication of the gospel narrative. Particularly in online spaces or employing online tools in youth work settings.
- **Relational ministry:** reflect on how hospitality, inclusion, and authentic relationships make it possible to effectively communicate the gospel and God's love in both verbal and non-verbal ways.
- **Balance of method:** encourage reflective practice that combines verbal proclamation with creative, visual, and embodied strategies.
- **Biblical fluency:** Develop materials that connect narrative, doctrine, and cultural context for Gen Z and Alpha.

Detailed analysis of Key Survey Questions 16 and 19:

Question 16 asked respondents to write a summary of the gospel in fewer than 100 words. The key themes in these summaries (with respondent number in brackets, so the more numbers the more respondents who included this theme) were as follows:

- **The good news** (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 12, 18, 23, 34) **of God's love** (2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 33, 35, 36) **expressed in Jesus** (all but 5, 8, & 33), **predominantly through his death** (2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 38) **and resurrection** (2, 9, 18, 19, 21, 23, 27, 31, 32, 34, 35, 38). **Return of Christ** (only mentioned twice – 19, 21)
- **Begins with creation** (creation of the world – 6, 10, 15, 31; creation of humans – 2, 3, 6, 16)
- **A response to sin and a dealing with or saving from sin** (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 33, 35)
 - Paying the price (7, 8, 24, 28)
- **Individual good news**
 - Loves us / you (2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 24, 29, 33, 36)
 - Forgiveness (2, 4, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 27, 30, 34, 35)
 - Purpose (5, 22)
 - Fullness of life (9, 20, 22, 25, 34)
 - Freedom (13, 22, 34)
 - Relationship with God (2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 15, 17, 19, 24, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36)
 - Relationship with others (5, 34)
 - Relationship more broadly – with ourselves (5, 24)
- **Global good news**
 - Making all things new / restoring the world (10, 11, 19, 32, 38)
 - Defeating death and evil (14, 15, 29, 33)
 - Related to 'issues' (1,

Other words:

- Grace (11, 18, 23, 30, 33)
- Hope (12, 18, 21, 25, 31, 33, 34, 37)
- Peace (22, 33, 34)
- Rescue (21, 24, 34)
- Justice (4, 21, 33)
- Heal / restore (5, 11, 18, 30, 31, 34)

Question 19 asked respondents to name any Bible verse that are key in their gospel understanding / communication (with tally of number of mentions – no tally means a single mention):

Most mentions:

John 3:16 (God so loved the world) iiiiiiii

John 10:10 (life in its fulness) iiiiii

Genesis 1 (creation) iii

Three mentions:

John 1:14 (word become flesh) iii

Romans 3:23 (all have sinned) iii

Romans 6:23 (free gift of eternal life – dead to sin alive to Christ) iii

Eph 2:8 – 9(it is by grace we have been saved) iii

John 13:34 & 15:12 (love one another) iii

Luke 19 – Zaccheus (transformation) iii

Psalms 139 (created by God) iii

Two mentions:

Matthew 28:19 – 20 (great commission) ii

1 Cor 15:3 – 4 (gospel summary) ii

Matthew 5 (Sermon on the mount) ii

Ephesians 1 ii

1 Tim 4:12 (don't let anyone look down on you...) ii

Luke 24 (Emmaus) ii

Single mention:

Eph 2:10 (we are God's workmanship)

Romans 15:13

Romans 5:8

Romans 1:16

Romans 10:9 (confess with your mouth)

Romans 10:13 (everyone who call on the name)

Psalms 91

Exodus 14 (crossing the red sea)

Parable of Wedding Banquet

Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13 (pearl of great price)

Isaiah 58 (justice for the world)

1 Peter 2:9 (you are a chosen people)

1 Peter 5:7 (cast your anxieties onto him)

Psalm 23 (God's care, shepherding)
Philippians 4:6 – 7 (do not be anxious)
1 Cor 5:7 (new creation)
John 4 ii (meeting woman where she is at)
Luke 4:17 – 19 (spirit of the Lord is upon me)
Luke 5 – (Calling of Levi)
Acts 17 (Paul in Athens)
John 2 (Cana – transformation)
Luke 7 (anointed by a woman)
Luke 15 (prodigal son) i
Mark 10:14 (let the little children come)
Mark 12:30 – 31 (love your neighbour as yourself)
1 Peter 3:15 (always be prepared to give an answer)
1 Cor 9:19 – 23 (becoming like... to win)
Gal 5:1 (it is for freedom)
James 1:19

SMC/Youthscape Lecture – Monday 9th June 2025

“Anxious about a Generation: Exploring a Theology of Well-being for Young People”

Context: Adolescence in a Disrupted Space

- Adolescence is always formed within a space—cultural, social, and relational.
- Today, that space is increasingly digital, primarily through social media.
- This digital migration correlates with a rise in youth mental health issues.
- *Shift in youth ministry*: From educator → to missionary → to therapeutic companion.

The Online Social World:

- Nick Couldry: “We handed over to business the design of our social world.”
- Big Tech now curates the space where young people form identity and connection.
- Social media is not just a tool but a primary space of being for young people.
- It creates a causal relationship with well-being (correlation with possible causes).

Addiction, Loneliness, and Comparison

- Social media is addictive, which corrupts the social—turns it into anti-social.
- Addiction isolates: instead of people, you find data.
- Comparison culture dominates: “There can be no place for love inside comparison” – *Kierkegaard*.
- Constant competition erodes true relationality and identity formation.

Theological Responses: What Does Youth Ministry Look Like Now?

The Youth Worker’s Role Is Evolving:

- **Educator** (teaching)
- **Missionary** (cross-cultural translation)
- **Therapeutic Presence** (accompaniment and healing)

Bonhoeffer: If you love the *idea* of the church, you don’t really love the church — a warning against abstraction.

Youth Ministry as “Creating Interspace”

- **John Swinton**: Concern about TikTok’s “auto-diagnosis” culture.
- Ministry must **resist isolation and abstraction** by crafting spaces of genuine encounter.

Interspace: Theology of Encounter

- Inner space (private, individualised) vs. interspace (shared, relational, sacred).
- Nicene Creed and poetry invite us into mystery, beauty, and *being addressed*.
- Art and poetry (esp. visual art) awaken discourse with the Other.
 - A photography project where young people were taught how to use a camera and then take pictures and capture the other person. This continued to poetry writing as well.
- Charles Taylor and the importance of *openness to transcendence*.

✪ *Mary’s Magnificat* as the culmination of the Psalms: Luther – “Who am I?” Mary’s response to being addressed is humility and transformation.

Personhood and the Sacred

- To be addressed is a sacred and transforming act—youth ministry must centre on this.
- Beauty is relational—the deepest beauty lies in connections, not consumption.

- Holiness arises where interspace is nurtured: spaces of worship, hospitality, call and response.

Key Theological Insight:

- Youth ministry today is a theological practice of creating sacred, interpersonal space—an interspace.
- This space resists the logic of addiction and comparison and becomes a site of encounter, healing, and transformation.

Seedcorn Study Day Summative Report – Tuesday 10th June 2025

The Cultural Landscape: Navigating Spiritualities

- Charles Taylor’s **Nova Effect** describes the explosion of spiritual options in modernity—people are navigating a “buffet” of spiritualities.
- There’s **wider access to ways of living well**, but this comes with confusion and fragmentation.
- We live in **polarised times**, but not simply between two sides—**three distinct moral/spiritual currents** are in tension:

Three Paradigms of Moral Order (T1, T2, T3)

Type	Characteristics	Spiritual Pathway
T1 – Counter-Enlightenment (external)	Rejects modern moral order and the transcendent; focuses on will to power , heroic self-assertion	Heroic action, radical freedom
T2 – Exclusive Humanism (internal)	Pursuit of human flourishing within immanence; “inner genius”	Authenticity, self-expression
T3 – Transcendent / Beyonders	Belief in something beyond immanent flourishing—surrender to something greater	Surrender, confession, grace

☞ *Martin Hägglund*: “If you believe in something beyond this life, you will waste this life” — captures the tension between T2 and T3.

Competing Anthropologies

- **Augustine**: We are bound in sin and need external grace.
- **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**: We are inherently good; it is society that corrupts us.
- These reflect different assumptions about what it means to be human.

Bon Iver’s lyric: “And at once I knew that I was not magnificent” – a moment of existential humility.

Popular Memoir as Spiritual Genre

Memoirs are popular because they often follow **transformational spiritual pathways**—they transcend ordinary life. They embody spiritual quests across the spectrum:

- **Nature** (e.g., *The Salt Path*): Overcoming adversity through heroic journeying.
- **Vocation** (*Yes, Chef*): Total life dedication to a craft; “transcendence through mastery.”
- **Sickness** (*Brain on Fire, Between Two Kingdoms*): Redemptive endurance, self-overcoming.
- **Exercise** (yoga, running): Salvation through self-discipline and body focus.
- **Romance** (*Out East*): Knowing oneself through intimacy.
- **Parenting** (*The Argonauts*): Blending rebellion and tradition; transformation through family.
- **Talent Discovery** (*Broken Horses, Educated*): Education as salvation; inner genius revealed.
- **Beyonders** (e.g., *When Breath Becomes Air, The Recovering*): Confronting death, grief, and addiction; yearning for surrender and meaning beyond self.

Underlying question in all: “What saves me?”

Often the answer is: **the self**—but the realisation dawns: *the self may not be enough*.

Christian Engagement

- Christianity can speak into all three narratives but **invites a deeper story**:
 - It critiques the idolatry of the self.
 - It meets the yearning for transcendence (T3) with **grace, surrender, and resurrection hope**.
 - It reframes heroic action (T1) and self-flourishing (T2) within **the story of Christ**.
- The **Gospel offers a richer anthropology**: not self-made, but God-given.

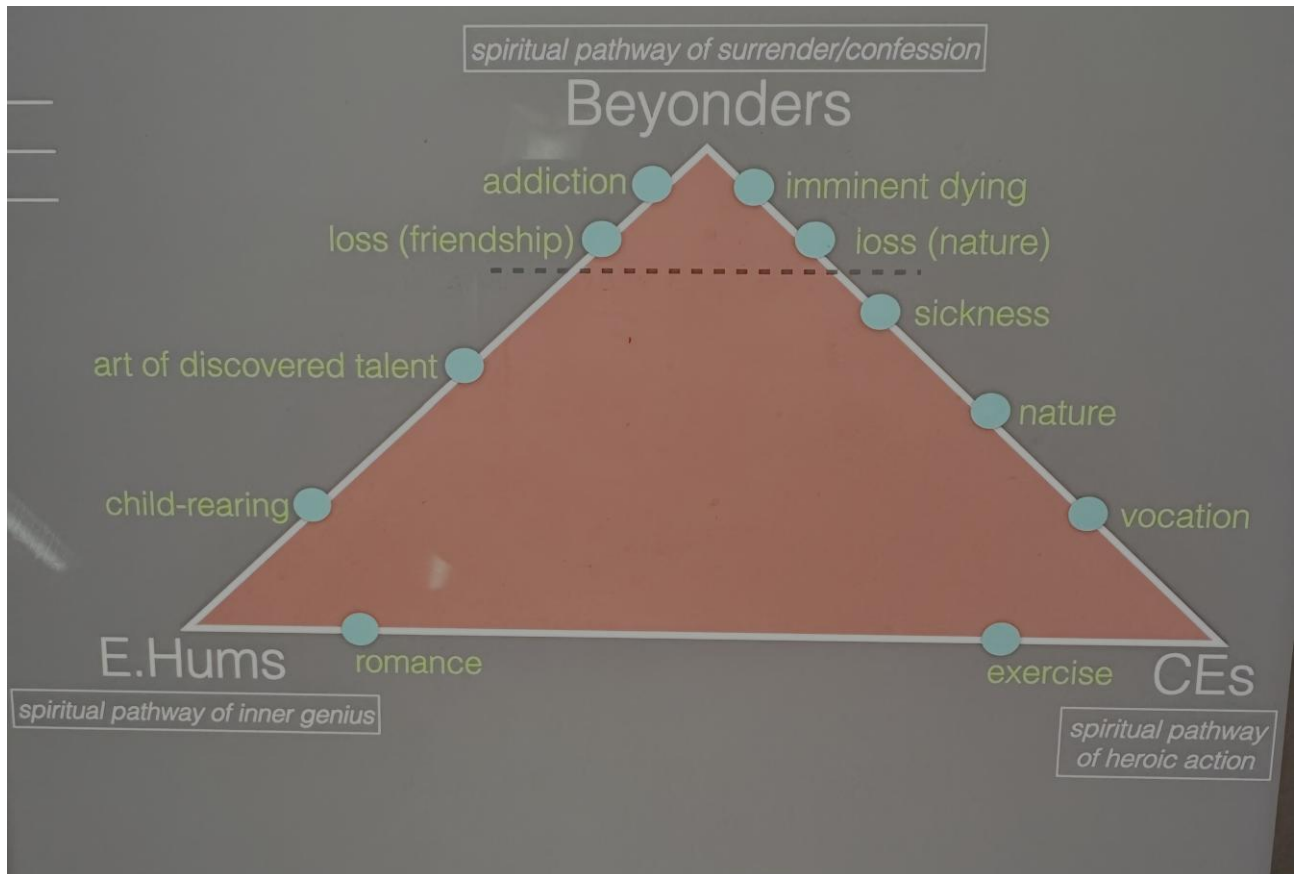


Image – Prof. Andrew Root, Seedcorn Study Day