

Pathways



The magazine for the people of the Diocese of Oxford | Autumn 2024 | FREE

Growing up

Children and young people in the church

PLUS: A smartphone – for an 11-year-old? | Creativity | How to expect growth



Children of God

Jesus often describes people as the children of God, comparing our relationship with our maker to one of parent and child. That’s an amazing invitation to go deeper. In the gospel we read of Jesus’ love for children, often putting them front and centre of the crowds gathered to hear him preach, against the advice of his disciples.

We must follow his lead and plant the mustard seed of faith in our young people to build the future of the kingdom of God. In our turn, we call disciples in every generation, sharing God’s love with all. And there are many to share it with. Our diocese is home to around half a million children and young people. We connect with over 60,000 children every weekday through our schools and multi-academy trusts but with a smaller proportion year by year through our churches.

Rather than cause for despair, this is an opportunity to renew, refresh and restore our ministry. Jesus calls us to be “fishers of people”. Let’s cast our nets wide enough so all are welcome.

Do take a look at your parish dashboard on the Diocese of Oxford website to help you discern how you will engage the young people in your communities. Use this resource to help you answer the call, unanimously endorsed at the March Diocesan Synod, for every deanery and church to consider our calling in relation to work with children and young people this year, and to plan accordingly. A small step can make a huge difference to the lives of children, young people and families.

In this edition

We take a closer look at what it means to be young and Christian. How has growing up in a digital age changed a generation of young people and their relationships with each other and God (page 15)?

Our focus on young people continues throughout this edition as we look at smartphones and their impact on youngsters. Opinion on page 12 debates the merits and potential pitfalls of giving devices to 11-year-olds and enabling them to access social media and the wider internet.

The Revd Dave Bull explores the theme of renewal in our ministry to young people. He asks if it is possible a new dawn is emerging from the gloom of the pandemic and the subsequent drop in the numbers of younger people attending church. Teenagers attending our diocesan weekend retreat speak thoughtfully about their faith and who they share it with in their day-to-day lives (page 23).

I hope this edition of *Pathways* inspires you to think about how God might be calling you and your church to engage with a new generation.

Bishop Steven

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We hope you enjoy reading *Pathways*. Email or write and let us know what you think. Contributor enquiries are welcome.

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Hannah Ling



Solidarity in the face of riots

A group from Oxford Citizens UK, which the diocese is a member of, visited asylum seekers in Oxford with cake and a card of support in the wake of violent protests and riots in England. During the visit they spoke to people who were taking part in an Asylum Welcome drop-in. Oxford Citizens UK also wrote to local mosques with a message of solidarity.

oxford.anglican.org/support-after-riots

For regular news and updates, visit the website: oxford.anglican.org/news



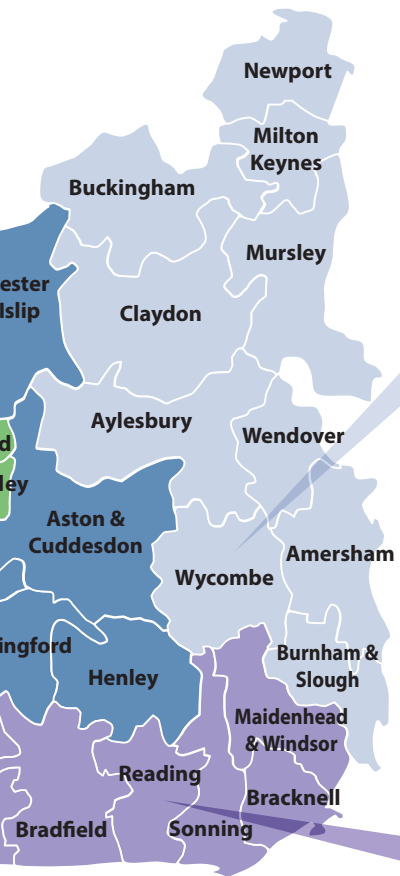
Stef of SCG Photography



Church branches out to support community

A ground-breaking community hub has opened in Chipping Norton, thanks to years of support from St Mary's Church. The Branch, in a former bank, provides mentoring and signposting advice to West Oxfordshire residents, and crucially provides a base for voluntary and statutory organisations in the town, mitigating the negative effects of rural isolation.

oxford.anglican.org/branch-community-hub



Ian Branch



Dishing up support for the hungry

Meals from Marlow has served up more than 200,000 meals to those who would otherwise not have a hot meal. Now in its fourth year, more than £420,000 has been raised to support the charity, which was founded by the local church, All Saints, as well as chef Tom Kerridge, Andy Agar and Chris Hughes.

oxford.anglican.org/200000th-meal-for-marlow

Jane Kenyon



Green-fingered group create retreat

Creating a welcoming green space at St Luke with St Bartholomew in Reading has encouraged pollinators and other insects to visit the churchyard as well as people. The healing garden beds were created on a patch of grass that has become a haven for native wildflowers, attracting bees and other animals, thanks, in part, to a grant from the diocese's Development Fund.

oxford.anglican.org/colourful-retreat

We're on social media too. Search "Diocese of Oxford" on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

*“God has given me
a yearning to help
young people hold
on to hope”*



Bethany Cook

Bethany, whose home church is St Mary's, Twyford, explains how hope in Jesus has become a motivating force in her life.

Since being a child, God has broken my heart for injustice – I couldn't bear to watch videos of children living in poverty while I lived in affluence. I always wanted to spend my life doing something about this inequality. I was thrilled to find a degree that tackled some of the questions about why injustice existed in the first place, and what could be done about it. I took up the offer to study geography at Cambridge.

At university I learnt that there is a much deeper explanation of injustice and the righting of wrongs to be found in the Christian story than in secular studies. I valued the academic teaching on inequality and development greatly – it opened my eyes to a lot of important things. But I couldn't help feeling secretly smug that I had answers in the Bible's explanation of the fall, sin and Jesus' redemption that secular studies couldn't grasp. At the same time, I felt frustrated at the lack of hope and solutions to tackle complex problems without the power of the Holy Spirit.

It turned out I wasn't the only one struggling with this. As I began my final year, a new paper was introduced into the course: Geographies of Hope. One of my lecturers had realised that geography's overwhelmingly negative approach to world issues had led many students to despair. She wanted to offer a space for us to explore reasons to hope. My Christian friends and I were excited. We relished engaging in academic theories of hope, but

never shied away from talking and writing about Jesus, our living hope. We found Biblical hope to be an anchor among secular theories describing hope as momentary, fragile, disappointing and easily broken. Many of our classmates despaired even more as secular writers struggled to offer a concrete reason to hope.

Having just graduated, I'm often asked: "What's next?" While I decide whether the career ladder is the place for me at all, I'm taking time out to write risk assessments and check the temperature of my church's fridge: I'll be working as a ministry assistant for the youth team at my church in Cambridge. All this reflection on hope broke my heart for those who don't have hope in Jesus. God has given me a yearning to help young people find and hold on to hope. I am excited to support an amazing bunch of them.

Whenever unwelcome thoughts of this opportunity being a "waste of my degree", poor career move or terrible financial decision, I think of the woman who broke an expensive jar of perfume over Jesus' head, and Mary, who chose to spend her time simply listening at Jesus' feet. Both of these events happened in a place called Bethany. Remembering these stories fills me with confidence that, for now at least, this job is exactly where Jesus wants me. ¶

Photo: Mark Cook



Do you know someone with unfulfilled potential? If you want to encourage them to use their gifts, this webpage might help: oxford.anglican.org/vocations

St Mary's, Turville started a Saturday morning churchyard craft group that attracts village families to gather under a gazebo while the church is closed for restoration. They craft, they chat and they end with liturgy, hymns and prayer.

St Paul's, Wooburn has given over one Sunday a month for a children's service in the hall instead of their normal service. This is more manageable for volunteers, and new families from the village are attending.

St Peter's, Loudwater is reaching new families at their local school through providing support with uniform and food parcels.

Several churches are supporting school children with additional needs through the Transforming Lives for Good initiative.

All Saints, Bisham recently started a school singers club in the church. It has become the best-attended school club.

All Saints, Marlow hosts a Bible bricks club in an infant school where children build Bible stories out of Lego.

Expect growth

Should we be looking for a viral renewal of the church among our children and young people?

“The Church of England will be extinct within 40 years because the faith it proclaims is not contagious enough.” This headline appeared in the wake of the pandemic, accompanied by a story about a mathematician whose calculations showed the “R” number for the church was simply too small for it to survive. We are all depressingly familiar with this story. But is it possible that a new viral story with a different ending is emerging among children and young people?

We are noticing a new kind of contagion. Rather than weakening the body, it seems to be the kind of virus that spreads and strengthens the church, especially among young people. Where detected it is usually small in scale – sometimes very small – but isn’t that how all viruses start? Like Israel in exile, we need to be reminded: “Who dares despise the day of small things?” (Zech 4.10).

Just some of the stories of viral life breaking out are featured opposite. We are also seeing some larger-scale gatherings of children and teenagers: Lighthouse holiday clubs, a deanery weekend away with over 100 teenagers, united worship evenings for teens, and several churches with dozens of children attending on Sundays.

*“small seeds
grow into large
harvests”*

The variety we see in these stories is teaching us that what we need is not a common model but a common, Spirit-led approach.

We must be willing to pray and wait until we see God open a door – and then take a risk to walk through it, without always knowing where it will lead. In contrast, our instinct is usually to start with discussing our own ideas.

What if God is already opening a door for your church to take the next step? What if the Holy Spirit is already preparing the hearts of children, young people and their parents – and they are just waiting to meet you? What if a small, brave, creative step now might lead to abundant new life?

Jesus frequently encouraged his disciples that small seeds grow into large harvests. Zechariah preached the same message: “The seed *will* grow well, the vine *will* yield its fruit, the ground *will* produce its crops, and the heavens *will* drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people.” (Zech 8.12). Is God encouraging you to trust in this promise and to seed something new that could lead to viral renewal among the children and teenagers in your community? ¶

Words: The Revd Canon Dave Bull, Area Dean of Wycombe Deanery



See what other churches are doing to grow:
oxford.anglican.org/growing-new-congregations#stories

Children's ministry

What is a child's faith like, and how do we help them grow in faith? Yvonne Morris challenges us to expect more.

"Noooothing can separate us from the love of God," I heard across the aisles as I was browsing the veg in the local supermarket. *I know that voice* I thought, and set off to locate the source. It wasn't difficult to follow the sound and share a very jolly greeting with three-year-old Stephen. "I'm singing God love," he said with a big grin and began the Noel Richards' song again, neither caring that he only knew one line, nor who heard.

His joy was as irrepressible as it was contagious. I've explored with children, countless times, the idea that we can come close to God and God can come close to us, any time, any place, any way. It delights me still that young children know that truth without boundaries. Their questions, wondering, observations, honesty, openness – even vulnerability – has caused me to encounter God in brilliantly surprising and profound ways.

A teenage Jesus sat among adults questioning, challenging and learning together in the temple. We can't know what they talked about, but we are told "All who heard him were amazed at his understanding" (Luke 2.47), and "His mother treasured all these things in her heart." (v.51). In approaching our ministry with children as learners, co-pilgrims and guides, we have the opportunity to create with them safe and brave spiritual spaces in which to uncover hidden treasures.

Another influential biblical story in my own ministry is the story of Eli. Not because he was a great role model as a parent, but because he had that great moment of clarity with the young Samuel. He recognised God's voice and then got out of the way so Samuel and God could be together and Samuel could hear, know and understand God's voice. It would have been so easy for Eli to say to Samuel: "God is calling you. Let me talk to God for you, and I'll tell you what he says." Instead, Eli encourages and equips Samuel with the tools he needs for his own journey with God: "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3.9).

This expectation that God and children can and should be in direct communication is a foundational principle of our Space Makers resources. Those spiritual practices are rooted in centuries of Christian contemplation. They offer ways for children, young people and adults to create together safe spiritual spaces in schools, homes, churches, in fact anywhere, so that anyone of any age can come close to and lead others to encounter God as Samuel did. Essential tools for the lifelong journey of faith for us all, but perhaps as adults, we need to pay greater attention to how we allow children to lead us closer to God and the hidden treasure. ¶

Words: Yvonne Morris, Discipleship Enabler and Children's and Family Ministry specialist
Artwork: Eavie, Waddesdon Church of England School

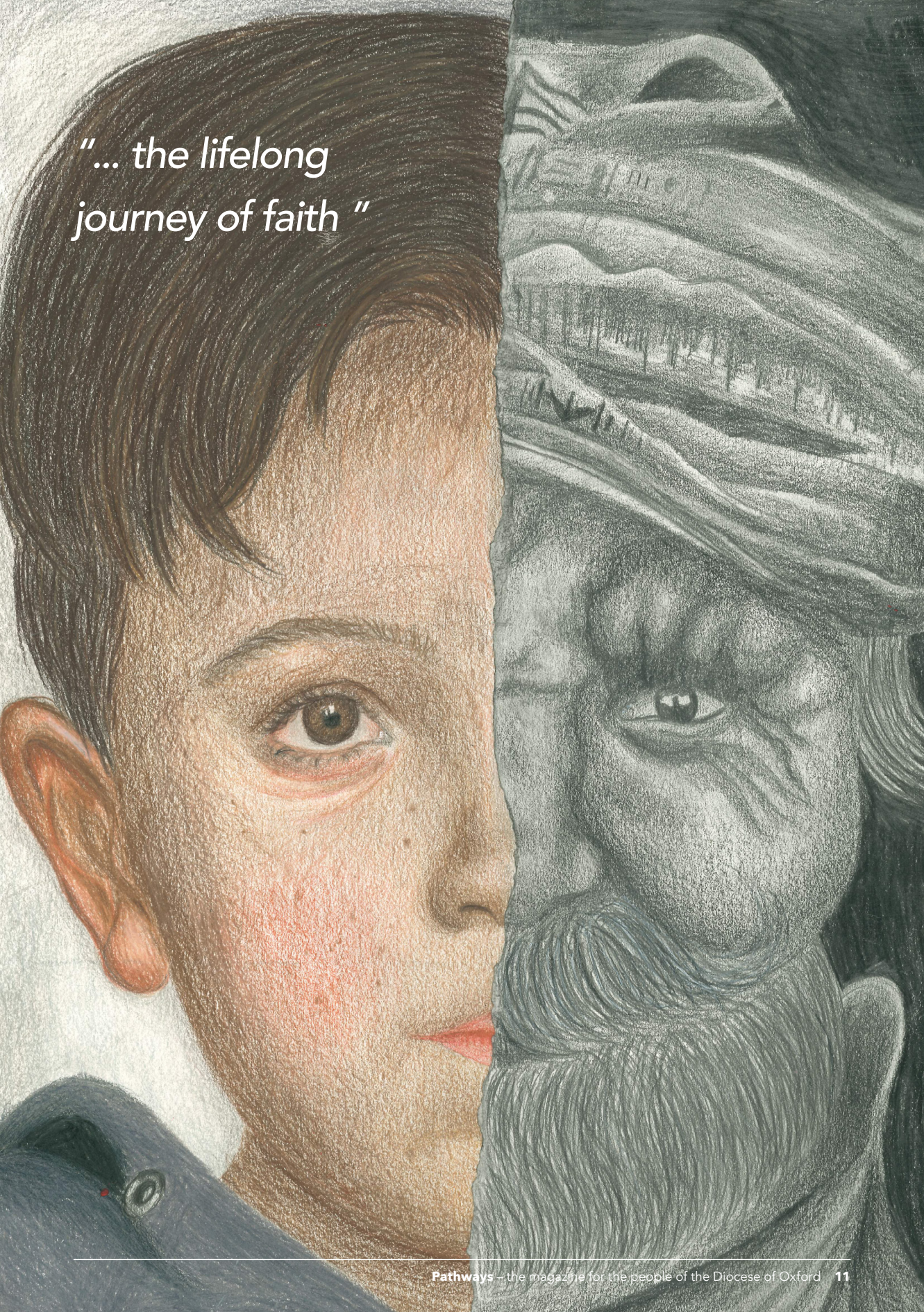


"It's fascinating to see how even the most restless children can focus and change their reaction when engaged in these practices." – Teacher Laura-Anne Putterford on *Space Makers*.

Read the full interview:

oxford.anglican.org/sm

*"... the lifelong
journey of faith "*



A smartphone – for an 11-year-old?



Ben Thompson is a Youth Justice Officer for the London Borough of Hillingdon

In a rapidly evolving digital age, the latest cohort of youth are “digital natives,” growing up in a milieu starkly different from that which framed the childhood of previous generations.

Not only are they inheriting a world permeated with advanced technology, but their fundamental approach to learning, interacting and

creating is also distinctly modern. Understanding this generational shift is critical in appreciating why introducing smartphones during early adolescence is beneficial.

Smartphones serve as pivotal educational tools in modern learning environments. They facilitate access to vast online resources and educational apps which enhance traditional schooling. Features like smartboards and classroom-specific applications are transforming pedagogical approaches, making learning more engaging and interactive. By allowing an 11-year-old access to these technologies, we ensure they are not left behind their peers in developing digital literacy and research skills.

Smartphones are not merely communication tools but portals to expansive creative landscapes. With applications for video and audio editing, digital art and more,

young people can express themselves artistically and share their work on a broader stage. Moreover, features like calendars, alarms and notepads

promote organisational skills and independence, critical competencies in personal development. Despite concerns about smartphones impacting mental health, the truth is that they can help with anxiety and loneliness:

“Smartphones play a critical role in enhancing the social connections and mental health of children and young people. They reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, which positively impacts mental wellbeing, while also providing crucial access to information and resources that aid in mental health management” (Compass UK, Effects of Mobile Phones on Children’s Mental Health).

“children can explore digital spaces safely”

Continues overleaf...

In each edition of *Pathways*, we ask two people with different perspectives to explore a topical issue. Smartphones have become part of everyday life for the vast majority of the population. But should we allow children as young as 11 to have them? Do the risks of exposure to harmful content and changing behaviour outweigh the benefits?

The birth of the internet, and with it the ability to access vast amounts of information, has been transformative, in the way that the printing press and mass literacy were also transformative.

Additionally, the power of social media to connect people has created the opportunity for increased understanding, tolerance and hope.

Except we know that's not the whole story, don't we?

According to the Government's Online Data Initiative, over 80% of children (aged 12–15) have had potentially harmful experiences online. The NSPCC reports that 76% of girls aged between 12–18 have been sent unsolicited nude images of boys or men. Thanks in part to the algorithms designed for the user's ease, on platforms such as TikTok, a shocking 75% of 15-year-olds have been sent a video of a beheading online.

The website *Discover* summarises the challenges in this way:

“potentially harmful experiences online”

“For teens and children, the TikTok algorithm may be too effective. Reading a teen’s innermost thoughts — especially when their vulnerable minds are drawn to harmful

content — can lead them to see more problematic content.”

We know that children and young people undergo a significant rewiring of their neural pathways

during adolescence – in essence the way that they think undergoes a complete makeover. We also know that teenagers worry about how they are viewed by their peers – existential questions about appearance, identity and relationships are at the heart of the adolescent experience.

These young people’s views (*The Times*, 2024) make sober reading:

“Self-harm wasn’t a big thing before, but since people started speaking on it on TikTok, people became more aware of it. There’s also anorexia, bulimia and eating disorder content on TikTok and a new trend called ‘starve maxx’.



Matthew is a headteacher of a secondary school in our diocese, and these are his own views

Continues overleaf...

The digital world is not without its risks. However, smartphones are equipped with robust parental controls that allow guardians to monitor and guide their child's internet usage. This ensures that children can explore digital spaces safely, learning to navigate them under the watchful eye of their parents. Moreover, features enabling location tracking and instant communication reassure parents about their children's safety when away from home.

While the risks associated with digital exposure cannot be overlooked, the approach to mitigating these is not through prohibition but through education and collaboration. As Christians we are called to walk alongside one another, and this includes young people. Rather than ban phones, it is important to understand that they are a part of everyday life and discipleship.

"... young people live in a converged online-offline world and as they get older, that's not going to change... It's important we're teaching our children and young people about appropriate use of phones – from understanding the importance of screen-time limits to knowing how to use safety and privacy features." Safer Schools. 📱

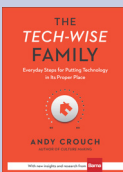
People find a way around TikTok blocking these videos." Jasmin, 15.

"I regret getting Snapchat at 12 – I wasn't prepared for what was coming. Random people would add me, then ask for nudes... A month ago, I was really addicted to my phone... I would constantly be checking for messages and at night I'd sit there binge-watching TikTok... My brother's daily screen time was 12 hours. He's constantly up all night and then he complains he's had a bad night." Tai, 14.

Based on what I have read, and seen, in my 30 years as an educator, I believe that the risks of giving children smartphones between the ages of 11–14 vastly outweigh the benefits. In the years to come, there will likely be legislation to ban the use of smartphones for children under 16, but until then, parents and carers need to join groups like the grassroots movement Smartphone Free Childhood to highlight and combat the challenges facing this generation.

So, of course, schools should ban smartphones. If our goal is to enable young people to flourish into adulthood, any arguments to the contrary seem deeply misguided. 📱

Further reading

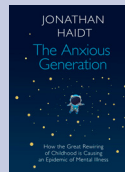


The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in its Proper Place by Andy Crouch

Making good choices about technology in our families is more than just using internet filters and determining screen-time limits. Crouch argues that it's about building character, wisdom and courage rather than accepting technology's promises of ease and instant gratification. It's about developing our heart, mind, soul and strength when we're tempted to settle for entertainment and consumer satisfaction.

Alongside in-depth original research from Barna Group that shows how families are wrestling with technology's new realities, Crouch takes parents beyond the typical questions of what, where and when to show us that in a world full of devices, there's a way to choose a better life than we've imagined.

Crouch also provides resources online: barna.com/collections/tech-wise



The Anxious Generation by Jonathan Haidt

American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt believes the teenage mental health crisis has been driven by the mass adoption of smartphones, together with the advent of social media and addictive online gaming.

Bishop Steven commented: "... deserves to be read by every parent and grandparent; by every headteacher; every church leader; every politician. It's a cool-headed, factual and devastating analysis of what has happened to the mental health of children and young people since 2010. It's also a cry for radical reform in relation to children, schools, smartphones and social media."

Young – and Christian?

It goes without saying churches are for everyone, but not everyone takes part. In some parishes we are missing young people, and are cut off from a whole generation.

Where are the young people – and how does the church reach that territory? We want to welcome all ages, and especially those who feel unheard in their churches and in the wider community – teenagers and young adults. To do this we need to understand what it means to be a Christian and part of Gen Z (or even Generation Alpha). Are the values we see promoted in these generations, like social and racial justice and climate change, aligned with their perceptions about church? What can churches do to meet young people in their faith?

A good foundation

If we are to equip our young people with the tools they need to grow in discipleship throughout their life, we need to walk alongside them through their childhood and beyond. We can have a “show not tell” approach, loving these young people and, in doing so, allow them to experience God's love too. This goes to the very heart of what being a Christian is, spreading the gospel, reflecting his grace and his way of life.

For some churches that may have already started, by reaching younger children as they join congregations for children's church or Messy Church. Showing children at every age we understand the transitions they face, from primary school to secondary school, from child to teen, builds the trust to enable us to be there to nurture them through every phase of life.

Technology

The advent of the internet age means young people are facing challenges which didn't even exist just a short time ago. Added to this, many of the adults tasked with finding a way to engage

with this generation don't understand the complexities of social media, or what the impact of being constantly connected is. Young people are often more comfortable online than face to face, even with each other.

For many young people being connected to the world through the technology in their pocket is part of life by the age of 11. As digital natives, they navigate the world differently, just as the generations before them did. Churches could even benefit from convening with the skilled young people who are part of their congregations to harness that digital prowess!

Truth

God is with us in the full messiness of our lives; he's a part of it all. While we seek to protect children and young people from exposure to the horrible things they may encounter online, allowing them to see the world as God does will give them a foundation to build resilience. Some parents worry about the graphic nature of Bible stories and seek to water them down, or not tell them at all. But we should be braver about standing alongside young people, showing the Bible is not just ten stories about fluffy sheep and Jesus rising again. We must journey with them to the cross and the horror and the messiness of that too.

We need to move out of our comfort zones to be alongside our young people in a meaningful way.

A different way

As Christians we're called to be counter-cultural. We believe there is a battle between good and evil. This dualistic approach should be applied

to our own experiences too, as we try to live in a way which Jesus taught us. These choices are not always straightforward; indeed, following the path of Jesus can often set young people aside from their peers, something which is challenging during a time when they are discovering who they are.

Added to this are the many distractions of modern life. Christians know the value of taking time to turn away from these distractions to encounter a place of peace. For young people the device they hold can become a vice holding them in a place of chaos, anxiety and constant information. If you don't give your mind a break you're going to break as a person.

Practices like those found within our Space Makers contemplative toolkit can give young people a point of quiet and focus. Adults can be proactive in creating this moment and training young people to use contemplation as a shield against distractions, developing healthier habits.

Justice

We know young people have a heart for justice, inspired by the God of justice they seek in the world around them. This generation of justice-seekers are looking for answers, and in the church we can show them the hope which God has for them. Then the technology they hold in their hands becomes a tool for activism to mobilise their peers. If we live the life they want to be part of, we can model what the young people want for themselves.

By knowing God's love, we will always have hope. By sharing that love with our young people we are giving them the gift of that same, lifelong hope that will never disappoint. 📖

Artwork by Tobias, aged two, of St John the Baptist, Stadhampton.



Find out about our Amplify project, actively listening to the voices of children and young people and partnering with them to transform their concerns, dreams and aspirations into concrete actions.

oxford.anglican.org/amplify



Engage young people

1

Relinquish ownership – whatever you do, make young people part of it. Empower them to own it, co-create and participate.

2

Listen – make space for young people to share their experiences, and take the time to listen so intently that they feel heard.

3

Be sincere – you have to mean it, all of you – and young people will quickly find you out if something isn't thought-through.

4

Be patient – it takes time to earn anyone's trust, so don't expect your efforts to bear fruit quickly. Be confident that change will come.

5

Be realistic – start with the young people you already have. You may have teenagers connected on the fringes of your church.

6

Expect change-makers – young people are not content with the status quo. They will want to take action for a God of justice.

7

Create a safe space – if you create a safe place for young people to play, then you're also creating a safe place for them to share.

8

Meet – find out where the young people are in your community and meet them there, whether that's McDonald's or a park.

9

Create community – build a community for young people to be a part of, a safe place for them to enjoy spending time with others.

Creativity

Picasso famously said: “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” **Pete Wheeler** encourages us to take up that challenge.

At 12 years old, after having been through a number of piano teachers, my musical creativity was nurtured by a teacher who recognised my inability to convert dots and lines into what my hands were supposed to do. Instead, she nurtured my ears, setting me weekly practice in composition. I revelled in challenges such as, “Compose a two-minute piece called The Steam Train,” receiving weekly feedback on what I could improve. In doing so, I developed a deep love for the piano and for harmony.

My life would have turned out quite differently without this creative nurture, as I went on to enjoy a career in music licensing, composition and production (with a brief spell as a garden designer along the way!), and as a worship pastor, before eventually being ordained.

Inherent in the creative process is risk – we rarely know exactly how things will turn out. They might even fail. At St Peter’s we have consciously nurtured the risk/creativity relationship, welcoming and fostering challenge, adaptability, uncertainty and adversity; seeking to be led by God’s creative Spirit into adventure! Our commitment to this calling is expressed in one of our three key church values, simply “adventure awaits”.

This value means church can look a little different sometimes. You may find yourself led into worship

in the community garden; or discovering scripture at a free fitness class; or praying together on a Sunday morning walk (or run!) through the estate. It’s usually exciting and surprising. It’s sometimes scary. It’s always fruitful.

Our creativity (which is often intertwined with our spirituality) needs nurturing, especially in church (where, sadly, we sometimes end up suppressing or under-utilising it!).

An important part of this nurture is providing the freedom to fail or get things wrong. Not everything we offer connects or lands. (We tend to be better at providing this freedom for children than we are for adults.)

“Bright with Eden’s dawn light”, we have been given charge of a “hand-crafted world” (Psalm 8.5–6, MSG). We remember we are designed to worship the Creator, not the created. As creatures that “have narrowly missed being gods” (v. 5), we recognise that our creativity can become disordered – curving away from God’s heart for order back to chaos.

At St Peter’s we like to use the image of a reclamation yard to describe ourselves – a place where nothing and no one is beyond God’s repurposing. Through Jesus, we are a new creation, made in the image of an Artist. So let us take up Picasso’s challenge. In doing so, we nurture a creativity that renews culture, reorders chaos and grows the kingdom. ¶

*Words: The Revd Pete Wheeler, Vicar, St Peter’s, Aylesbury
Artwork: Angelin Jittu, created in Year 12 at The Oxford Academy*



Inspired to be creative? Listen to the Revd Sue Hughes talking about a maker’s café in her church:

oxford.anglican.org/sue-hughes



*"Adventure
awaits"*

These verses have given Thato encouragement as she lives her life as a Christian. She challenges other young people to respond to God in their lives.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.
Jeremiah 29:11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion –
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Isaiah 61:1–4

Dwelling in the Word

ThatoYaModimo Kitso Moraile is from Kimberley and Kuruman, our link diocese in South Africa. She is one of the young people who recently visited our diocese in an exchange programme. ThatoYaModimo means *God's will* in Setswana; Kitso means *wisdom*.

My favourite Bible verse is Jeremiah 29, verse 11. God knows what he is doing with each and every one of our lives. You should not fear because the Lord knows what plans he has for you.

He will never leave or abandon us (Philippians 4:13), regardless of our circumstances or stage we are at in our lives. We, as God's children, should never leave him. We should not have doubts. It doesn't matter how tough life gets.

We live in a world where so many of us young people have just lost hope. We are uncertain about the future. Many have given up.

It's really sad if you look at the unemployment rate in my country. Many people went to universities and colleges to get a qualification, knowing they would have a better secured future, but at the end of the day, it seems to them it was worth nothing. So, I will refer back to Jeremiah 29. We should not lose hope at all because God comes through eventually. It just requires that we should remain patient and firm and believe in one God.

When I was in the UK, we learned a lot of things. I was quite sad because we were expecting it to be totally different. We picked up that not a lot of young people go to churches.

We also learned about people being agnostic and humanist. They have uncertainties and doubts that there is a loving God. It really shocks me to

see how we as young people only expect God to come through for us when we need him. We have a tendency of being ignorant when God wants us to lend him a listening ear. We do not allow God to enter our lives or ensure that we build a foundation in him.

I woke up last Monday feeling like God is really speaking to me with Bible verses from Isaiah [opposite]. It's the good news of deliverance. It goes back to showing that God has a plan, he has a purpose for each and every one of our lives. It is for us as his children to reconnect, reflect on what he has set aside for us, and goodness and mercy shall follow us.

God only wants us to acknowledge him in whatever we do. He just wants us to go back to him.

I would like to close by saying to all the young people out there who do not know how good the Lord really is or who are still uncertain, that the only way we as people can connect with God is through prayer and listening to his voice patiently. ¶



If you'd like to engage with scripture more, why not take our Story of Scripture course?
learn.oxford.anglican.org

For our church

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the community you have given us in our church, for the strength, guidance and support they bless us with. Thank you for the space we have to explore and grow in faith, without judgement or persecution.

Sorry for the times we take what you have given us for granted, when we get distracted or prioritise other things. Sorry for the times we don't reflect your gifts of forgiveness and kindness with each other. Forgive us for prioritising the things of this world over your plans for us.

Help us to live out your teachings in our church communities and in the community around us. Bless those in leadership and make your will clear to them so that they make decisions with wisdom and compassion. Please be with us as we strive to live with one another in grace and humility.

Empower us as your church and use us for your will as we work together in unity as the body of Christ.

In Jesus' name,

Amen



What do you think God is calling you to do in your community? See our website for help with tackling social justice issues: oxford.anglican.org/environment-and-social-justice

*Prayer written by the youth of St Laurence's, Reading.
Photo: Shutterstock*

The teenagers' perspective

Young people from this summer's diocesan youth weekend away share the ways they do – and don't – talk about faith and get involved in church.

"There's too much talking about *not* Jesus. The whole point of Christianity is literally in the name – Christ. We don't speak enough about Jesus. We speak too much about ceremonial things; 'we must do this'. But anyone could do that – what is special about Christianity is that we know that Jesus is here for us."

Samuel is openly Christian at school, but questions whether the church puts out the right impression at a wider level.

"We are not just a choir. We are not just a church. We are not just a family. We're here because Jesus has united us, and there needs to be more of a focus on how we can be in unity with Christ and be with him, but then also practise that day to day."

Not everyone feels comfortable sharing their faith at school. Imogen and Tyla sometimes find being a Christian at secondary school isolating.

"At school, people are always really shocked if I tell them I'm Christian. They're like, 'What, you actually believe in God?!'. But here [at the weekend away] there's not any judgement. Having places where you can meet lots of Christians around the same age helps."

Youth groups provide welcome opportunities for young people to be themselves and spend time with God. For Imogen, that safe space is to be protected.

"I don't often invite people to my youth group. I want to keep it my space, because it's a place where I'm with God, not my friends."

Those safe spaces also allow young people to deepen their faith. In 2023, Sophie was invited to

the diocesan youth weekend by one of the helpers at her football club. Tamara, the "ultimate inviter person", was one of the leaders for the weekend, and asked Sophie to join her and her daughter there. It was a hit, and the following year Tamara extended the invitation to Kaitlyn. A few months later, the girls also attended a CPAS Venture with their church.

For Kaitlyn and Sophie, the time away was transformational. "I feel different now." They had the opportunity to engage more deeply in worship in a relaxed and inclusive environment, a welcome contrast to their perceived "strictness" of some churches.

"I've heard people say, if you're not a Christian, there's nothing for you in heaven. I don't personally like that, because I think God's about forgiveness, and I think he has a place for everyone."

For Ray, though he's always felt very welcome at church, there is still more churches could do to support young people, for example when they are overwhelmed with career choices.

Ray and Samuel are confident faith has had a hugely positive impact on their lives. Their message to other young people who want to explore faith? "Go for it." 📌

As told to Pathways by Emma Thompson, diocesan Communications Officer.



Our Discipleship Enablers support engagement with young people:
oxford.anglican.org/children-young-people-and-families



Amplify

We're actively listening to the voices of children and young people and partnering with them to transform their concerns, dreams and aspirations into concrete actions.

oxford.anglican.org/amplify