

**The Missiological and Ecclesiological Implications of the Digital Revolution on
Emerging Adults**

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Abstract

Cultural and sociological changes have resulted in the emergence of a distinct life phase between adolescence and adulthood known as emerging adulthood. Alongside this has been the rapid onset of technological change in by a digital revolution that has had far reaching effects. Both these phenomena have changed the landscape for mission and church for emerging adults. The question addressed by this paper is how mission and church practice will adapt, respond and develop if it going to be effective in reaching emerging adults in a digital world. Necessarily it takes into account missiological and ecclesiological factors as well as cultural and sociological literature and considerations of neurology. It is exclusively literature review, seeking to examine the salient features of both emerging adulthood and the digital revolution and explore and critique missiological and ecclesiological responses to them. It finds that to reach out and create community for this age group represents a significant challenge due to the extent of the changes. The implications mean that greater digital involvement, increased investment in youth ministry and a shift towards greater participation and empowerment is required in effective mission and ecclesial communities.

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Thanks

Jesus for living and dying for me

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Introduction

The prevailing culture has always been the amniotic fluid in which a generation grows and in which the mission of God takes place.¹ In the past decades, this fluid has been transformed by rapid and seismic technological change.² Furthermore the characteristics of the emerging generation maturing in this environment are undergoing their own revolution. In both these elements there is found a very real challenge in the field of missiology. This paper seeks to identify the effects of dramatic digital change alongside the interrelated salient features of emerging adults and consider and propose how the church and its missionaries may respond.

The commentators write with urgency, bemoaning the lack of serious research in such a prevalent area of life, emphasising the limited time window of drawing upon the experience of those who knew life before the internet and the need to, 'reflect on the meaning of the inventions that we have brought to be, and which are having a profound influence in every part of daily life.'³ The urgency for us to consider the matter is multi-faceted. From a sociological point of view, a greater awareness of the dangers,⁴ which are only beginning to be fully realised, lead to 'a point of inflection, where we can see the costs and start to take action.'⁵ From an ecclesiological perspective, the serious challenges the church is facing in terms of haemorrhaging numbers of young adults are causing leaders to seek immediate action. The Evangelical Alliance's recent research found that numbers of those attending church in the 20-29 age group, 'declined from 520,900 in 1985 to 230,600 in 2005, a decline of 62%.'⁶ Finally, from a missiological viewpoint, the urgency comes from the size of the emerging generation and its resultant influence,

¹ See D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 447-8 for a summary of mission as inculturation.

² H. Gardner & K. Davis, *The App Generation* (London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 51-52 More evidence and debate to follow.

³ J. Lynch, *The Scent of Lemons* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2012), p. 3.

⁴ A. Thomas, *Digital Disciple* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2011), p. 93.

⁵ S. Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), p. 296.

⁶ K. Walker, *20-30s and the Church: A Statistical Overview*, p. 3.

<http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/upload/20-30s-and-the-church-A-Statistical-Overview.pdf> Accessed 13/12/14

‘Generation Y’s sheer size will make sure it makes its mark on the world in a way Generation X never did.’⁷ This paper strives to meet the pressing need in these areas.

In research, a reflexive statement is helpful as it allows the reader to understand something of the context and motivation of the author.⁸ As a youth evangelist for over ten years, passionate about the local church and digital technology and having navigated emerging adulthood I write from a perspective having observed the changes taken place and see the need for change if we are to be effective moving forwards. My desire in this paper is to improve evangelistic practice and explore principles for the local church to consider in improving engagement with this age group.

This dissertation has three stages. The first priority will be to establish the definition, extent and prevalence of both ‘the digital revolution’ and ‘emerging adults’. Secondly the dominant and most influential themes will be taken from both these areas and debate the challenges and opportunities that they present for mission and church. The final part will synthesise and propose both principles and practicalities for a way forward in each discipline.

1. A Distinct Generation

There is a subtle difference in the way that commentators approach the definition and description of emerging adults. For some it is time bound; they are describing a specific group of people at a certain age at a certain time. Savage et al give an overview of the generations and prescribe ‘Generation Y’ as being those born after 1982.⁹ Orr-Ewing and Orr-Ewing ear mark their ‘Millennials’ as those born between 1975 and 1994¹⁰ in contrast to Howe and Strauss who use the same label for new-

⁷ R. Huntley, *The World According to Y* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2006), p. 11.

⁸ For the further value of which see G. Bolton, *Reflexive Practice* 3rd edn (London: Sage, 2010), p. 19-21.

⁹ S. Savage, S. Mayo-Collins, B. Mayo & G. Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), p. 4.

¹⁰ A. Orr-Ewing & F. Orr-Ewing, *Millennials* (London: Latimer Minister Press, 2010), p. 22.

borns of 1982 to 2000¹¹. These represent a limited view. Much more preferable and sensible is to treat emerging adulthood as a life stage through which the vast majority will pass:

To be in one's twenties today is not the same experience as it was decades ago. To think otherwise is to self impose a blurred vision that cannot recognize real life as it is experienced today and so cannot take emerging adults fully seriously.¹²

There is a growing body of literature to suggest that the landscape is changing between adolescence and adulthood. Arnett describes the 'quiet revolution' that has taken place for young people over the last few decades within which the 'road to adulthood' has been lengthened.¹³ Smith depicts the emergence of 'a new, distinct and important stage of life,'¹⁴ and in a UK context, the Orr-Ewings describe, 'a new generation... arising in the West.'¹⁵ Most of the commentators, however, are a little too sweeping in their description of the extent of the transformation. Their descriptions are accurate for the majority, especially the middle classes, but there is a degree of cultural myopia in failing to acknowledge the lower classes, on whom the impact of the socio-economic factors that cause the changing landscape in the majority is questionable and unaddressed. To this extent there is a level of generalisation. That said, the Orr-Ewings do explore some of the issues in their description of the New Victorians.¹⁶ Nonetheless, there is persuasive agreement¹⁷ with Arnett that, 'there is a need for a new term and conception of this age period.'¹⁸

There is still room for debate here, firstly, it is questionable, with the relatively early stages of this phenomenon, that new and *definitive* parameters can be drawn up

¹¹ N. Howe & W. Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York, NY: Random House, 2000), p. 4.

¹² C. Smith, K. Christoffersen, H. Davidson & P. Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 227.

¹³ J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 3.

¹⁴ C. Smith & P. Snell, *Souls in Transition* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 6.

¹⁵ Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 22.

¹⁷ See for example explicit agreement from Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 6. and consistent references to emerging adults from D. Gortner, *Varieties of Personal Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 167.

¹⁸ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, p. 21.

and secondly, because what is being talked about here is so transitory in comparison to adolescence or adulthood, it could not be defined as a distinct life stage.¹⁹ That said, the alternatives are less attractive. Levin denies a completely new life stage, asserting instead that adolescence has been extended.²⁰ The problem with this viewpoint is that it overlooks the fact that the emerging characteristics are not being demonstrated by those at the lower end of adolescence and are arguably so distinct from adolescent characteristics as to render this perspective almost as unhelpful as a complete denial of the changes occurring. On the other hand, what is not being seen is anthropological changes, as you would be able to clearly identify in an adolescent or an adult. Emerging adulthood, if a distinct life stage, has to be acknowledged as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon. This adds some limitations. Firstly that its distinctiveness will only be as strong as the cultural and social factors that create it and secondly that it may be time limited as these factors shift, change and develop. Nonetheless, the social and cultural forces are compelling.

It is a combination of largely external factors that have led to this point. There has been an interrelation of economic factors, for example, higher house prices and an unstable employment market, with sociological changes such as an increase in emerging adults moving back in with their parents.²¹ Economics are also a factor in the delay of marriage, increased parental support and what Smith sees as a, 'dramatic growth in higher education.'²² All of the above have an inevitable impact on the worldview and cultural characteristics of this generation.

Amongst the external factors is the digital revolution itself. Myers states clearly, 'Internet Pioneers are different from generations that came before them,' describing the distance as chasmal between pre- and post- internet generations.²³ Twenge refers to 'iGeneration' or 'Generation Me', inferring that the labelling of the digital products of the age (iMac, iPod etc.) can be used to define the age group that

¹⁹ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 6.

²⁰ J. Levin, *Blurring the Boundaries: The Declining Significance of Age* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013) p. 66.

²¹ Ibid, p. 64.

²² Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 5.

²³ J. Myers, *Hooked Up* (Stamford, CT: York House Press, 2012), p. 6.

use and champion them.²⁴ As the features and impact of the digital revolution are explored in the coming chapters, further interrelating trends will emerge that are so dramatic as to have resulted in the recognition of a new life stage.

In summary, these forces and the resultant changes are powerful and seemingly here to stay for the foreseeable future: 'emerging adulthood should be recognised as a distinct period of life that will be around for many generations to come.'²⁵

Emerging adulthood refers to the life phase between adolescence and adulthood, most likely, but not exclusively occurring between the ages of 18 and 30 and exists because of the, 'very unique characteristics of this new and particular phase of life.'²⁶

2. The Digital Revolution

In terms of impact on the human race, it is difficult to find an equal of comparison in recent years to the emergence of the internet and digital media. Commentators have compared the rise in digital communications with that of the invention of the printing press.²⁷ Although it is arguably far more pervasive than that, on the basis that Gutenberg's revolution was predominantly about information whereas the digital revolution extends to social networks and beyond. The speed of the digital revolution has also been incomparably faster. Carr finds that the internet traffic has doubled on average every year since the World Wide Web was invented.²⁸ Jackson goes as far as describing us as having, 'minted a new currency of life.'²⁹

There are many components to the digital revolution. Access to the internet means access to an abundance of information unimaginable to previous generations.³⁰

Social networking has grown exponentially³¹ and its use is prolific amongst

²⁴ J. Twenge, *Generation Me* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), p. 6.

²⁵ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, p. 4.

²⁶ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 6.

²⁷ E. Drescher, *Tweet If You Love Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2011), p. 62.

²⁸ N. Carr, *The Shallows* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), p. 83.

²⁹ M. Jackson, *Distracted* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), p.47.

³⁰ S. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 68.

³¹ J. Rice, *The Church of Facebook* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), p. 66.

emerging adults; Brierley reports that amongst those in their twenties in Britain, 'four-fifths, 78% percent use their technology every day, and the other fifth, 19%, at least once a week.'³² Furthermore, availability of media and connections has led to increased globalisation as the limitations of time and space have been overcome: 'A young person living in Britain today can access hip hop in South Africa and a young person in India enjoy the latest American soap operas.'³³

2.1 The Digital Revolution and Emerging Adults

'To IPs [Internet Pioneers], computers have always been small enough, Google has always been a verb and cell phones have been in their hands for much of their lives.'³⁴

Today's emerging adults have grown up scarcely knowing a reality of life without access to the internet and digital media. This has a number of effects. Firstly there is a sense of entitlement to it. There is an assumption that they have free access to information all the time.³⁵ Secondly, the very progress of change is assumed: 'The advances we are experiencing within our lifetimes border on incomprehensible for many of us. But for IPs, they are expected.'³⁶ This can be uncomfortable for older generations who are unsettled by the pace of constant change. Thirdly, being online is not a sporadic, intermittent activity, but a constant state of play; commentators describe the internet and communications technology as, 'a basic necessity'³⁷ and an, 'indispensable tool.'³⁸ However, its dominance and emerging adults compulsion towards it can be exaggerated, for example where Rushkoff goes as far as to say we are striving to become more compatible with technology itself.³⁹

³² P. Brierley, *Twenties Today and Tomorrow* (Unpublished, 2014), p. 41.

³³ Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 7.

³⁴ Myers, *Hooked up*, p. 15.

³⁵ Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 36.

³⁶ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 9.

³⁷ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, p. 91.

³⁸ Huntley, *The World*, p. 36.

³⁹ D. Rushkoff, *Present Shock* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2013), p. 95.

2.2 Is it a bad thing?

One of the sentiments expressed around the urgency of this paper was the fact that, with so little reflection upon the merits of a digital revolution, if malicious, it could be causing a great deal of damage. Based upon the aforementioned prevalent attitude amongst emerging adults to the internet there would be few who, generally speaking, would give assent to such caution. There are those who have consistently raised concerns on the premise that the media itself is not morally neutral. Famously McLuhan stated that, 'the medium is the message'⁴⁰, and this concept was the basis for Postman to deeply decry the effect of television on serious subject matter:

The television screen is so saturated with our memories of profane events, so deeply associated with the commercial and entertainment worlds that it is difficult for it to be recreated as a frame for sacred events.⁴¹

Postman's argument goes as deep to suggest that engagement with even virtuous content has a detrimental effect on its consumer because of the very nature of the medium. He goes too far. The nature of the medium does have an impact on how we interact with the content and the neurological implications of this will be explored with regard to digital media, but the medium does not somehow distort or denigrate virtuous content to the extreme extent he suggests. Neither television nor the media of the digital revolution are intrinsically evil. To adopt this extreme position is to fail to recognise the moral positives of both the media and the content they have the potential to carry. That stated, neither is it morally neutral and perspectives such as Postman's help us engage with the potential that media and culture have for ill: 'Far from being a neutral phenomenon, popular culture can be bound up with structures, practices, and ideas that can be dehumanizing or threaten the basic fabric of human culture.'⁴²

⁴⁰ M, McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, NY: Mentor, 1964), p. 9.

⁴¹ N, Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 122.

⁴² G. Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 89.

The emergence of the tools and activities of the digital revolution do have consequences upon us: 'We tend to think that since it is a 'neutral tool', only the user uses the technology. But that is not true: it is also the technology that "uses" its user.'⁴³ There will be no shortage of examples below but here are two illustrative immediate instances:

Firstly, emerging adults' relationship to information has led some to think they have a false sense of wisdom. With access to almost fathomless factual knowledge there can emerge a belief of being wiser than previous generations. More information does not necessarily equal more wisdom, something that Hipps describes the information age doing, 'little to encourage' the development of.⁴⁴ In contrast Tapscott refutes the suggestion that this generation is any less wise or intelligent.⁴⁵ His argument is sensible, based on the increase in raw IQ scores and greater information can lead to more informed decisions, but Bauerlein and Hipps are right to draw a line between wisdom and intelligence as not necessarily the same entities.

Secondly, mobile technology means that most emerging adults can be reached anywhere. The advantages to this, have been unthinkingly accepted without reflecting on the way it profoundly changes, 'our way of understanding work, human relationships and our relationship with space.'⁴⁶ Rice articulates the related emergence of 'continuous partial attention' in which we are always 'on', aware of the notification of a sound bite of digital communication through our portable device. This, he finds, leads to a 'detrimental effect on the quality of our attention.'⁴⁷

Despite the acknowledgement of the above and the numerous other reasons for caution, the digital revolution is not intrinsically malignant. Rather that its extraordinary impact and scale means that its potential for good or ill cannot be

⁴³ Lynch, *The Scent*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, p. 71. See also M. Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2009), p. 154.

⁴⁵ D. Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2009), p. 118.

⁴⁶ Lynch, *Understanding Theology*, p. 34.

⁴⁷ Rice, *The Church*, p. 102.

underestimated and awareness and understanding of the missiological or otherwise implications are crucial. The former will now be addressed.

3. Missiological Implications

An Evangelical Alliance paper in 2009 reported that reaching 16-30 year olds was 'either more important or as important as any other top priority.'⁴⁸ This statement of intent is indicative of the recognition of both the challenge that the church currently faces and the opportunities that this age group presents. Below are a number of sections that answer the first component of the question; the missiological implications.

3.1 Gospel Paradigms and Language

Firstly, it is necessary to explore how the digital revolution might affect the way in which the gospel is communicated. In such exploration, the emerging adult context will necessarily be expanded. Crucially, especially when thinking about language, Savage et al.'s observation that, 'there is a new generation Y young person who does not know, and who may never have heard the basic Christian story,' must be considered.⁴⁹ One significant impact of this is that the evangelical gospel paradigm of modernity, in which people were called *back*, often in an 'altar call' moment, to repent of their sins becomes less relevant (i) because someone cannot be called back to an overarching narrative they have never left, (ii) because they do not know the language of the narrative and (iii) because a solution is being presented to something the hearer does not think they have a problem with. In reflecting upon this, Singlehurst in *Preaching the Word* goes through a number of stages, beginning with a basic translation of the words that are not understood as a result of not knowing the Christian narrative.⁵⁰ So in a digital context a similar logic could be

⁴⁸ The Evangelical Alliance Council Symposium, *The 18-30 Mission: A Missing Generation*, p. 1. <http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/upload/Report-The-Missing-Generations.pdf> Accessed 30/12/14

⁴⁹ Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 123.

⁵⁰ L. Singlehurst *The Gospel Message Today* (Cambridge: Grove, 2010), p. 12.

applied, for example translating 'repentance' as 'rebooting', 'sin' as 'corrupting virus' and using language of the social networks, 'fan', 'follower' or 'friend', to discuss posture towards Jesus. This is perhaps a start in instigating thought but Singlehurst concludes in his own paper it is not enough.⁵¹

The next stage is to ask far more fundamental questions about the framing of the gospel itself and the choice of paradigm used. Beyond the lack of recognition of the language, so too is the resonance of the objective moral code within the Christian story leading to findings that in predominant emerging adult worldviews that, 'no concept for sin... or salvation from sin was apparent.'⁵² That said, there are, in the digital world, traces of this gospel paradigm. Turkle identifies 'confessional sites', where, 'people log on anonymously and post a confession, sometimes referred to as a secret,' as a fascinating demonstration of people's need for an absolution of sorts in the digital age.⁵³ Jackson describes references to, 'the "undo generation" since they have a "start again" or "game over" mentality to everything in life.'⁵⁴ Despite these echoes, there is a gradual disappearance of the Christian story in emerging adult culture and this closes some doors. However, the digital revolution opens others and these paradigms are worth exploring.

3.2 The Gospel as an Alternative Narrative to Consumerism

Arguably the greatest feature of emerging adults' culture alongside the digital revolution is the prevalence of consumerism. Emerging adults are 'the first 100 per cent consumer generation,'⁵⁵ for whom shopping is 'a hobby, a sport, even a way of life,'⁵⁶ and who 'have never known life without the subtle but pervasive influence of the marketers over them.'⁵⁷ Hollinghurst states that if the mantra of modernity was 'cogito ergo sum,' its postmodern equivalent is 'tesco ergo sum, I shop therefore I

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 13.

⁵² Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 43.

⁵³ Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 229.

⁵⁴ Jackson, *Distracted*, p. 59.

⁵⁵ Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 144.

⁵⁶ Huntley, *The World*, p. 146.

⁵⁷ Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 57.

am.’⁵⁸ Furthermore, the co-emergence of consumerism and the digital revolution is not incidental. Rapid technological growth has provided ever changing products to buy, the vehicle to buy them in the form of online shopping and a whole new range of platforms to market from through web advertising and social networks.

The challenge to mission here is clear. The combination of consumerism and technology as a powerful means to drive it form an attractive competing narrative to emerging adults, ‘a story of meaning and purpose to define human existence.’⁵⁹ In this story, firstly satisfaction can be found in more possessions and life will be made easier by the purchase of the latest gadget. Secondly that the incessant desire to upgrade to the newest or biggest (or indeed smallest) product and the entertainment it provides a lifetime (or at least a generation) of distraction so that questions of meaning are never asked and answers never sought, and are unwelcome when proposed.

As well as identify this narrative and its dangers, Turpin presents a whole ‘paradigm of ongoing conversion’, from consumerism based on a Wesleyan understanding of the gradual spiritual change of working out one’s salvation.⁶⁰ It offers a number of helpful implications. Firstly, such conversion is non-linear, a feature that has parallels in the digital age (see below, 3.6), although an unhelpful extension of this would be the assertion that there is no line of conversion at any point.⁶¹ Secondly, it holds within it the need for awakening. This is a crucial observation as is its extension to the digital revolution as a whole and the other relatively unknown characteristics of emerging adults. Part of the good news to this generation could well be an awareness of the nature and circumstances of their culture. It is alarming, with regard to consumerism, that in Smith’s study respondents could not objectively identify a hint of danger: ‘interviewers could not, no matter how hard they pushed, get emerging adults to express any serious concerns about any aspect

⁵⁸ S. Hollinghurst, *Mission Shaped Evangelism* (London: Canterbury Press, 2010), p. 37.

⁵⁹ K. Turpin, *Branded* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁶¹ See D. Everts & D. Shaupp, *Pathway to Jesus* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), p. 113.

of mass-consumer materialism.⁶² With both the digital world and this particular aspect of emerging adults there is a distinct lack of critical self-reflection on the effects of the powerful cultural forces. Turpin's proposed methods of awakening would need adapting for emerging adults as they are written for a younger generation and are limited with a focus on mass media rather than social media.⁶³ Turpin's model also falls short at the point of regeneration. What she describes is individualistic, not corporate, and in an otherwise persuasive argument does not provide enough compelling alternatives to the consumeristic mind-set to fill the void. The antidote could go much further to embrace mission itself, both before and after converts have understood its meaning.

This resonates with another characteristic of emerging adults: 'They want to do more than learn about a faith; they want to live it.'⁶⁴ So therefore mission becomes not just an invitation to learn about a Christian worldview but one to put it in to practice; not an opportunity to explore what to believe about generosity, but how to behave generously. Effective mission to this generation may well be mission *with* this generation who behave long before they believe. They are, 'not interested in faith as a propositional truth but they wanted to know what difference it made in their lives.'⁶⁵ Drescher describes this as, 'the opportunity to facilitate the sharing not of a narrow Christian *message* but an expansive Christian *practice*.'⁶⁶ Her perspective is short sighted here as it is not a choice between the two. A Christian message is shared, even implicitly in the practice, that this is what faith is about.

Some would be quick to point out the weaknesses of the model. There are those who regard justice as just one way to back up the authenticity of the gospel rather than an integral element.⁶⁷ However, it is asserted that this approach does

⁶² Smith, *Souls In Transition*, p. 67. Although this is disputed by Huntley who describes emerging adults as 'deeply disturbed' by the extent of consumption in their culture. (Huntley, *The World*, p. 157.)

⁶³ Turpin, *Branded*, p. 98-104.

⁶⁴ D. Kinnaman & G. Lyons, *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), p. 215.

⁶⁵ S. Collins-Mayo, B. Mayo, S. Nash & C. Cocksworth, *The Faith of Generation Y* (London: Church House Publishing, 2010), p. 110.

⁶⁶ Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 146.

⁶⁷ See L. Allison & M. Anderson, *Going Public with the Gospel: Reviving Evangelistic Proclamation* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), p. 126.

communicate elements of the gospel and that other components and aspects of the Christian message can be shared as part of the ongoing relationship and extended journey to faith articulated below.

If the digital revolution provided the vehicle for the prevalence of consumerism amongst emerging adults, it can also provide the means for an alternative:

Not only is this a generation that cares about social problems, they are the first to grow up with a powerful tool that can be used to make a far more substantial difference than my generation ever could.⁶⁸

The internet provides endless opportunities for emerging adults to identify needs, to become involved in existing projects, to promote causes and to invite others to join in. However, the extent to which this generation does care about issues of social concern is debatable. There is certainly an argument that increased social media activity at an age when they, 'talk repeatedly about how busy they are,' leads to time-squeezed introspection rather than a desire to solve global problems.⁶⁹ Smith et al go further to say that this is not a generation that wants to change the world⁷⁰ and Carr describes how the prevalence of distraction, compounded by digital media, diminishes our ability to experience, 'empathy, compassion, and other emotions.'⁷¹ On the other hand there is good reason to believe that Generation Y, 'are not more selfish than previous generations,' that social media encourages a culture of sharing and participation that goes beyond self-promotion and that digital connection, with both information and like-minded networks, creates a more altruistic stage of life.⁷² The digital world provides a powerful tool for this to be channelled into counter-consumeristic mission.

There is a further implication of consumerism on our missional posture. Huntley notes that emerging adults are 'extremely media-savvy... derisive of those marketers who insult their intelligence... cynical and untrusting of advertising and

⁶⁸ Tapscott, *Grown Up*, p. 270.

⁶⁹ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 77.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 72.

⁷¹ Carr, *The Shallows*, p. 221.

⁷² Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 145.

marketing promises.⁷³ This leads to a sharp ability to spot the counterfeit and inauthentic. Therefore effective evangelism, especially in online communication will most likely be full of integrity and authenticity.⁷⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons add that a consistency and transparency need to be present across our Facebook profiles.⁷⁵

3.3 Mission at a Time of 'soaring expectations and crushing realities'⁷⁶

Arnett⁷⁷ is not alone in identifying the optimistic outlook of the majority of emerging adults: 'the future's so bright I gotta wear shades.'⁷⁸ The digital revolution and its ongoing release of upgrades and traversing of new technological frontiers reinforces the overarching optimistic narrative that tells them that life will continue to get better. Some dispute this, describing this as a generation who are pessimistic about the future based on a cultural shift to postmodernity which has, 'rejected modernity's ideological belief in progress and a better future and refocused on the present as the one thing to be sure of.'⁷⁹ Perhaps this would be the case but for the digital revolution, which is not the sole factor, but a prominent one in keeping emerging adults' eyes, 'firmly set on the future, and they look to it with great hope and confidence.'⁸⁰

The challenge this presents to many modern theories of church growth and contemporary evangelistic strategies is that they seem to be presenting an answer to a question no emerging adults are asking. A classic church growth missional principle is 'to find a need and fill it,'⁸¹ and often gospel messages are preached as a tonic to brokenness and despair. These are clearly not going to resonate with a generation who, at least on the surface, have great hopes for the future and have no self-perceived need that the church can fix.

⁷³ Huntley, *The World*, p. 151.

⁷⁴ Rice, *The Church*, p. 179.

⁷⁵ Kinnaman & Lyons, *UnChristian*, p. 54-55.

⁷⁶ Twenge, *Generation Me*, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, p. 16.

⁷⁸ Huntley, *The World*, p. 177.

⁷⁹ Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 150.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 36.

⁸¹ C. Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 2nd edn (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), p. 160.

So where do the opportunities lie? Savage et al helpfully describe a predominant world view that they label a happy midi-narrative, one where the central life goal is happiness and that 'operates on a much more modest scale of the here and now, rather than something beyond.'⁸² They are right in concluding that it, 'has to be challenged. It is a fraud.'⁸³ But frustratingly, despite their deconstructive call to subvert the perspective, their reconstructive imagination of what should replace it is limited. There is a suggestion that, 'a spirituality for this world, rather than for a future heaven,'⁸⁴ is focussed on but even this is underdeveloped and contradictory to another of the book's conclusions that, 'there is, in the church, a tendency to exaggerate the extent of interest in spirituality in Western culture.'⁸⁵

Perhaps a more effective way forward is to frame the gospel in terms of purpose. The transitional and formative nature of the period means that this is a time when emerging adults are not only open to change but also deeper questions of the meaning of life: 'Perhaps it is because the question of life purpose taps directly into the developmental quests of young adulthood for belonging and for meaningful vocation.'⁸⁶ The questions of how you fit, 'strike at a core issue of emerging adult identity - they are the questions that most bring personal identity into relationship with personal theology.'⁸⁷ A subtle nuance of this approach is that it is not proposing that emerging adults think about the direction of the rest of their lives, but their purpose and meaning in the present. This is not a generation who think much into the future, but are, 'far more focussed on "daily life management" than on developing a long-term purpose.'⁸⁸ The approach is open to critique from those who highlight the features of a phase of life that is, 'free, fluid, tentative, experimental and relatively unbound,'⁸⁹ and it is therefore questionable how compelling the question of purpose is for such a care free generation. That said, the approach is a strong one. It is much easier, in this present age, to convince

⁸² Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 38.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 164.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 38.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 136.

⁸⁶ Gortner, *Varieties*, p. 191

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 191.

⁸⁸ Gardner, *The App Generation*, p. 68.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 56.

emerging adults of their lost-ness than to persuade them there is a solution to problems they do not have.

This is a generation of contrast and paradox. 'Millennials' refers to emerging adults as 'New Victorians' to illustrate the societal gulf that occurs between the empowered and the neglected amongst this age group. The pervasiveness of optimism outlined above is in stark contrast to a pessimistic minority who do not share such positivity. The extent of such pessimism is disputed. Gortner asserts that, 'negative world views are *dominant* [emphasis added] among young American adults, with prominent themes of chaos and corruption,'⁹⁰ whereas for Smith and others⁹¹ it is a 'minority.'⁹² The weight of opinion is with the latter viewpoint, but it would be remiss not to consider the missiological opportunities amongst this albeit minority.

There is little doubt that many emerging adults struggle. Mumford reports that in the first decade since the Millennium, 'the number of anti-depressants prescribed by the NHS... almost doubled,'⁹³ leading to many viewing the world through a 'dark pessimistic filter.'⁹⁴ The extent to which the digital revolution is responsible for these challenges must be addressed. It would be overly simplistic to conclude that the intrinsic co-emergence of emerging adults and a dominant digital world has led to the struggles this generation faces. But there seems to be a contribution on a number of levels, a couple of which there is time to explore.

Firstly around the issue of connectedness, Rice summarises research and concludes that, 'connection is the key to happiness.'⁹⁵ In which case, with greater potential for connections and continuous connectivity a digital world should make us happier. The opposite seems to be true. Gardner and Davis find that, 'students who had used Facebook for a longer time and those who spent more time each week on the site tended to agree more that others were happier.'⁹⁶ The digital revolution should

⁹⁰ Gortner, *Varieties*, p. 123.

⁹¹ See Arnett, Huntley and Savage above.

⁹² Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 36.

⁹³ K. Mumford, *The Missing Generation* (Leyland: 10Publishing, 2012), p. 90.

⁹⁴ Gortner, *Varieties*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Rice, *The Church*, p.28.

⁹⁶ Gardner, *The App Generation*, p. 102.

have increased relational capacity and made friendship easier, but seems to be increasing loneliness and shallow relationships: 'we could just as easily call it an Internet "isolation".'⁹⁷ Rice surmises from a paper, 'Social Isolation in America,' that our relational capacity has a limit and beyond that limit becomes counterproductive, 'While our social connections are growing exponentially, the number of people with whom we feel safe to trust the important parts of ourselves is clearly shrinking.'⁹⁸ The glaring weakness in Gardner and Davis' conclusion above is that students who struggle relationally would be more likely to spend more time on Facebook in the first place and conclude others are happier. What Rice fails to consider is the broad range of other socio-economic factors, for example increased mobility meaning people live and work further from the place they grew up, that would lead to a reduction in close confidants. However, despite the challenges with causality, this is certainly a factor.

Secondly, the world of social media especially presents challenges in identity formation at a crucial stage for emerging adults. The crafting of an online profile to project to the digital world is superficially a fun activity of self-description. Yet as Chodos describes, it has deeper implications for identity development: 'we are beginning to think of the Self as the sum total of the information we can accumulate about it,' and this information is broadcast to the world via social media.⁹⁹ This then has to be maintained as a, 'kind of "reputation management" ... a time-consuming but unavoidable practice in a world of unwieldy, amorphous networks.'¹⁰⁰ What inevitably results is a tendency to compare ones profile, self and reputation to others to varying levels of detriment and 'leaving us vulnerable to crippling insecurities about how we're projecting ourselves and how we're being perceived.'¹⁰¹

Alongside a conviction that there is hope for the future, technological change has brought challenges. Amidst the former, effective mission will reframe its emphasis;

⁹⁷ Thomas, *Digital Disciple*, p. 1.

⁹⁸ Rice, *The Church*, p. 109.

⁹⁹ R. Chodos, Reflections on the Impact of "The Digital Revolution" on Art and Religion, *Cross Currents* 62/2 (2012), p. 264.

¹⁰⁰ Jackson, *Distracted*, p. 59.

¹⁰¹ Mumford, *The Missing Generation*, p. 28.

amidst the latter it will continue to meet the needs of struggling emerging adults. Christian community can offer authentic connections and deep friendships at times of struggle as, 'many people do still look to the Church for help at critical moments in their lives.'¹⁰² Outward focussed churches meeting the needs of hurting and lonely emerging adults will make an impact as they fulfil their missional mandate to the poor in spirit.

Individualism, boredom, sexual hurt and fear of admitting regret all point to the need for the church to use its theological imagination to speak of a God who meets us in our doubt and suffering when our shell of optimism is too fragile to hold our being.¹⁰³

3.4 Moment or Process

The digital revolution and the emergence of the emerging adult life stage will have an effect on not just the route of the journey to faith as has been explored, but also the length of that journey. Consideration of this will help us manage expectations and missional strategy.

Rushkoff describes the ever rolling wave of information this generation face,

Our inboxes are loading, our Twitter feeds are rolling, our Facebook updates are changing, our calendars are filling, and our consumer profiles and credit reports are adjusting all the way.¹⁰⁴

Despite exaggeration of the extent to which society feels compelled to keep up with the 'impossible pace' these information updates set,¹⁰⁵ the assessment is illustrative of the incessant supply and demand of digital stimuli. In such an instant culture, and one where emerging adults are not just accustomed to change but expecting it, a case can be made for this being extremely fertile ground for conversion, and that it may occur relatively quickly. Alongside this is the feature of openness during this

¹⁰² Collins-Mayo, *The Faith*, p. 8.

¹⁰³ A. Root, Young Adult Realities, *Christian Century* 128/20 (2011), p. 37.

¹⁰⁴ Rushkoff, *Present Shock*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 74.

stage of life to new ideas and worldviews: 'more than any other period of life, emerging adulthood presents the possibility of change.'¹⁰⁶

Yet such optimism is largely misplaced. Firstly because emerging adults are living in post Christendom¹⁰⁷ and this is even more so the case for emerging adults for whom the resonance of a Christian nation will be barely audible: 'Generation Y young people are less likely to identify themselves as Christian, less likely to go to church, less likely to hold traditional Christian beliefs.'¹⁰⁸ This has a significant effect on the length of the journey to faith. Singlehurst sums up the success of instantaneous conversion in Christendom well:

But the difference was the people of that day understood it... The reason was that a great many hearers who came, whilst they may not have had an active church background, had nonetheless been to Sunday school.¹⁰⁹

There is insufficient time to adequately expound this debate fully here but it is necessary to say that among the effects of post Christendom is a longer journey to faith simply because emerging adults do not have the same background, language, cultural framework or objective morality that Singlehurst describes.

Secondly because commentators recognise emerging adults as a generation averse to commitment who, 'generally loath to close doors or burn bridges.'¹¹⁰ This characteristic permeates almost every aspect of their lives from work, where they, 'see no reason to give employers their undivided loyalty,'¹¹¹ to relationships where, 'cohabiting is a smart if not absolutely necessary experience and phase for moving towards an eventually successful marriage.'¹¹² The digital world encourages and facilitates non-committal behaviour. Dating websites and hook up apps such as Tinder allow emerging adults not only to begin relationships at arm's length, but

¹⁰⁶ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ S. Murray, *Post Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ Collins-Mayo, *The Faith*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁹ Singlehurst *The Gospel*, p. 4-5.

¹¹⁰ Smith, *Souls In Transition*, p. 80.

¹¹¹ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 159.

¹¹² Smith, *Souls In Transition*, p. 159.

also in some cases on the understanding that no further responsibility than a physical encounter is required. Despite the existence of, 'the casual hookup, often facilitated by social media,' it is debateable quite how prevalent it is. Huntley states that young people 'don't hold particularly conservative views towards sex,'¹¹³ although both Orr-Ewing and Myers report, 'increasing proportions of abstinence,'¹¹⁴ and 'the growing reality of some... increasingly rejecting the permissiveness of the previous youth revolutions,'¹¹⁵ respectively. Increases there may be but nonetheless the anti-commitment cultural distinctive stands and represents a significant challenge to mission and especially instant conversion.

Although the journey to faith may be gradual and there may be a disposition to keep options open, the potential and openness to change represents a significant opportunity and implies that resources and energy should be expended in this age group: 'Few people enter emerging adulthood at age 18 with a well-established world view, but few people leave their twenties without one.'¹¹⁶ The transitory and formational nature of this life phase means that though change may be gradual, it has great potential to be fruitful and lasting.

3.5 Fishing the Net: Use of Digital Technology

The most inevitable, and arguably obvious, missional implication of a digital revolution involving, if not centred around, communications technology, is the use of that communications technology to reach people and broadcast the good news. Perspectives such as Von Buseck's urge missionaries to take to the information super highway to make disciples: 'we need rank-and-file Christians to capture the vision of using every tool on the internet and mobile media to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.'¹¹⁷ Furthermore, 'the ends of the earth' are a lot closer. The Vatican's analogous rallying call to treat social media as a 'digital continent' could lead to misunderstanding, implying that evangelism could take place in just one

¹¹³ Huntley, *The World*, p. 65.

¹¹⁴ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 36.

¹¹⁵ Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 31.

¹¹⁶ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, p. 166.

¹¹⁷ C. Von Buseck, *Net Casters* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), p. 91.

portion of the globe.¹¹⁸ It is a whole digital world, so pervasive is its impact, but the article is right to focus on the positive aspects. The attractiveness of this proposition lies in the potential impact of such activity, the sheer quantity of emerging adults online and the amount of time they spend connected is an alluring environment for evangelists. Moreover, it seems, anyone can get involved:

Digital technology has given everyone a “megaphone”: anyone with a word processor and page layout program can produce a book: anyone with a camera and a computer can produce a movie.¹¹⁹

However, therein lies the monumental weakness in the simple call to join in and proclaim the gospel online. *Anyone* can do it. Most emerging adults are online, which leads to lots of ‘megaphones’ and therefore lots of digital noise. The reason this approach does not work is that media is no longer solely about broadcast, and even if it were there is a difference between simply transmitting and getting people to listen. Emerging adults engage with media by contributing and sharing; they are not just recipients but participants. Social media is not merely ‘TV on steroids’, an amplification of mass media, but ‘the ability - to facilitate connectedness, sharing, collaboration, and the construction of new modes of community.’¹²⁰

Such an approach may be based on a flawed view of evangelism, one unconcerned with the response of the recipient of the good news, merely wanting to discharge the responsibility of communicating the message. In riposte, Kinnaman and Lyons correctly state that the most effective evangelistic efforts are not those that reach the most at once but those that are ‘interpersonal and relationship based.’¹²¹ There are further disadvantages to a broadcast mentality to digital media. In a helpful analogy, Drescher articulates that when trying to meet the needs of a mass audience, the authenticity and personalisation are significantly diluted and the tone of the message becomes inescapably anonymous and one-to-many¹²²: ‘When we

¹¹⁸ D. Gibson, Vatican says the Church can’t ignore Social Media, *Christian Century*, 131/13 (2014), p. 18.

¹¹⁹ Chodos, *Reflections*, p.262.

¹²⁰ Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 106.

¹²¹ Kinnaman & Lyons, *UnChristian*, p. 70.

¹²² Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 100.

are under the sway of a broadcast mindset, however, we think in terms of billboards rather than birthday cards.¹²³ A more theological perspective is offered by Lynch, who states:

Emphasizing mass communication, or virtual communication, sometimes we run the risk of underestimating the greatest novelty the Church has to offer, which is the mystery of the Incarnation.¹²⁴

Whilst being sympathetic with his sentiment, a strong argument might be made that the heart of incarnation is being present in the world and environment one is trying to reach¹²⁵, in this case a generation of emerging adults, for whom a primary narrative and habitat is the digital world.

Evangelism is relational¹²⁶: ‘God has wired human beings so that spiritual influence occurs most commonly through relationships.’¹²⁷ Whilst being acutely aware of the multitude of opportunities the digital revolution has presented to reach emerging adults, a broadcast mentality would be as ineffective as complete denial and withdrawal. However, alongside genuine friendship, presence and engagement in the digital arena is crucial as a means of forming and developing relationships: ‘The goal of those “fishing the net” is to build relationships in order to then facilitate evangelistic activity.’¹²⁸ Most effective missionaries to emerging adults will engage in social media.¹²⁹ This will primarily be an extension of their existing relationships, supplementing and far from replacing physical, human engagement. This paper would go further to assert that, despite the significant critique, there is a place for some broadcast media within effective missional digital praxis. Chodos places a degree of emphasis on the ‘corollary phenomenon’ that the digital generation searches rather than seeks for information.¹³⁰ His reflection is limited and the emphasis distracting from the fact that for emerging adults engrained in social

¹²³ Ibid, p. 146.

¹²⁴ Lynch, *The Scent*, p. 90.

¹²⁵ K. Kim, *Joining In With The Spirit* (London: Epworth, 2009), p.53.

¹²⁶ Even conceded by Von Buseck, *Netcasters*, p. 73.

¹²⁷ Kinnaman & Lyons, *UnChristian*, p. 209.

¹²⁸ R. Wagner, *Godwired* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 136.

¹²⁹ Von Buseck, *Netcasters*, p. 75.

¹³⁰ Chodos, *Reflections*, p.264.

media, more often than not information finds them rather than is sought out. To this extent there are, 'multiple benefits for leaders who endeavor to bridge digital manifestations of broadcast media with digital social media practices.'¹³¹

Reinforced by a consumer mentality with regard to much of social media, emerging adults will absorb hundreds of messages each day via social digital platforms.

Where reinforced by an authentic relationship and lifestyle, creative and engaging pieces of communication will be effective in starting conversations and instigating questions of meaning but they will rarely be the sole or primary vehicle for evangelistic activity.

When we realise that digital space has the extraordinary ability to create vast superficial social networks, but is ill suited for generating intimate and meaningful human connection, we may treat it more like dessert than the main course.¹³²

3.6 Style and Tone

Beyond the gospel paradigm, the way in which good news is communicated is affected by both the digital revolution and the intrinsic effects on emerging adult culture. Hipps observes that under a pre-digital, Gutenberg paradigm, 'the values of efficiency and linear sequence... changed the way the gospel was conceived.'¹³³

The result was, especially in the climate of rational modernity, in part, the use of propositions to communicate, in line with the linear progression of argument.

Hipps goes on to articulate that digital text and the printed book exercise very different neurological muscles and that internet engagement and its non-linear interconnected pages are more suited to 'right brain' energies.¹³⁴

In response to this rationale, to which Hipps gives credence, there has been significant weight given to the efficacy of narrative in communication:

¹³¹ Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 152.

¹³² Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, p. 183.

¹³³ *Ibid*, p. 48.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 144.

Propositions invite you to take sides, to be for or against; stories invite you to become part of them, to compare and contrast other stories with your own story, and from that starting point to reflect and wonder about the meaning of it all.¹³⁵

This is a generation apparently, ‘buzzing over stories,’¹³⁶ and the digital world gives a place to share them.¹³⁷ The commentators’ arguments are, in part, that narrative appeals to the same neurological muscles that are used in accessing mobile technology and the way in which information is accessed and shared. Some suggest going beyond story to other facets of the digital world, ‘Images, more than words alone, evoke emotions and engage others,’ and to a generation engrossed in constant stimulation the argument is compelling that the style of communication has to both resonate in terms of style and quality if it is to compete.¹³⁸ Whether or not emerging adults are, ‘practically begging for creative expressions of the gospel,’¹³⁹ or not is debateable as the implication is that there is a desire to hear the good news, but the emphasis on creativity cannot be overlooked.

It can however be over emphasised. A critique of Hipps and the sensible resultant missional thinking is that for many a narrative based and image rich approach may not suffice. The rise in a New Atheism, ‘its infectious self-confidence and punchy soundbites,’¹⁴⁰ demonstrates that for some emerging adults, a linear, rational and propositional message connects better. Care must be taken not to throw baby ‘Apologist’ out with the pre-digital bathwater. Apologetics will play a part in the process of emerging adults coming to faith, although arguably more foundational than decisive:

¹³⁵ J. Drane, *Do Christians Know How to be Spiritual?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), p. 108.

¹³⁶ Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 126.

¹³⁷ Von Buseck, *Netcasters*, p. 91.

¹³⁸ Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 116.

¹³⁹ Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, p. 211.

¹⁴⁰ A. McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 91.

Supporting facts and ideas build “plausibility structures” making belief in something more probable. Without plausibility structures, an idea is unlikely to get a hearing, let alone adherents.¹⁴¹

There are some who disagree with the relevance of the efficacy and prevalence of narrative in a digital age. Chodos describes story as a pre-digital phenomenon, articulating that technology has ‘displaced’ it in the middle of the last century and left a vacuum:

Technology has the unintended side effect that we begin to see ourselves and the universe in the same way that we see our technological products... When we ask ourselves, “What is the meaning of it all?” we used to answer with some kind of narrative. Now, we are hard-pressed to find any answer at all.¹⁴²

Chodos is at odds with popular opinion. The evangelists of the nineteenth and twentieth century were proposition heavy with an emphasis on apologetics and linear in argument.¹⁴³ If anything, narrative has come into greater use, prevalence and efficacy in a postmodern digital era.

Two more stylistic concerns warrant attention. Firstly, use of the Bible. Clearly the pre-eminence of books as a source of information in a pre-digital world implicitly gave a degree of relevance to the Bible. The e-book is starting to ‘take hold’ with sales, ‘increasing at a much faster pace than sales of physical books.’¹⁴⁴

Digitalisation has also led to an ‘unbundling’ of content with tracks of music and chapters of books available as separate purchasable entities.¹⁴⁵ Myers explains how the learning process and teaching will change for emerging adults of the future, with more online learning and the increased access to information leading to the ability for students to teach themselves. The most salient of the developments however is that, ‘the traditional textbook used as an exclusive source of knowledge

¹⁴¹ R. Newman, *Questioning Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), p. 55.

¹⁴² Chodos, *Reflections*, p.265.

¹⁴³ See, for example, L. Sweet *Soul Tsunami* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), p. 199-204.

¹⁴⁴ Carr, *The Shallows*, p. 101.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 94.

and answers will become obsolete.¹⁴⁶ Arguably therefore, in a missional context, the way that the evangelist will talk about the Bible as a source of authority, especially alongside the prevalence of post-Christendom, will have to include context and more explanation than before.

Secondly a word on brevity. Digital technology is ‘profoundly’ altering the brains of emerging adults.¹⁴⁷ One of the ways in which this happens is that, ‘the technology revolution has created countless situations that tempt us to multitask,’ meaning that in many instances, ‘attention constantly shifts from one task to another.’¹⁴⁸ This ‘continuous partial attention’ means that marketers, advertisers and evangelists need to work even harder to gain and keep attention.¹⁴⁹ The emergence and popularity of Twitter, the micro blogging site, is indicative of and reinforces the fact that short, concise pieces of content appeal to a busy, distracted generation whose brains are being wired accordingly. Stylistically therefore, where elements of the Christian message can be shortened and amplified, they are more likely to engage emerging adults, as Sweet concludes: ‘If you can’t say it in less than 140 characters, you can’t say it in a way that connects with a Google world.’¹⁵⁰

3.7 Conversion as Conversation

If the mass media of the pre-digital epoch was largely a monologue, social media is conversational. The impact of the high value emerging adults place on participation will be expanded upon extensively amongst the ecclesiological implications below, but at this point it will suffice to highlight striking paradox of emerging adults of the pervasiveness of consumerism on one hand and the desire to participate and contribute on the other. Drescher is one of many to identify the latter, identifying ‘a shift in ‘habitus’ from significant predominance of obedience to improvisation.’¹⁵¹ In a digital world, information is shared, liked and critiqued. This phenomenon

¹⁴⁶ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 80.

¹⁴⁷ Carr, *The Shallows*, p. 120.

¹⁴⁸ G. Small & G. Vorgan, *iBrain* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 136-137.

¹⁴⁹ See also Rice, *The Church*, p. 102.

¹⁵⁰ L. Sweet, *Viral* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2012), p. 66.

¹⁵¹ Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 50-51.

alongside the aforementioned longer journey of faith means that the posture of the evangelist needs to be one of listening and asking the right questions:

I'm pleading for conversations that lead to conversions, rather than presentations that lead to preconceptions. I'm encouraging the use of questions rather than the use of answers.¹⁵²

Manley Pippert rightly agrees: 'God has made us curious, so let's learn to ask questions.'¹⁵³ What is telling of Newman's stance is recognition that this is far from the default position of the evangelist, who often prefers to be broadcasting.

Missiological vehicles that facilitate participation are likely to connect. The success of the Alpha Course amongst emerging adults is, in part, due to its participatory nature. Cottrell observes, 'the meal together is as important as the teaching, the environment the meal creates embodies welcome and hospitality,'¹⁵⁴ but not, for emerging adults, as important as the small group in which questions can be asked and stories told. The conversation will be about creatively provoking thought about their own journey and creating space to reflect in a time of excessive busyness and distraction: 'Telling Generation Y what to believe will not work. Telling the Christian story, in a way that raises questions about their own stories, will be an important skill.'¹⁵⁵ Where Alpha falls short for many emerging adults is the rigid, modernist 'recipe' on which it is based and the largely linear, propositional nature of the talks. The recognition that, 'people need time to explore new beliefs,' and its discursive and social nature compensate however in the main.¹⁵⁶

As articulated, the missiological implications are varied and far reaching and whilst not necessarily requiring a total revolution in approach and posture, certainly a significant amount of change is required if missionaries to emerging adults are to be

¹⁵² Newman, *Questioning Evangelism*, p. 38.

¹⁵³ R. Manley Pippert, *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), p. 125.

¹⁵⁴ S. Cottrell, *From the Abundance of the Heart: Catholic Evangelism for all Christians* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), p. 49.

¹⁵⁵ Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 158.

¹⁵⁶ S. Savage, 'A Psychology of Conversion – From All Angles' in M. Percy (eds) *Previous Convictions: Conversion in the Present Day* (London: SPCK, 2000), p.4.

effective. It is now necessary to progress to the implications for the church as a whole.

4. Ecclesiological Implications

‘It has become impossible to talk about the church without at the same time talking about the mission of the church.’¹⁵⁷

The second part of the question focusses on the ecclesiological implications. The role of the church in mission has been much debated from Cyprian of Carthage, ‘Outside the church there is no salvation,’¹⁵⁸ to the individualistic, post-Enlightenment belief that, ‘In the worst scenario of modern evangelism, a person can be a Christian without an active life in the church.’¹⁵⁹ There is a degree of extremity in each statement: salvation is both corporate and individual.¹⁶⁰ They do, however, importantly demonstrate with Bosch above the significance of the role of church in mission and conversion. There are two significant reasons why this is even more pertinent in this arena of study.

Firstly, the length of the process, see 3.4, means that people exploring faith need relationships that will keep them on the road. The destination of the journey is more likely to be conversion if there are fellow travellers who know the way: ‘One of the best things you can do for your friends who don’t yet know and love Jesus is to introduce them to other friends who do.’¹⁶¹

Secondly is the emergence of the social network and the extent to which it dominates the world of emerging adults. This is a generation that has ‘not making commitments’ as defining characteristic as its desire to be connected.¹⁶² Mumford is correct in perceiving that Facebook is, ‘an expression of a deep desire to belong,

¹⁵⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission* p. 372.

¹⁵⁸ A. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 4th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 354.

¹⁵⁹ R. Webber, *Ancient Future Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), p. 143.

¹⁶⁰ This debate is not core to this issue. See C. Wright *Salvation Belongs to our God* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 122-128. for an excellent holding of this tension.

¹⁶¹ B. McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realise: Evangelism as a Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), p. 136.

¹⁶² Smith, *Lost in Transition*, p. 231.

to be significant, to be wanted and valued.¹⁶³ This combination of generational features leads to an increasing difference in the way that people come to faith; that they belong before they believe: 'People are converted to church before being converted to Jesus Christ.'¹⁶⁴ Although contradictory of or at least superseding of Finney's earlier research it highlights the utmost importance of community in the faith journey of many emerging adults.¹⁶⁵

4.1 Virtual Community?

One of the facilitative capabilities of the digital world is the creation of online communities reflecting virtually every area of interest. Ecclesial community has been an inevitable area of development and it is right to question its effectiveness here.

The first argument in its favour is that emerging adults search and find things online, as Wagner identifies:

The online self is driven by the desire to keep moving, to connect and disconnect, to seek momentary harbor in online "places" where others of like-minded interests may also have landed.¹⁶⁶

Myers continues on the basis that the digital realm is quite simply the one that they operate in, 'for many, the Internet will be the first place they turn to for spiritual connectivity.'¹⁶⁷ The underlying missiological principle in favour of online community is that of incarnation; if that is the world that emerging adults inhabit, then the missional church will likely inhabit it too if it is to be effective.

In contrast, it is almost the audacity of the online networks to be defined as *community* that is decried by their critics and this is at the heart of the debate.

¹⁶³ Mumford, *The Missing Generation*, p. 24.

¹⁶⁴ J. Finney, *Emerging Evangelism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), p. 135.

¹⁶⁵ J. Finney, *Finding Faith Today* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992), p. 48. Finney finds that church was the most important factor in 6% of conversions and a supporting one in just over a third.

¹⁶⁶ Wagner, *Godwired*, p. 127-8.

¹⁶⁷ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 60.

Turkle is quick to point out that, 'Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences and common responsibilities,' and suggests that our embracing of Facebook et al as models of community has gone as far as to suggest that challenging their status as such is 'heresy.'¹⁶⁸ She overstates her case. Most would elevate social networks to such a station and recognise their value in enhancing the real life relationships she describes.¹⁶⁹ That said, recognising the superficiality of virtual community without authentic real life commitment is important. Hipps states that virtual community is 'infinitely more virtual than it is communal', comparing it to cotton candy: 'It goes down easy and satiates our immediate hunger, but it doesn't provide much in the way of sustainable nutrition.'¹⁷⁰ Dixon takes a much more theological line:

Cyberchurch as a complete church in the conventional sense seems to me impossible to justify from Scripture, however realistic the virtual reality links may become, and however many people may be joined simultaneously.¹⁷¹

It is interesting that he highlights the number of people as this is arguably one of the attractions of digital community: 'expect the Millennials to want it all, and to want it local and global at the same time!'¹⁷² Online community synergises the global nature of both the digital world and Christianity, creating a feeling that emerging adults are part of something much bigger, and this should be celebrated. Dixon's attempt to condemn virtual community Biblically is ambitious considering the writers could not have remotely foreseen its possibility. Furthermore, the critique that Dixon, Hipps, Turkle and others offer is with regard to *exclusively* virtual community. In reality it is rarely so extreme. Pimlott and Pimlott highlight this well:

¹⁶⁸ Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 239.

¹⁶⁹ Wagner, *Godwired*, p. 130-131 Wagner argues that very rarely do purely online communities exist: they either start online and then meet up or start face to face and then end up online.

¹⁷⁰ Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, p. 114.

¹⁷¹ P. Dixon, *Cyberchurch: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1997), p. 158.

¹⁷² Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 79.

Some see computers as the miraculous solution to virtually every problem, while others feel strongly that the use of technology depersonalises relationships and should be discouraged. Neither of these polarised viewpoints is particularly helpful.¹⁷³

The *some* to which they refer are a small minority. Wagner cites research that states that, 'most online churchgoers view their online activity as a "supplement" not a replacement for local worship.'¹⁷⁴ Virtual community is a pale imitation without genuine human interaction, but for emerging adults their desire for authenticity will seldom lead them to mere 'cyberchurch.' A logical conclusion from the imperative of the incarnation leads to greater digital engagement, not less. The website of a church is 'vitaly important,'¹⁷⁵ as well as the live streaming of teaching¹⁷⁶ and the ability of ecclesial communities to 'foster relational intimacy... in socially networked communications.'¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, the role of emerging adults will be central in facilitating this type and level of engagement:

IPs will lead religion into an era of greater ecumenism, with many church organisations becoming far more proactive in reaching out to their communities and prospective members. Some organisations will probably move in the opposite direction, however, becoming more orthodox, insular and closed.¹⁷⁸

4.2 The Church Service

The digital revolution has huge repercussions for the way in which emerging adults engage and interact with church services. Firstly because in most services a significant component is teaching and as articulated in 3.6 above, the way in which this generation accesses information is different. Secondly, it has instigated more

¹⁷³ J. Pimlott & N. Pimlott, *Youthwork after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), p. 118.

¹⁷⁴ Wagner, *Godwired*, p. 133.

¹⁷⁵ Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 62.

¹⁷⁶ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 60.

¹⁷⁷ Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 111.

¹⁷⁸ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 60.

fundamental questions about the experience of being part of a community and the role that they play as part of that experience.

4.2.1 Teaching Style

A shift in learning has occurred. The linear, Gutenberg, book-based learning route has been replaced, certainly amongst emerging adults, by a different paradigm. The way in which Google is used is far from linear, rather a matrix of text, video, images and sound bites eloquently described by Carr as plunging into an ecosystem of, 'interactivity, hyperlinking, searchability, multimedia.'¹⁷⁹

The first implication of this is that emerging adults expect to be able to constantly use the technology that is so intrinsic to their existence. It would be counterproductive and patronising to expect that they not use mobile devices as part of their engagement in church:

like them or not, digital social media and mobile computing define the social reality with which we must contend if we are to participate in any meaningful way in the contemporary world.¹⁸⁰

Drescher is too negative here, however. It is not a matter of contention, but embracing this social reality. Turkle raises an important warning that the presence of technology could lead to less social interaction as, 'people come together but do not speak to each other.'¹⁸¹ But that said, effective churches' attitudes will most likely be far more positive to adopting the changes taking place and successful leaders will not merely welcome the use of technology but make the effort to creatively use it to communicate to this and all generations.

Emerging adults are used to handling the abundance of information at their thumb tips: 'New Victorians will often be found notepad in hand wanting to learn and grow.'¹⁸² The Orr-Ewing's sentiment is correct, but the idea that it is a notebook (unless, of course, they mean of the digital variety) rather than a mobile device is

¹⁷⁹ N. Carr, *The Shallows*, p. 91.

¹⁸⁰ Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 3.

¹⁸¹ Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 155.

¹⁸² Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 102.

obsolete. The digital generation will then go beyond recording what they are learning to immediately questioning it¹⁸³ and then checking it is correct using a mobile device: 'Teachers and pastors can be checked in real time.'¹⁸⁴ The technology takes this further as then the recipient then has the capacity, and often the inclination to then share information via social media. Teachers will even bear this in mind, knowing that short, truth filled statements will be more memorable and have greater impact if they can be shared in 140 characters or less.

There is a deeper layer that goes beyond the use of digital media that recognises the impact it has had on learning. Tapscott urges us to, 'focus on the change in pedagogy, not the technology. Learning 2.0 is about dramatically changing the relationship between a teacher and students in the learning process.'¹⁸⁵ He is correct but misplaces emphasis. The relationship he refers to is important, but the pedagogical change is far more about embracing the neurological changes instigated by the digital revolution. The new journey of information access, exemplified by Google, is much more suited to the right side of the brain and its facets of creativity, metaphor, image and abstract thought. Effective teaching will tread the balance of right brain and left brain (more logical, rational and reasonable) learning. Those communicating in a church setting need to be acutely aware of this, combining propositional truth with engaging stories, a variety of images and cultural references. There will also be a recognition that there are many generational specific issues, some outlined in this paper, which are particularly relevant to emerging adults but that, 'will not come up in a sermon.'¹⁸⁶ Gibbs rightly goes further to perceive that digital engagement is the key to remaining in touch with these concerns: 'Leaders need to be familiar with the recurring and widespread themes in our culture, and connected with the wider conversations taking place in cyberspace.'¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Hollinghurst, *Mission Shaped*, p. 36-37.

¹⁸⁴ D. Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), p. 43.

¹⁸⁵ Tapscott, *Grown Up*, p. 148.

¹⁸⁶ Mumford, *The Missing Generation*, p. 20.

¹⁸⁷ E. Gibbs, *Leadership Next* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 105.

Opponents will claim a dumbing down or, 'superficial, short-term stimulation,'¹⁸⁸ or more likely a deep reluctance to depart from entrenched teaching style and methodology. However, it is a necessary process if emerging adults are to engage with church.

4.2.2 Participation and Empowerment

Another profound shift that has taken place with the onset of technological change is the degree to which the recipients of media want to and are capable of interacting with it. Mass media is one way communication. Social media is interactive, networked and multi directional and the reach of its pervasive influence has extended to mass media in that the most popular television shows now incorporate social media interaction in some way. Myers expertly summarises: 'As the IP's generation has matured, its members have evolved from media consumers to content creators.'¹⁸⁹

The greatest ecclesiological challenge presented by this shift is that the church still primarily operates under a mass media paradigm. A degree of catch-up needs to happen. When any information is communicated, effective leaders will most likely not merely expect interaction but invite it to take place. Sermons will look a lot more like conversations, asking questions, inviting input and using digital media as a vehicle for feedback: 'instead of mass broadcast (updating your status), digital leadership is about interacting with others on their walls and commenting on their posts.'¹⁹⁰

The participation principle extends to every area of the ecclesial community. Firstly in response to the aforementioned paradox of consumerism and contribution and as an antidote to the former's pervasive cultural narrative (see 3.2). Secondly because of the predilection of this generation to learn by doing and thirdly because the praxis of a missional church is too vast and important to be left to the professionals. Everyone needs to be mobilised: 'The priest needs to become the

¹⁸⁸ Lynch, *Understanding Theology*, p. 91.

¹⁸⁹ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 8.

¹⁹⁰ Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 139.

servant of a servant church encouraging the priesthood of the whole people of God.¹⁹¹

Tapscott writes to a business context (but it is just as true for church) of a digital generation: 'Don't just treat them as foot soldiers. Treat them as peers. Listen to their suggestions. Let them collaborate with you... Give them real power and they'll surprise you positively.'¹⁹² A crucial observation here is collaboration at the planning stages, not just the implementation. The fact that this is a generation with such a reluctance to commit means that there is a much higher chance of success if they are involved at every level and even then the anti-commitment tendency needs to be acknowledged and reckoned with.

Interestingly, Brierley finds that emerging adults are most likely to be attracted to larger churches and that in church attendance is double in London than anywhere else amongst those in their twenties.¹⁹³ It is counter intuitive to associate larger churches with high levels of participation as one would think that there be more roles available in smaller communities. However, it is a hallmark of success of bigger congregations that they create participatory opportunities: 'Megachurches excel at creating intentional efforts and planned procedures to help the interested newcomer become integrated into the church.'¹⁹⁴

One final word on participation and empowerment: effectual churches will work hard to break down any barriers that may have been manufactured as a result of both the emergence of the new phase of life and its associated technologies between them and other, older generations. Smith describes a situation of generational isolationism: 'Most of the meaningful, routine relationships that most emerging adults have are with other emerging adults,'¹⁹⁵ and one of the facets of the church is that it is 'uniquely placed... to build up communities of belonging across different generations.'¹⁹⁶ Collins-Mayo et al are right and yet one of the

¹⁹¹ Cottrell, *From the Abundance*, p. 102.

¹⁹² Tapscott, *Grown Up*, p. 288.

¹⁹³ Brierley, *Twenties*, p. 23.

¹⁹⁴ S. Thumma & D. Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), p. 158.

¹⁹⁵ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, p. 234.

¹⁹⁶ Collins-Mayo, *The Faith*, p. 112.

urgencies of mission amongst emerging adults is that the church loses that unique placement if a generation of emerging adults are missing. Furthermore, technology may well be part of the solution. In an emerging adult culture desiring participation and needing guidance to, 'work through their moral confusions'¹⁹⁷, and an older generation struggling to get to grips with a new technological dawn, there could be distinct mutual benefit:

The rate of change in our culture puts younger people in touch with things for which their elders sometimes lack even the vocabulary, suggesting the need to go beyond intergenerational tolerance to reconciliation that leads to a new collaboration.¹⁹⁸

4.3 Prophetic and Monastic Voices

In an extremely limited study, Miller et al discovered that, 'religiousness shapes engagement'¹⁹⁹ with social media but could not say how, concluding, 'we know relatively little regarding how religion is adapting to and interacting with SNS [Social Networking Service].'²⁰⁰ This study is cited as indicative of how little is known especially amongst Christians about the effect of the digital world. And yet it is having a profound effect in the lives of a whole culture. As a result, one implication and opportunity for the church is to simply talk about it more, identify and tackle the challenges it is presenting to society as well as celebrating and maximising its benefits.

There may well be a significant role to play for the church in speaking out against the dangers of the new technological world and go further to offer alternatives. A prophetic voice that identifies the issues will be important: 'As a society, we need to better prepare children and teens being raised with Internet and mobile technologies to appreciate the value and importance of lasting relationships.'²⁰¹ So

¹⁹⁷ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, p. 235.

¹⁹⁸ E. Creps, *Reverse Mentoring* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), p. xvii.

¹⁹⁹ B. Miller, P. Munday & J. Hill, Faith in the Age of Facebook: Exploring the Links Between Religion and Social Network Site Membership and Use, *Sociology of Religion*, 74:2 (2013), p. 247.

²⁰⁰ Miller, Faith, p. 248.

²⁰¹ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 43.

few emerging adults consider the significant effects of their high levels of immersion in the digital world and the church may have a valuable role to play in helping understand how life is impacted.

The neurological implications in particular affect every area of life, including spirituality:

Yet all of these relationship-managing activities and private communications distractions seem to make it difficult for emerging adults to pursue tasks that require full concentration or private dedication.²⁰²

It is clear that there is an implication here for spiritual discipline, synonymous with the private dedication Smith is referring to. Thomas, although subjectively, goes too far to suggest that technology automatically forms barriers with the divine: 'when I turned on, I turned off the part of me that seeks God.'²⁰³ There is a narrative of retreat that the church could champion. Writers, theologians and neurologists, both sacred and secular are advocating the importance of taking breaks from technology.²⁰⁴ Postmodern monasticism will provide a compelling complete alternative for some,²⁰⁵ but to the majority the church could speak intelligently and creatively, proposing a different narrative of control, digital mastery and temporary, regular retreat.

4.4 Spiritual Communities

A final emphasis will conclude this section; that of spirituality over religion. The digital world has accentuated an anti-hierarchical worldview for a few reasons. One being the increased capacity and accelerated journey to the perceived upper echelons of society. A second that technological advances create a feeling that society has developed beyond archaic religion. A third that increased access to

²⁰² Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 74.

²⁰³ Thomas, *Digital Disciple*, p. 17.

²⁰⁴ See e.g. Tapscott, *Grown Up*, p. 117.

²⁰⁵ There is insufficient time to explore this fully here, but see, J. Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008)

information has contributed to the fact that systemic flaws, moral failings and breaches in trust are instantly and virally shared around the world: 'the next generation of Christians has a similar crisis of confidence in institutions, including government, the workplace, education, and marriage, as well as the church.'²⁰⁶ This distrust of institution would not merely be limited to Christians.

Change is required because the church is still perceived to be hierarchical and religious and the emergence of a digital world merely emphasises its rigidity. Emerging adults have left the church because:

As they have grown up, experiencing a new world, connected and transparent through new technologies and a social technology boom which places private lives in the public sphere which shocks their predecessors, while churches appear stuck and obscure, the opposite of fluid, engaging and transparent.²⁰⁷

Effective ecclesial communities will most likely work hard to shed this image and an embracing of the technology that contributes to it will help. Despite a deep reluctance to engage with anything religious, what is not being embraced is atheism and a rejection of all things spiritual. The proactive level of interest in spirituality is much debated²⁰⁸ and probably overstated but what does seem clear is that studies,

repeatedly find that people continue to express a belief in God or a higher order, and often give religion as an identifying marker in census and survey forms, but do not practice their faith or accept many of the teachings within it.²⁰⁹

It is a question of emphasis. Churches that focus on religious practice and nominal, unquestioning adherence without meaning will most likely be significantly less attended than those who emphasise personal and corporate spiritual engagement and reflect more the changing world around emerging adults than the traditions

²⁰⁶ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, p. 14.

²⁰⁷ Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 115

²⁰⁸ There is insufficient time to engage fully with the debate here.

²⁰⁹ S. Henderson, J. Holland, S. McGrellis, S. Sharpe & R. Thompson, *Inventing Adulthoods, a Biographical Approach to Youth Transitions* (London: Sage, 2007), p. 122.

and institutions from which they have come: 'IPs will develop and actively participate in social networks built around spirituality and religious-like beliefs, but not necessarily traditional religions.'²¹⁰

5. A way forward

As the above cultural assessments have taken place, there have emerged two further considerations that straddle mission and church in their nature and implications. It is proposed that these should act as practical guidelines that speak into both fields of missiology and ecclesiology.

5.1 Move the Boundaries

'Indeed we may be straddling one of those fault lines in history when the definition of a generation needs to be recalibrated.'²¹¹

The crisis that is being faced amidst emerging adults is also as a result of youth ministry strategy that has failed to adapt to changes in cultural trends. Church structure and missiological praxis does not traditionally respond quickly and the sheer speed of the digital revolution and its unrelenting pace alongside the stealthy yet definite emergence of a new phase of adult life has left the vast amount of youth ministry behind. Church structure means that there are defined age categories for groups and meetings and these have been slow to respond to sociological change. Increasingly blurred boundaries between adolescence and adulthood mean that those responsible for their respective mission and discipleship will need to work more closely together and not allow emerging adults to fall into the gap. From a youth perspective, sociological and digital change means this area is more important in the life of a church: 'at its best youth ministry can provide an underpinning structure for a whole strategy of church growth.'²¹² Youth ministry in the future will be responsible for more people as its upper age limit rises to include

²¹⁰ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 60.

²¹¹ Gardner, *The App Generation*, p. 51.

²¹² Savage, *Making Sense*, p. 17.

emerging adulthood. From an adult perspective, effective church leaders will take the ecclesiological implications outlined above seriously and be as intentional about transitioning emerging adults as youth workers are.

For youth ministry, this not only increases the number of people they are working with, as the age parameters move older, but also the responsibility and opportunity it has. The success of Christian youth ministry will not be judged on seeing a young person through to the age of eighteen, but having navigated this, 'exploratory [and] unstable',²¹³ phase of life. This means that more investment, in terms of time, finance, advocacy and emphasis is needed. 'From Anecdote to Evidence', found extraordinarily that, 'Those who employ a youth worker are half as likely to be declining as those who employ another type of paid worker.'²¹⁴ More research is required, both in the effects of technology and into the ongoing sociological changes amongst emerging adults. Not just the future, but the current state of the church depends on an ability to ask and answer these questions and to plot a creative and determined way forward. There are encouraging signs of growth. Momentum²¹⁵ is a good example of a ministry's extension from youth to young adulthood. Youth For Christ²¹⁶ have recently amended the upper limits of their age range in their constitution from eighteen to twenty five, pioneering Ethos a series of short films aimed specifically at emerging adults.²¹⁷ Some churches have also become more intentional about transitioning young people into emerging adulthood, working with organisations like Fusion to send young people well to university.²¹⁸ But there is a long way to go if the missing generation are to be found. Increased investment in and extension of youth ministry is likely to be a good start.

²¹³ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, p.18.

²¹⁴ The Church Commissioners for England, *From Anecdote to Evidence*, p. 26.

<http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/FromAnecdoteToEvidence1.0.pdf>
Accessed 25/2/15

²¹⁵ <http://momentum.co.uk/> Accessed 25/2/15

²¹⁶ <http://www.yfc.co.uk/> Accessed 25/2/15

²¹⁷ <https://yfcresources.co.uk/ethos/ethos> Accessed 25/2/15

²¹⁸ <http://www.fusion.uk.com/> Accessed 25/2/15

5.2 Seize the Opportunities

Mission and church are relationally driven. The ‘tribal’²¹⁹ nature of emerging adults coupled with the phenomenon of the social media network, which Sweet surmises has replaced the family or the individual as the predominant relational unit,²²⁰ lend themselves more than ever to these salient missiological and ecclesiological features. Used well, not as a shortcut but a supplement, the virtual worlds that emerging adults inhabit represent an ‘unprecedented opportunity for discipleship.’²²¹ The potential to share life, celebrations and concerns in addition to ‘real’ authentic community will be seized by the most effective churches amongst this age group. The challenges of superficiality, distraction, identity formation and addiction will not be ignored but held in tension with the benefits. As a generation that constantly embraces and personifies paradox, this tensions is much more easily navigated and the advantages exceed the dangers: ‘on balance the social benefits of digital technologies outweigh the very real risks.’²²²

Unprecedented potential for community and connection is joined by that of communication. The phenomena of information access and its speed of travel have been expounded and their implications on the communication of the gospel should not be understated. The capacity for the news to travel has dramatically increased. Myers identifies the potential: ‘The quality is high and the cost is dramatically low. This enables anyone with even marginal interest to take a shot at being a YouTube cewebrity.’²²³ Evangelists inevitably see this as an exciting opportunity. Sites such as YesHels²²⁴ and Christianity²²⁵ have already taken advantage of this. To be maximised however, this opportunity will most likely take into account firstly, emerging adults’ desire to interact with media, secondly, the importance of conversation in faith exploration and thirdly, the need to see authenticity behind the message. Where every day emerging adult Christians use social media

²¹⁹ Huntley, *The World*, p. 25.

²²⁰ Sweet, *Viral*, p. 173.

²²¹ Orr-Ewing, *Millennials*, p. 63.

²²² Drescher, *Tweet If*, p. 3.

²²³ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 119.

²²⁴ <http://www.yesheis.com/en/> Accessed 25/2/15

²²⁵ <http://www.christianity.org.uk/index.php/> Accessed 25/2/15

creatively and authentically to communicate their faith to existing friends and acquaintances, there is significant potential to influence and inspire.

Finally, on opportunities, the age group to drive the church forward in this respect is emerging adults themselves. They are the ones to seize the chances the digital world provides and as incarnational in that world they can help other generations adapt and effective churches will release them to do so. An important message of trust and empowerment needs to be communicated from the gatekeepers and leaders in older generations, and their importance in mentoring and support will be pivotal:

In the coming decades, Internet Pioneers and subsequent generations of Internet Natives will dominate the workforce. Those organisations that empower them will be best positioned for success.²²⁶

Conclusion

Christian mission has shown a remarkable ability to connect the gospel message to the cultures that its evangelists have found themselves in or been sent to. From St Paul in Acts 17²²⁷ to the pictures of European missionary Matteo Ricci in local Chinese dress, to the apologists of the twentieth century in response to the Enlightenment. The co-emergence of the new phase of life for young adults and the digital revolution present us with a changing landscape again and the extent to which they will develop further is uncertain. One thing that is certain is that the digital revolution and its far reaching effects are here to stay. The internet is not going to be deleted: 'We are not going to stop the music or go back to television as the family hearth.'²²⁸ For some in the church this will mean significant change.

The most urgent recommendations of this paper are as follows:

²²⁶ Myers, *Hooked Up*, p. 164.

²²⁷ Paul finds an altar inscribed with, 'To an unknown God', which he uses to connect the people of Athens to the Christian gospel.

²²⁸ Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 294.

- i) Missiologically, effective evangelism is likely to explore and experiment with new gospel narratives and means of communicating them. For cultural reasons of a Post-Christendom era and anti-commitment alongside a digital paradigm that has departed from a linear, Gutenberg means of accessing information, effective evangelists are likely to frame the good news, for example, in terms of purpose as an antidote to lostness; generosity and mission as an alternative to consumerism. This is a generation for whom the digital revolution has bombarded them with contending worldviews to the point of overload: 'most emerging adults are inundated with more competing information, narratives, and truth claims than any person could possibly assimilate, assess and synthesize.'²²⁹ Effective missionaries to this generation will not only challenge and subvert these worldviews but also communicate the Christian worldview in such a compelling way as to compete. This will be particularly pertinent to my ministry as I seek to craft evangelistic messages in ways that connect.
- ii) That the shift from mass media to social media alongside cultural characteristics of participation and collaboration means that communication and worship in an ecclesial context has to change. The format of most church services and especially sermons reflects mass media with low levels of participation. If, 'broadcast learning doesn't work for this generation,'²³⁰ effective churches, with high numbers of emerging adults will most likely be those who adapt to more participatory learning styles, invite feedback and empower all generations with high levels of involvement.
- iii) That the coincidence of the emergence of emerging adults and the digital revolution have had such a significant impact and yet despite some, but still formative, academic reflection, most people are unaware of the effects of the cultural and technological shifts that are happening around them: 'It is above all the young who need to be convinced that

²²⁹ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, p. 64.

²³⁰ Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, p. 148.

when it comes to a networked life, we are still at the beginning of things.²³¹ This paper has highlighted a number of pertinent issues but further research is recommended, especially an extension of Turpin's model of conversion from consumerism specifically for emerging adults and likewise for Singlehurst's exploration of language and gospel paradigm. The church can play a significant role in highlighting, discussing and addressing the issues raised by the coincidence of these phenomena.

It would be easy to think that the implications of technological change are more digital engagement. Increased social networking use, cyber church and 'fishing the net' are not the answer to the opportunities and challenges that the digital revolution presents us with. There are far more complex and deeper issues that go beyond translation of evangelistic language to the choice of gospel paradigm, beyond use of computers in church to the nature and style of interaction and affect what the prophetic voice of Christians looks like in the twenty first century. It is likely that successful churches and their missionaries will go beyond superficial understanding of emerging adults' culture and the digital world to applying some of the recommendations above if they are to connect with this crucial generation.

²³¹ Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 294.

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