An Analysis of the Use of Social Media to Facilitate Longevity Behaviors in Youth Ministry

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Abstract

The field of professional Youth Ministry is historically plagued with the stereotype of inexperienced, young, hipster types possessing good relational skills with adolescents that find themselves not being able to last very long in any one located ministry setting. While formal, academic training has made significant strides in the field to remedy this problem, long-term ongoing training and mentoring opportunities are where experiences get fleshed out and refined. Within these training and mentoring opportunities, one stands out as pivotal in its ability to influence the stereotype for the better. The recent phenomenon of social media facilitates a connectedness and virtual community of practice that differs from most forms of “traditional” community creating new norms of culture, unlike any that youth ministers have ever experienced.

This paper will propose a theoretical framework to analyze the use of Social Media outlets (Web 2.0) to facilitate longevity behaviors in the professional Youth Minister. A qualitative study of current research in ministry longevity theory, Web 2.0 technology utilization, and communities of practice, offers answers to the following questions and form the analysis framework:

1) What behaviors in Youth Ministry are indicative of longevity creation?
2) What unique aspects of Youth Ministry benefit from a sense of community?
3) How can Social Media facilitate this community to affect longevity behaviors?

*Keywords*: youth ministry, longevity, Web 2.0, community of practice
Introduction

The field of professional Youth Ministry, although relatively new in the world of ministry professions, evolves rapidly as the specialization gains attention within the larger ministry context. For about eighty years, the need for professional youth ministers has been recognized and facilitated by a combination of churches interacting with society with progressive stages of growth and transformation (Strommen, Jones, & Rahn, 2011).

The nature of any ministry profession carries deep relational bonds between the leaders and followers, either between subordinate and supervisory clergy or between laity and clergy. Specifically, the relationships that exist between those practicing youth ministry as a profession, the leadership that supervise them, and those in the church seeking to further their child’s relationship with Christ, seem to carry more weight because of the involvement of children in the disciple-making process. Not only does the professional youth minister find opportunities for growth and development in relationships with parents and teens, but also with senior leadership. The enormity of this task and responsibilities dictate that the profession not be entered into lightly. The book of James issues both a plea and a warning for church leaders saying, “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1, NIV). Because of this plea, one should consider the leadership dynamics within the field of professional youth ministry carefully. Within the leadership dyad of youth ministers and the churches they work for, there exists a unique circumstance as the youth ministry position most certainly dictates that they are almost always in a subordinate position (Heflin, 2009, p.139). Consequently, the training and support of youth ministers is of utmost importance.
Today, despite recent changes in both training and emerging new perceptions, there still exists a stereotype of what a youth minister looks and acts like that is less than attractive (Jones, 1999). For years the perception has been that youth ministers are too young, inexperienced, and lack the ability to maintain longevity with a church to form effective disciples of adolescents. For example, the prevailing thought is that youth ministers only last for about eighteen months to three years at any given locale. As recently as May of 2014, I listened to an interview with Doug Fields, a widely known youth ministry veteran of thirty years, in which he illustrated the same perception of longevity (Fields, 2014). When I began my first ministry, I fit into the category of some aspects of what the stereotype dictated a youth minister should look like. I was young, inexperienced, a bit conceited, well liked by kids, and somewhat clueless about how the nuts and bolts of ministry should operate. By all accounts, I had just as much of a possibility of failure as my peers. There were times that I felt like I wanted to give up; that I was not cut out to do this long-term. Recalling those feelings fuels the desire to contribute new research that will promote better relationships among ministry staff, wiser choices, and provide adequate mentoring to promote longevity for youth ministers in America. If youth ministry longevity is to change in a positive direction, we must consider ways to supplement formal training with ongoing leadership skills training directed toward the unique aspects of the profession. Longevity, specifically the behaviors that facilitate it, then, is the motivation for this current study and the implications thereof have the potential to affect the future state of Youth Ministry for years to come.


**Purpose and Thesis**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a new framework of understanding for the future state of youth ministry professionals by exploring the benefits of using new cultures of virtual (online) communities of practice to facilitate the interaction of professional youth ministers and promote leadership behaviors that affect longevity in the profession. I seek to combine the theoretical pillars of ministry longevity theory, implications of the new technology culture (Web 2.0) on the ways in which we learn, and communities of practice to support my thesis; that the use of social media, as a community of practice, by youth ministers, to collaboratively share ideas and mentor one another, will better facilitate the implementation of behaviors that promote longevity in the field of Youth Ministry. My thesis articulates answers to the following questions:

1) What behaviors in Youth Ministry are indicative of longevity creation?
2) What unique aspects of Youth Ministry benefit from a sense of community?
3) How can Social Media facilitate this community to affect longevity behaviors?

**Literature Review**

In this section, I will explore relevant literature pertaining to the three pillars of my theoretical foundation; namely, ministry longevity theory as related to youth ministers and the factors that influence it, communities of practice and the roles they play in youth ministry longevity, as well as the influence of current trends in social media use to facilitate community among youth ministers. I define longevity here as a combination of understandings, centered on lasting for many years, both in the profession and in singularity of locale, as the benefits of the latter form the basis for the former. Additionally, Communities of practice are defined as mutual
engagement of persons in a joint enterprise with a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). I will expound on both of these definitions further noting their connection to youth ministry. Specifically, I will explore four, interdependent, factors that emerge from the literature regarding what contributes to longevity in the field. Personal, spiritual identity development, self and supervisory evaluation of job descriptors, awareness of career change factors, and peer and mentor accountability within community are the four primary themes of behaviors that contribute to longevity in youth ministry. Second, I will define communities of practice (COP) and explore the implications of how professionals learn from one another. Additionally, the benefits of utilizing a COP model among professional youth ministers are discussed. Finally, I will explore the implications of the use of social media outlets, as COP, on the ways in which the next generation of youth ministers learns and interacts with one another. Examples from varied avenues of mainstream business and education lend themselves to support the use of these advances in social media technology within the field of youth ministry. I will make the case that social media outlets are, in fact, communities of practice that can exponentially increase the effectiveness of facilitating ongoing mentoring, training, and accountability within a community of youth ministers thereby facilitating an increase in longevity behaviors.

**Youth Ministry Longevity**

In order to provide an awareness of specific behaviors that are indicative of youth ministry longevity creation, one must first understand the multi-faceted nature of the factors that contribute to longevity. Central to this discussion is an accumulation of what attitudes and characteristics on the part of the youth minister are necessary to create a perception of Christ-
likeness in the eye of the beholder. Although not an exhaustive list, youth, parents, and senior leadership are the primary stakeholders.

The aforementioned stereotypical tenure of youth ministers provides the catalyst for this study and illustrates the need that still exists to find ways to strengthen their longevity behaviors. The first major study of the state of Youth Ministry conducted in 1999 posed a slightly better synopsis than the widely held stereotype. The *Study of Protestant Youth Ministers in America* (SPYMA) provided ground-breaking research into the state of professional youth ministry that showed the average tenure is around four to six years. While the actual prognosis is not quite as bad as the perceived stereotype, it highlights the work that still needs to be done. Published in the work of Strommen, Jones, and Rahn (2011) entitled *Youth Ministry that Transforms*, the purpose of the SPYMA, at its foundation, was to “to address [youth ministry’s] critical nature: ‘Because it alerts us to the concerns of youth ministers—concerns that cause many to leave this profession during their early years of service’” (Why a critical study, para. 2). Jones (1999) notes that the current state of the profession of youth ministry is grossly misinterpreted within ministry circles and, thus, “churches…have fallen prey to the stereotype” (p.9) that good youth ministers should be “young, male, musically talented, charismatic, energetic, entertaining, and culturally relevant in appearance” (p.9). This problem has a twofold consequence; first, churches looking to hire a youth minister use the negative stereotype as the qualifications for employment and, second, potential youth ministers who fit the stereotype think they will excel in the youth ministry world. Both are potential problems if they prove true.

First, churches that seek a youth minister with superficial qualifications demonstrate a lack of true support for the youth minister, thinking he or she should be able to be successful on their own. Dave Rahn (2011) notes the danger of this lack of support toward longevity when he
states that “any approach to youth ministry that does not seek to cultivate support from significant stakeholders is destined to be short-lived” (chapt. 11, para. 1). Additionally, Jones (2011) notes that the most successful youth ministers are those who “understand that there is more to youth ministry preparation than clever ideas and poignant illustrations” (chap. 9, summary, para. 2). As the research suggests, fitting the stereotype can result in shorter lengths of tenure as youth ministers experience feelings of being ill-equipped, unappreciated, over-tasked, and inadequate (Doerksen, 2004; Strommen et al., 2011). By extension, this produces either burnout or, through a lack of coping skills, moral failure, which both contribute to a lack of longevity. This is the reason youth ministry is referred to as a marathon (Fields, 2002).

Similarly, Jones (1999) dealt with the issues of stereotype as she noted the dangers of churches hiring youth ministers based on the negative assumption that they should fit a certain mold of expectation. She provided two measures for the framework of understanding that dealt with specific personal and spiritual competencies. The purpose was to negate the negative stereotype so both churches and youth ministers may be better equipped to navigate the waters of hiring practices. The first measure came from Dunn’s (1996) article dealing with the necessary competencies for youth ministry including self-management, which outlines ministry skills of time, money, and volunteer management, and self-care, which deals with personal spiritual maturation; both illustrating the responsibility of the youth minister for his or her own actions yet providing opportunity for much training. The second measure came from Senter’s (1997) axioms of youth ministry, which “represent specific values, or hallmarks of effective ministry” that highlights recruiting and equipping volunteers and parents (Jones, 1999, p.11). This construct adequately addressed the factors that affect the perception of stereotype, and, by extension, longevity in Youth Ministry as the measures promote authenticity. Of note are the support
systems that must exist to facilitate issues of personal responsibility along with mentoring and accountability support. Several books published in recent years deal with the issues of self-management and self-care for youth ministers (Fields, 2002; Olson, Elliot, and Work, 2001; Robbins, 2010) but unless they are picked up and read consistently, the ongoing training piece needs a different outlet.

Vineyard churches, as a denomination, have developed a guide entitled Authentic Identity (2009) for youth ministers, for example, which address the issues of personal responsibility. They assert that to merely seek popularity with students is to place students secondary to the youth ministry, as the notion of popularity is a selfish one. They, instead, have recognized the importance of developing the intentional authenticity that adolescents crave and push their youth ministers to not “lose [their] unique identity in the process of learning about the teenagers’ world. Loving them, while retaining [their] authentic identity, will serve as an excellent example in living out their relationships with unbelieving friends” (Jergensen, 2009, p. 17). The personal development of the youth minister, both spiritually and professionally, is of utmost importance.

Focused studies on longevity, and the factors that contribute to it, are emerging in the circle of Youth Ministry as a profession. Grenz (2001) explored the implications of longevity, as it relates to ministry practices, with a good mix of both current (n=89) and former (n=65) youth ministers. The design of his study was aimed at exploring the causal-comparative characteristics of career tenure in Youth Ministry. Factors such as inadequate salary, greater opportunity for successful work in a new position, and personal needs going unmet rose to the top of the list of reasons for leaving the position (p.171). It should be noted that Grenz’s (2001) definition of longevity did not pertain to the length of time spent at one church, rather, it “refers to time spent as a vocational youth minister, and not time spent at one church” (p.9). While he notes the
importance of research in the topic of the benefits of longevity, his study didn’t explicitly address those concerns. His study, however, did accomplish what he set out to do; answer the question of what factors contributed to either change in vocation or change in church. Additionally, the change factors were largely divided into two categories, job and personal.

While one can certainly benefit from learning what causes career change and how not to live up to the negative stereotype, a focused approach to measuring what particular characteristics contribute to longevity in youth ministry is necessary for this current study.

Four factors that contribute to longevity emerge from the literature that captures the essence of this measurement: identity development (Heflin, 2009), self-evaluation of important job descriptors (Heflin, 2009; Severe, 2013), awareness of career change factors (Grenz, 2001), and an assessment of accountability measures (Strommen et al., 2011). Each of these factors are symbiotic in relation to one another (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Symbiotic stages of longevity factors.](image)

Illustrates the relationship of factors that contribute to longevity behaviors in Youth Ministry.
In the first factor contributing to longevity, the youth minister should cultivate a sense of who he or she is, or should become. This applies both in a personal spiritual sense as well as in professional goals. If one is to lead and mentor an age group in a key developmental stage, individual stability should take priority over all else. While the recognition of one’s sinful state certainly keeps humility at the forefront, a consequence of that humility should be a desire to maintain a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Houston Heflin (2009) posits thus: “the appropriate genesis of any youth ministry is not a program for the spiritual formation of adolescents but a commitment to our spiritual formation as Christian adults and disciples of Jesus” (p.9). One’s personal commitment to this formation provides the foundation of influence that will guide the direction of adolescents and their parents toward Christ. As this commitment is maintained, the job of the ministry will simply be an outpouring of the Spirit of God from oneself. Job descriptors, then, naturally flow from the ontological knowing, or self-awareness, of the youth minister as an ambassador of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20, NIV). Paul understood this aspect of his identity when he addressed the church in Corinth. He asserted that his primary role was to become all things to all people “to win as many as possible” (1 Corinthians 9:19, NIV). He lived the example of what it means to conform one’s identity to that of Christ to fulfill His mission in the world. The fact that Paul wrote these letters to churches illustrates the importance he placed on communal identity; that it takes a body of believers working toward one purpose to help shape one’s identity.

A second factor contributing to longevity consists of an awareness of how to evaluate and assess the primary actions that lead to strong relational bonds with parents, adolescents, and senior leadership. In a phone conversation with Dr. Heflin (personal communication, April,
2014), I asked him what he thought was the primary role from his categorization of roles that facilitated longevity behaviors. He stated the “role of the equipping recruiter” as the most important for youth ministers to master. This process of recruiting volunteers and equipping them for works of service in the ministry is one of the hardest to master as it involves good relational skills, awareness of family dynamics, an understanding of youth culture, as well as an awareness of where to acquire good resources. Additionally, a confidence in one’s own ability to accurately and effectively share the vision of the ministry is required. Performance of each of these factors simultaneously becomes more of an art form than a mere tactile skill. Consequently, the importance of doing it well becomes magnified in the perception of parents and leadership. Evaluation of these ministry obligations is pushed more from the direction of senior leadership prompting a reactive approach to youth ministry. Thus, the importance of procuring effective evaluative tools and discussing them with parents and senior leadership is amplified.

Another potential problem stems from the lack of formative evaluation tools for the youth minister to utilize in his or her ministry, thus affecting their ability to feel a sense of accomplishment in ministry. In a study of youth ministers from the Illinois National Network of Youth Ministers (NNYM), focus groups of youth ministers in a larger network all indicated that evaluation of ministry programming was difficult. Severe (2013) states, “The data revealed that formal programmatic evaluation tools were almost completely absent from ministry practice” (p.295). While formal evaluative tools were absent, informal evaluation of programming, youth, and self were considered implicit and were the preferred method used with the exception of one in the study. This is primarily because the tools for formal evaluation are limited (p.293). The inexperienced youth minister especially needs the support of ancillary tools to be better equipped to facilitate his own growth or growth of volunteer youth ministry leadership. If these tools are
not provided the potential for failure and feelings of inadequacy become compounded to the point of burnout or senior leadership falls victim to the temptation of not assessing job performance effectively. This can then lead to termination or a looming sense of “the grass is greener” attitudes toward the ministry.

Third, an awareness of the factors that can lead the youth minister to either find another congregation to serve or to leave the profession altogether, can help prepare and facilitate a more proactive approach to both identity development and self-evaluation. As noted earlier, these factors become clear in the research of Dr. Jonathan Grenz (2001) as he explores the nature of why youth ministers change jobs often or leave the career altogether. An awareness of one’s motivations for being a youth minister can provide insight into areas of needed growth and extinguish the need to constantly move around from church to church. Grenz’s (2001) research revealed the motivations for wanting to move jobs or change careers were largely selfish in nature. He notes that they “left their position because of inadequate salary, greater opportunity for successful work in a new position, and conflict with senior pastor” (p.8). While some of these reasons could be warranted because of legitimate underfunding or power hungry leadership, the study revealed the reciprocal nature of the leadership dyad in most cases. At some point, the youth minister must evaluate his/her own motivations for continuing in ministry and seek help from others to shape those motivations.

The final factor to facilitate longevity behaviors is the role of peer and mentor accountability. When youth ministers aren’t performing to the best of their abilities, a sense of confidence in their abilities and personal spiritual state begin to degrade. In the SPYMA, three critical clusters emerged that related to this “Growing Loss of Confidence” (Strommen et al., 2011, chap.3, clusters correlating, para.1) that shed some light on the foundational reasons why
this occurs and offer suggestions as to what the youth minister can do about it. First, a feeling of personal inadequacy revealed itself as a primary factor of the lack of confidence felt. The research suggests that younger, inexperienced youth ministers often looked toward numbers of youth attending their programs to measure successfulness of their ministries. Coupled with the increased desire to please people, this measure, when not achieved to the level they thought it should, revealed insecurities and prompted these feelings of inadequacy.

Second, the youth who attended often exhibited attitudes of disinterest. When youth ministers sensed this apathy, they often blamed themselves for lack of preparation and planning, or being creative enough to provide the “coolest” programming. While the research never actually addressed the perceptions of the youth themselves, whether or not the youth minister had an accurate understanding of this phenomenon was irrelevant. The perception was already engrained in the mind of the youth minister and was the deciding factor in the research.

The final cluster contributing to a loss of confidence was the youth minister feeling unqualified for the job both theologically and professionally. The balance of knowing how to communicate the message of the Gospel while making it relevant to an ever-changing culture was a huge contributor to this feeling. The research suggested again that the younger, inexperienced youth ministers were more susceptible to these feelings. Practical skills that address the unique attributes of the youth ministry profession were among the most desired to combat this feeling. Strommen et al. (2011) note that “they want further training that enables them to counsel both youth and parents, as well as skills that enable them to spiritually nurture youth” (loc.1766).

Of importance to this study are the implications of the suggestions that Strommen et al. (2011) offer to youth ministers to address these issues. They note the biblical example of Paul’s
relationship to Timothy as he encouraged him often despite his (Timothy’s) age. Here, the mentoring and accountability toward Timothy provide him the strength to carry on and continue to make a difference in the lives of those he is called to minister to. They also share one of the study participant’s responses to this issue that helps to clarify the importance of these people in the lives of youth ministers. They state thus:

Satan knows our weaknesses. If he cannot convince us that we are not good enough for the job in order to disable us, then he will try using every method imaginable. This is where mentorship and friendships of utmost spiritual integrity are crucial – especially friendships, where discernment and love are present. (Strommen et al., 2011, loc.1723)

The necessity of mentors and others who can maintain a level of accountability, in the bounds of friendship and community, to the youth minister is profoundly important. It is through these individuals working in community with one another that growth, both personal and professional, can happen.

Additionally, to combat feelings of being unqualified, the suggestion is made to “take advantage of learning opportunities” (loc.1816) to better prepare oneself for the task of ministry. Many training opportunities have emerged in the years since data were collected fifteen years ago. At the time, there were only a few national conferences that youth ministers could attend. Now I get advertisements in the mail several times per year for a different conference for youth ministry both national and regional in scale. Simply Youth Ministry Conference, National Youth Workers Convention, the Orange Conference, and the National Conference on Youth Ministries are the larger national conferences. While several look beneficial, both cost and travel expenses to attend them can be prohibitive. Serving in a non-denominational church, as each one is different when it comes to providing funding for professional development, I am allotted five-
hundred dollars per year for professional development; this includes conferences, books, and travel expenses. Most of the time I can only afford to attend one, and even then, some of the travel expenses must be paid out of pocket. Thus, the challenge is to find ways to augment training and learning opportunities in ways that have maximum benefit at minimal cost. This becomes hard to do in isolation so the self-inclusion in a network of other youth ministers becomes necessary.

**Communities of Practice**

In my 16 years of professional youth ministry, I have gained much insight from the wisdom of others through various conferences, local youth ministry networks, friendships with other youth ministers, and through online communities that have only recently emerged in the world of youth ministry. I have also had the privilege of speaking wisdom into the lives of youth ministers who have just started in the profession. The encouragement, accountability, instruction, and training in righteousness through the power of God’s word expressed in the lives of both peers and older mentors challenge and equip me to press on in this journey of professional Youth Ministry. The role of community within the practice of youth ministry, as noted earlier, can equip the youth minister with a better understanding of how to integrate his or her personal and professional identity in a reciprocal manner to the benefit of others within that community. This is what is referred to as a community of practice (COP). Wenger (1998) would outline a community of practice as a mutual engagement of people in a joint enterprise with a shared repertoire. This happens when a collective engagement with others, who share the same conditions, in the process of learning where meaning, practice, community, and identity
converge in an informal manner (p.4). These four factors of community learning convergence correspond well to the four factors that contribute to longevity behaviors in youth ministry.

First, in the role of identity development, the youth minister can benefit from the involvement of other like-minded people in the formation of his or her spiritual and philosophical foundations for participation in the profession. While the personal responsibility to maintain a commitment to Christ and His Church certainly exists, engagement in the practice of youth ministry with fellow laborers in the field helps to shape this identity for the better (Jones, 1999). Wenger (1998) notes that one’s identity in practice is not solely based on one’s self-image; rather, it “is a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other” (p.151). He defines reification in a broad sense of not so much about making the experience of an event into a concrete object, but of the collective interpretation of those experiences into a new potential for understanding. The context of the youth minister’s identity then, is informed by the interpersonal interactions of shared experience. Through a community of fellow youth ministers, the task of identity development is enhanced and refined to better reflect the nature and character of God toward the youth they minister to.

Second, the practice of utilizing evaluative tools for one’s ministry illustrates the competence necessary for membership in a COP. As youth ministers seek evaluative tools for personal and professional competencies, the resulting analysis promotes what Wenger (1998) refers to as “accountability to the enterprise” which involves “the ability to understand the enterprise of a community of practice deeply enough to take some responsibility for it and contribute to its pursuit and to its on-going negotiation by the community” (p.136). By contributing to the broader body of knowledge from the results of evaluation, youth ministers participate in the communal reification of best practices in the field. Wenger (1998) also notes
that competent participation in a COP not only involves what is known but also in what new knowledge can be obtained through discovery. He states: “a community’s regime of competence is not static” (p.137), rather, a continual process. Similarly, Robbins (2010) notes that self-evaluation in youth ministry is an ongoing process (p.243). He also notes that on a personal level, this translates to the youth minister seeking out “interpersonal support [by] cultivating a group of people who hold [them] accountable” (p.243). As youth ministers involve themselves in a COP, the processing of successes and failures in the context of professional and self-evaluation serves to equip them for long-term service (Jones, 1999).

Third, in a COP, meaning becomes internalized and best understood through informal evaluation balanced with formal processes. Meaning is used in a general sense here characterizing “the process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful” (Wenger, 1998, p.52). Through the COP, one can interpret meaning through a balance of both the participation in, and reification of a body of knowledge. Wenger (1998) notes that in a COP, “formal processes are not freed from the informal. In fact, in terms of meaningfulness, the opposite is more likely” (p.67). Similarly, in the youth ministry context, Severe (2013) notes that the majority of youth ministers participate in evaluative processes through informal, and more formal, means of observation and debriefing respectively. “Strong reliance on observation partially explained the difficulty many of the respondents experienced with verifying spiritual growth” (p.294). This method had no grounding in formative theory; rather it was “episodic, summative, and informal” (p.294). Debriefing, on the other hand, was much more structured, “continuous, intentional, formative, and appeared non-formal in most debrief settings” (p.294). Using this method in a balanced formal and informal way garnered an increase in feelings of “transformational influence” (p.295). Thus, as the evaluative process in
youth ministry is accomplished in a COP setting, behaviors that promote longevity in this domain can increase as meaning-making occurs.

Fourth, as youth ministers participate in a COP, the central factor of community manifests itself informally around a sense of belonging. The practice of youth ministry is sourced in and around community. One “characteristic of practice, as a source of community coherence, is the negotiation of a joint enterprise” (Wenger, 1998, p.77). A unique aspect of youth ministry, as a profession, is that, unlike other companies and non-profits where many employees are focused around the same goal with similar skillsets, youth ministers often are isolated as the only professional with that particular skillset within the church that employs them. The work of Strommen et al. (2011) illustrates the desire of youth ministers, especially the younger, inexperienced ones, to have ongoing training and mentoring at their disposal (chapt.12, development needs, para.3) to meet the varied needs of training. When youth ministers feel like they are not alone in the practice of the profession, they are more likely to experience a sense of satisfaction; both with their confidence of being able to perform the task of the job well and their spiritual well-being. As noted earlier, the study participant in the work of Strommen et al. (2011) notes the importance of spiritual integrity in these mentoring relationships. If these relationships are facilitated within a COP, the potential for longevity behaviors increases. However, the plans that were suggested to set this training and mentoring in motion were not able to address the new availability of some of the virtual training and mentoring outlets that exist today. The interconnectedness of youth ministers through these virtual outlets simply did not exist 15 years ago.
Social Media (Web 2.0) Mediated Community

When one examines the literature surrounding the issues of the use of social media as a valid form of training in a given field of study, considerations of how the current generation learns and interacts with them are of utmost importance. Since the forms of social media are relatively new and the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies are widespread, several corporations and non-profit entities, as well as youth ministry related fields, have explored ways to maximize their utilization for professional growth. The term of Web 2.0 is defined as “Web-based technologies, such as wikis, blogs, social networking sites (SNS), and RSS feeds, meant to facilitate and coordinate massively produced knowledge and content” (Postigo, 2011, p.182). The term has been used extensively in recent literature as researchers have sought to understand its implications in business training (Kalargyrou, Pescosolido, & Kalargiros, 2012; Matthews & Stephens, 2010; Vasja Roblek, Mirjana Pejic Bach, Mesko, & Bertoncelj, 2013), education (Holland & Holland, 2014; Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2012; Kurre, Ladd, Foster, Monahan, & Romano, 2012), and in youth ministry culture (McCorquodale & Sterten, 2010; Severe, 2013).

Social Media has certainly taken a life of its own in recent years. I would assert, however that this phenomenon of connectedness is not new in theory but has merely felt the effects of a globalized, technologically advanced society. Shane Hipps (2009) notes that “every new medium retrieves some experience or medium from the past. For example, the Internet retrieves from the telegraph” (p.37). Similarly, by examining the principles that drive COP’s, we can determine that Social Media borrows every element that makes it behave in the same manner. Thus it becomes, in fact, a COP that can exponentially increase the effectiveness of facilitating ongoing mentoring, training, and accountability of youth ministers.
These technologies that facilitate the use of a Web 2.0 mindset are the result of what some researchers deem the “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) that have grown up with globalized technologies capable of transcending space and time like no other time in history. Information access coupled with increased bandwidth capacity, that is, the widening of the pipeline transmitting it, has become so readily available that virtual training initiatives are becoming the norm. This forms the new culture of a New Media Literacy (NML) that today’s generation of youth ministers finds themselves most comfortable interacting with one another in. There is now a generational shift in the way that society interacts and communicates. Those entering professional youth ministry today are a part of the Millennial generation that have never grown up without Internet access or a cell phone. The Millennial generation, the largest in American history (Rainer & Rainer, 2011), has a deep ontological connection with social media concerning how they learn from and interact with it; that is, they are so interconnected through the use of these outlets that they perceive interactions with them as reality.

This Millennial generation has an understanding of a NML (see Lin, Jen-Yi, Deng, & Lee, 2013) that has taken on a life of its own. Marshal McLuhan (1964) stated that the “medium is the message” as it shapes the way people interact, understand, and learn information. In this case, Thomas & Brown (2011) would agree:

The new culture of learning actually comprises two elements. The first is a massive information network that provides almost unlimited access and resources to learn about anything. The second is a bounded and structured environment that allows for unlimited agency to build and experiment with things within those boundaries. The reason we have failed to embrace these notions is that neither one alone makes for effective learning. It is
the combination of the two, and the interplay between them, that makes the new culture of learning so powerful. (loc.78)

The media (information network) is the message (culture of learning) that shapes the new ways in which youth ministers can learn from one another. “As a functional definition, social media [Web 2.0] refers to the interaction of people and also to creating, sharing, exchanging and commenting contents in virtual communities and networks” (Ahlqvist, Bäck, Heinonen, & Halonen, 2010, p.4). As social media has engrained itself in the lives of the Millennial generation, its interplay with society creates a new culture of community.

In the work of Ahlqvist, et al. (2010), for example, they study “the potential transformations of social media in the virtual and physical spheres,” (p.3) making extensions for future-casting societal implications of the technology. They note the “visual narratives that describe the most critical elements and paths of the future developments on the topic under scrutiny” (p.3) and help to provide a sense for how social media will begin to influence everyday life outside the virtual space it’s contained in. Thus, they make the assertion that “practices now common in social media, such as community-based communication and collaboration, rating, tagging, enriching messages and so on, are entering – some rapidly, some more slowly, some in a changed form – the physical space of daily life” (p.3).

The implications of this study to youth ministry becomes important as they note the collaborative process that it took to facilitate the study produced the kind of co-creative “culture of ownership” over the outcomes. As youth ministers are able to participate in these COP’s that exist in a virtual setting through social media outlets, the potential for idea exchange, mentoring, friendships, and accountability can enter the sphere of their daily life as they live out their calling with young people.
Recent studies from the Developing Minds with Digital Media Project (2007) illustrate a multitude of implications of Web 2.0 technologies that are crucial for satisfying the growing need to provide individuals with the tools to teach themselves what they need to know at regular intervals throughout their lifetimes. Self-education through Web 2.0 outlets are critical for both young people and adults in a changing world. If the more experienced of us youth ministers can purposefully utilize these communities of practice to interact with those who are less experienced, these “communities will thus evolve from ideation channels towards ubiquitous innovation environments” (Ahlqvist et al., 2010, p.19).

In another study by (Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2012), the implications of social media usage on college student supplementary study explores the perceptions of students’ use of social media’s ability to adequately augment their studies. Students open responses were used to study the differences in their attitudes toward the use of social media in an educational setting. Their qualitative analysis of a small sample (n=20) of students with a broad range of majors were categorically arranged to form both broad and narrow results on the nature of students’ social media use. Whether or not they found social media of use is secondary to the fact that all of them were connected to it in multiple ways. The students were not aware of the effect that it had on them. They simply took their own use of these web 2.0 outlets for granted. Similarly, today’s generation of youth ministers are interconnected through social media in ways that profoundly influence their everyday lives to the point that it shapes their reality.

With the convergence of longevity factors noted earlier, the influence of Web 2.0 technologies have the potential to exponentially increase the youth minister’s ownership in his or her longevity creating behaviors thus facilitating sustained growth. Additionally, this new culture of learning and interaction provides opportunities for experienced youth ministers to share past
experiences and wisdom with the next generation of connected youth ministers desiring to widen their knowledge base and training opportunities.

By the nature of how these virtual COP’s have spread across the globe, consumers of these Web 2.0 technologies have adapted into producers and facilitators of them. Research within this phenomenon in youth ministry, as with any other field, is relatively new territory and must be handled with care. Two such articles provide a snapshot relevant to this current study.

The first article from (Lin, Jen-Yi, Deng, & Lee, 2013) creates a new framework of understanding the Web 2.0 environment and reframes the New Media Literacy (NML) proposed by Chen, Wu, & Wang (2011). They reposition NML based on an integrative understanding of how media is consumed. What they come up with profoundly shapes the way one understands NML. They delineate, within the framework, the major difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 is that the former encompasses consumers of online media while the latter creates prosumers; the reciprocal producer/consumer. This analysis postulates the ways in which the transition of media to culture influences consequences of interacting with it. For the purposes of this current study, there are implications to how the current generation of youth ministers interact with and create with this NML. The nature of this delineation creates an opportunity for the youth minister to exchange experiences in such a way as to facilitate the process of learning on an expanded level with the use of social media. Idea sharing, mentoring, advice on conflict management, people skills, and evaluative tools can all be shared in a virtual setting.

Second, Thompson (2011) conducted a study of independent contract workers and how they used “informal online-communities” for “work-learning” (p.184). She posits findings that categorize online interaction into four categories. These “four themes describe ways of engaging in online communities which: fit with understandings and expectations of online community,
leverage fluidity, play with boundaries, and mesh with work” (p.187). The ways in which today’s youth ministers interact with social media also seem to fit within these categories of use. As they seek out answers to questions of identity, evaluation, peer and mentor accountability, and training opportunities, youth ministers are looking for authentic interactions that push the boundaries of what “real” interaction is perceived to be.

While mostly theoretical in nature, these two studies provide a lens with which to examine current approaches to using social media to promote longevity behaviors through reciprocal online relationships with peers with similar interests and goals. Wenger (1998) states that “working with others who share the same conditions is…a central factor in defining the enterprise they engage in” (p.45). Similarly, youth ministers can certainly benefit from this same type of community in a virtual setting.

Web 2.0 technologies have the capability, then, to facilitate training and mentoring opportunities in a virtual environment that will promote not only free, or low cost, training but, on a deeper level, facilitate the building of trust and mutual respect for one another in the profession. These relationships are the building blocks for the social capital necessary for long-term sustainable growth and development of longevity behaviors. Social capital consists of agreed upon “norms for interaction, reciprocity, trust and mutual respect” (Matthews and Stephens, 2010, p.544). Huysman, M., & Wulf, V. (2006 ) note that the relational aspect of social capital “is based on socially attributed characteristics of the relationship, such as trust, mutual respect and generalized reciprocity” (p.47). Together, these attributes of social capital help to shape the very nature of how Web 2.0 technologies are used.

I have observed and experienced this social capital within social media concerning how the Millennial generation learns from and interacts with it. The question becomes, then, how
many other youth ministers either have, or could potentially benefit from, the integration of these technologies as a component of their initial, and ongoing, training? This deserves further research as technology, and its integrated use, continue to evolve in the world of youth ministry. Thus, The potential for an integrated model of learning that includes the mentoring, collaborative creation, and idea sharing aspects, in a virtual sense, have the capacity to facilitate the four stages of longevity behavior convergence (see figure 2).

*Figure 2. Social Media facilitation for longevity factors.*

Illustrates the natural interconnectedness and influence of Web 2.0 on the facilitation of longevity factors in Youth Ministry.

**Conclusion**

The professional youth minister who is just beginning in the profession has an advantage over those of us who have been at it for several years. They now can learn and glean from our experiences in an environment that embodies the very essence of how they learn and interact with social media. Thus, through online COP’s, it should become the responsibility of those of us
that are more experienced youth ministers to come along side those who are just beginning to share our wisdom in a purposed way that will facilitate longevity behaviors within the whole community. The profession of Youth Ministry has much to gain from professionals interacting with one another through these COP’s facilitated by Web 2.0 media. As we examine the factors that converge to facilitate longevity behaviors in youth ministry, the relational capital that drives them comes into focus. Since the new generation of youth ministers is a part of the digitally engrained Millennial collective, the opportunities for continued reciprocal growth are exponentially greater than they were in years past. The technology has enabled us to collaboratively spur each other on toward behaviors that will facilitate longevity and reap the benefits thereof. As we move forward, formal academic training has already figured out how to deliver online learning. What could happen to longevity behaviors in youth ministry if we truly embraced a Web 2.0 collective learning style?
References


