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Citation:

Dowson, R and Kinnear, A (2022) Youthful Church: A Study of British Christian Youth Events and Community Culture. *Event Management*, 26 (1). pp. 177-193. ISSN 1525-9951 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599521x16192004803557>

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YOUTHFUL CHURCH: A STUDY OF BRITISH CHRISTIAN YOUTH EVENTS AND COMMUNITY CULTURE

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Within contemporary culture, events dominate our leisure activities, and churches are not exempt from this trend. In the context of a study of church youth events, this research focuses on the well-being aspects of three growing churches and their youth events activities. In exploring the conceptualization of the eventization of faith, the research considers aspects of youth development, including well-being, from a Christian perspective. The aim of the article is to identify and consider the influences of well-being in the purposes, content, and outcomes of such faith events and their contribution to well-being in these temporary youthful church communities. It examines the concept of well-being through the cultural medium of events, focusing on case studies of the youth events of three independent, nondenominational, evangelical churches in the UK.

Key words: Eventization of faith; Youth church; Well-being; Events

Introduction

The theme of well-being and events offers an opportunity to consider event programs that exist to support people and their well-being in a range of contexts. This article selects a Christian youth environment through which to explore and evaluate increasingly popular events activities, as churches play an important role within their local community, especially through providing activities for young people and families. In addition, by providing access to larger events, some churches enable other

churches and their communities to engage with and develop their own youth programs, while interpreting and integrating popular culture in the event mix.

These events activities supplement traditional youth engagement routes such as Sunday services, Sunday School, and youth groups, as churches include special youth events in their planned activity programs. The well-being of those young people who engage in church events is considered as a key priority in building communities of faith.

The emerging concept of the “eventization of faith” draws on the work of Pfadenhauer (2010).

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This research is based around a premise of the consolidation of events activity within the context of living out a life of faith (Dowson, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019; Dowson et al., 2019; Dowson & Lamond 2017). Four aspects have contributed to earlier conceptualization of the eventization of faith:

- surrounding a sacred object or space with events to engage with a range of different groups
- commercial sales of churches and associated sacred spaces as venues for events
- churches developing programs of religious-based events for their own congregations and for their surrounding communities to attend.
- event ideas include thematic development, building events around communal activities based around objects or places (Dowson, 2019)

Here, we extend these definitions by observing eventization of faith through the lens of annual festival-style youth events. These events promote Christian beliefs, values, and lifestyles, and instigate new relationships beyond, within, and between church youth groups. Such events demonstrate a cultural response to the popularity of the contemporary music festivals that overwhelm British summers. At the same time, the church events provide a safer space, far from the perceived or real dangers that might dwell in the peripheries of commercial festivals. In this sense, organizers of such events aim to contribute to the well-being of their youthful participants. Youth-specific activities are incorporated within the wider intention of churches to promote and support well-being within their local communities. Activities aimed at developing youth well-being include traditional church activities and Christian festival-like events are integrated into these programs.

In this article we have selected Christian youth events led by three churches, which are based

across the UK, in London, the Midlands, and Yorkshire. The purpose of our article is to begin to analyze and better understand the potential impacts on youth of church-related leisure event experiences, with a focus on well-being. Table 1 indicates key characteristics of the three thriving independent churches in this study, which are based in different UK locations, and at varying stages of growth.

Characteristics of Churches in the Study

Two of the churches in our study are independent, nondenominational local churches, while the third is part of a globally branded mega-church organization. They share a key feature with many churches as they provide regular weekly youth activities during Sunday services, as well as on weekday evenings at each location. For the churches in our study, these activities are attended by up to hundreds of young people each week, and culminate in festival-style youth “conference” celebrations held once or twice a year. These festivalized faith events overflow with contemporary live Christian music, international guest speakers, fun, and entertainment. Although each church is independent of the others, they are connected through strong and close collaborative relationships, with shared contemporary styles of worship and similar theological perspectives.

Our study surfaces new research into the development of youth culture and community well-being and expands the body of knowledge within events management, youth studies, and practical theology. Our research questions how contemporary Christian faith relates to popular culture (Turner, 2013). We identify ways in which youth leaders moderate the popular youth culture in which their communities are immersed, considering potential impacts on the well-being of young people.

Table 1
Characteristics of Churches in the Study

Church	Location	UK Campuses	Weekly Sunday Services Attendance
Heart Church	Nottingham	2	1,250
Life Church	Bradford	3	1,700
Hillsong UK	London	12	11,000

The Development of Events in Contemporary Christian Culture

The widespread influence of events in the 21st century is observable through many areas of society and within different global cultures and contexts. In the UK, as elsewhere, mainstream culture is dominated by summer music festivals that appeal to diverse audiences. Church culture is not immune from this trend, with early emergence of significant Christian festivals since the 1970s. Greenbelt, a radical political and arts-based liberal Christian festival (<https://www.greenbelt.org.uk/greenbelt-festival/>) takes place each August Bank Holiday weekend. Since 1974 Greenbelt has focused on justice and activism, exploring faith and spirituality, and integrating a range of Christian music genres into the mix. Well-being of the planet and people contributes a central theme. Spring Harvest is led by an overtly evangelical Christian organization (<https://www.springharvest.org/about>), offering Bible teaching and worship in a residential setting since 1979, with dedicated activity streams for different age groups. Spring Harvest aims to transform participants through building intergenerational and egalitarian communities that nurture children and young people. These two events in particular were fore-runners of popular festival-style events dominating the Christian calendar, many of which focus on youth audiences. The Catholic tradition of the church contributes to the plethora of summer youth activities, sending groups to the international World Youth Day (www.worldyouthday.com), held every 3 years. In 2019, World Youth Day took place in Panama City. Although numbers attending were smaller than in previous years, with only 700,000 attendees (compared to an estimated 6 million in Manila, Philippines in 1995 and 2 million in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2013), plans are underway for the next event, in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2022 (Dowson, 2017; McKeown, 2019; Pfadenhauer, 2010; <https://panama2019.pa/es/onepage/>; www.worldyouthday.com). In the UK, alongside youth streams situated within many Christian events, there exist other, specifically youth-oriented leisure activities. These range from larger festival-style events, to smaller residential “house parties” that are organized by Christian charities, such as Scripture Union. They include Catholic and Anglo-Catholic

youth pilgrimages to sacred shrines (such as Our Lady of Walsingham), and Soul Survivor events that emerged from the strongly evangelical Anglican-influenced New Wine network (<https://soulsurvivor.com/about/>). Our article explores well-being aspects of the cultural medium of Christian youth events, focusing on three independent, nondenominational, evangelical churches.

Defining Church Events and Their Purposes

There are numerous typologies that define and categorize events. Getz (2005) argued that events play an important role in society, such as cultural development and community building, with the appeal of a unique experience that becomes a lost opportunity if the event is missed. Getz (2005) noted that events often require purpose-built facilities, whether temporary or permanent. Bowdin et al. (2011) defined event types by size, form, or content. Getz’s (2007) model of the planned event experience identified changes within the emotional journey through the event; motivations and expectations of people attending events; and a liminal space during the event, when participants encounter a “time out of time” (Falassi, 1987) that facilitates new experiences. However, Lamond challenged traditional definitions, proposing that:

Event is about disruption and the exposure of discourse as a result of disruption, and in part, how regimes of truth, power relationships, try to address that disruption, either to mitigate against it, or to shape it in some way to support a particular ideological end. (Dowson & Lamond, 2018, p. 154)

This definition is especially appropriate in the context of the transformational aims of churches in staging youth events. Dowson (2015) observed that connections between church and events may not be immediately apparent. Yet, significant numbers of churches focus their energies on events, whether for church members, clergy, or local surrounding communities. Churches aim to influence the youth within their churches and to connect with young people in the wider (unchurched) neighborhood. Some churches impact nationally and internationally through youth and other events. Previous research demonstrates the difficulty in

Table 2
Groupings of Identified Event Purposes

Governance	Spiritual Church Activity	Internally-Driven Events	Community Focus	External Organizations Hiring Facilities for Events
Corporate Governance	Catechesis Discipleship Holiness Initiation Life-cycle Liturgical Ritual Seasons Worship Change and transformation Education Evangelism and mission Forming group identity Learning Nurturing Pastoring Relationship-building within the church Ritual Reputation Teaching	Fundraising Networking and growing sustainable networks Social Social justice	Ecumenism Interfaith Relationship-building with / in the wider community Civic events	Commercial activity Community-based activity

Note. Source: Dowson (2015, p. 179).

classifying events within a church and the development of a typology for religious events. Derived from our 2012 research, Dowson (2015) summarized the categorization of church event purposes within a range of identified groupings, as shown in Table 2.

Groupings of Identified Event Purposes (Dowson, 2015)

The top row headings in Table 2 summarize broader clusters of church event purposes, as some focus inwards on existing members, while others are externally focused. In this context, events are harnessed within a strategic approach to engaging with youth, who may be members of existing church families. However, many churches broaden the appeal of their events programs to attract new adherents and to serve unreached parts of their local community. Church events may have multiple purposes, with intentions being explicit, subliminal, implicit, or even hidden. Underlying goals of events aim to engage with people to initiate or build relationships, with a long-term objective of what churches would label as “mission” or evangelism.

However, according to Bickley (2015), external commentators on faith may critique the role of churches and other religious organizations in delivering publicly-funded community amenities and activities due to their potential for proselytism, interpreting such behaviors as manipulative and therefore not resulting in well-being.

Research Approach

At this point we clarify our assumptions and research perspectives: this study is ostensibly an effort to further develop the conceptualization of the eventization of faith. Our topic also enters the realms of practical theology and culture, introducing ethnographic research methods (Sonnenberg & Barnard, 2015). As researchers, we situate ourselves within the context of the church environment, and between us we have lived experience within the specific communities being studied, which we have been able to observe for over more than a decade. We have participated in their local and national events: thus, theologically speaking, we are embedded within the culture of church (Ward, 2012). Between us we have experienced the

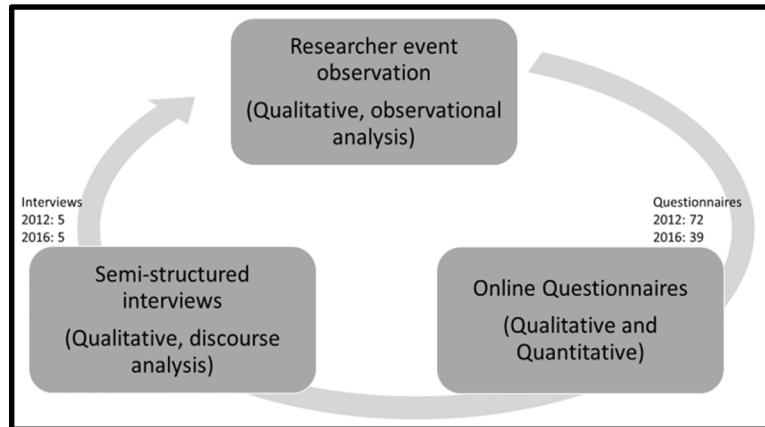


Figure 1. Primary research data approach.

churches in our study, as well as their festival-like youth events, ongoing youth activity, and worship programs, as participant, as organizer, and as parent. We have observed youth services and gatherings, youth participation in Sunday services, and larger national and international youth worship events. Our own participation has been central to this investigation (Pink, 2013). We have utilized the results of qualitative case study primary research projects undertaken in 2012 and in 2016 (Van de Ven, 2007). The 2012 research involved one of the churches (and two other churches in the same city), and the 2016 research involved participants from all three churches. However, both projects were based around the same research approach, shown in Figure 1.

Primary Research Data Approach

As ethnographers we work towards a reflexive understanding of the relationship with our informants, recognizing that any information provided is affected by both researchers' and informants' positions in our and their own social worlds. We attempt to observe, participate in, and understand the cultural beliefs and practices of this social grouping, engaging with them in a significant way (Grazian, 2004). The key methodological point for ethnographers is that the personal relationships that they have with their informants cannot simply be skimmed over as "close." Instead, these relationships form a significant part of their data

and a vital basis of their analysis (Davies, 2008). Ward (2012) argued that research methods that are simultaneously theological and ethnographic must be embraced in order to undertake ecclesiological studies. For us, these methods arise as worshippers and as researchers, being sited within church as a whole, and with specific connections to the churches in our study. Our selection of three case studies enables generalization; not only because these examples are similar, but also because our own ideas that emerge from our studies can encompass the three churches (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

The Churches and Their Events

Bradford-based Life Church hosts the RockNations conference each year, which developed from their Youth Ministry with the aim of empowering young people and their leaders (<https://www.lifechurchhome.com/conferences/rocknations/>). Every Friday evening, the Youth team takes over the spacious church campus, with several hundred teenagers and young adults coming together for social activities and worship. Three age groupings are catered for: 11–14s, 14–18s, and 18–30s. Each child or young person who attends these weekly sessions receives regular visits at home from leaders, engaging with parents and family members to build trust, and strengthening the relationships begun on a Friday night. The RockNations festival-style annual conference is for "young people and their leaders to encounter Jesus and change

their World” (<https://www.lifechurchhome.com/conferences/rocknations/>). In 2019, for the first time, two separate conferences were held back-to-back, to enable growing numbers of participants to attend, an indication of the event’s popularity. The conference is hosted by Life Church Leeds campus pastors, supported by the RockNations team, with worship by the church’s band, “I Am Future.” Guest speakers and music artists join a quality line-up to rival many secular events. The church captures the attention of young people online, and to describe the event it relies on the medium of video, rather than written words. RockNations was part of this study.

Nottingham-based Heart Church has a similar youth structure, called Takeover (“TØ”), a youth group for young people aged 13–18 that meets every Friday evening at their City Campus (<https://heart.church/events>). Young people are welcomed by friends and leaders and the focus of activities is “having fun, playing games and hearing more about God.” Within this setting, small groups, or “crews” are formed, led, and cared for by youth leaders, encouraging friendships and involvement within the life of the church. Heart Church describes itself as a “family where love is unlimited, laughter is loud and there’s always room for one more” (<https://heart.church/youth>). Their annual youth conference was part of this study.

Hillsong Church was founded by Global Senior Pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston in 1983, in Sydney, Australia. By 2020, Hillsong had founded churches in 28 countries, with an average weekly global attendance approaching 150,000 (<https://hillsong.com/about/>). In the UK by 2020 there were Hillsong churches in North, South, East, and West London, Birmingham, Croydon, Edinburgh, Guildford, Liverpool, Newcastle, Oxford, Reading, and Tonbridge. In Central London, the Dominion Theatre (capacity 2,069) is filled five times every Sunday. A central element of the Hillsong offering is youth activity, with separate groups for different age ranges (11–14, 15–18, 18–30) and students. Prior to the pandemic, Hillsong’s Young and Free Conference was a youth addition for 11–18s to the main Hillsong Conference, delivered annually in each of three global locations, including London. Young people join in the main Hillsong Conference for morning and evening sessions, while the

rest of the day is packed with music, teaching and special guests, fun, and social activities. Between them, Hillsong Worship and Hillsong United (the youth band) have released over 50 albums (Hillsong, 2020), with over 100 albums by regional and specialist groups as well as releases in different languages. In 2019 Hillsong were nominated for Top Christian Artist, Top Christian Album, and Top Christian Song awards in the Billboard Music Awards (2019, www.billboard.com). The Hillsong youth conference was part of this study.

Discussion and Literature

The considerations from our study are summarized in the following sections that discuss the academic literature in the context of our primary research and experience in the churches studied.

Consideration 1: Churches Engaging With Young People

As a result of decreasing numbers in church, fewer young people attend church regularly in families, and young people are more engaged with leisure activities and popular culture than with church (Collins-Mayo & Beaudoin, 2010). However, the pool of young people with church connections is larger than might be expected, given the overwhelming discourse on the death of religion (Dowson, 2017; Zurlo et al., 2019). In the UK, some 75% of Christians came to faith as children or young people (Genders, 2019). Although less than 100,000 young people attend Anglican church services in England each week, church schools account for daily contact with approximately 1 million children (up to age 18), and even nonchurch schools have weekly faith-based assemblies. In addition to young people and children connected to church-based uniformed organizations (e.g., Cubs, Brownies, Guides, Scouts), some 52% of toddlers in church-run toddler groups have no other church contact (Genders, 2019; <https://talkingjesus.org/research-from-the-course/>). This recent research places young people firmly in the sights of churches targeting youth activities and events.

The Church of England ascribes to the “Five Marks of Mission” (Zink, 2017), which overtly prioritizes church growth in all its efforts, but also recognizes the importance of not imposing their views

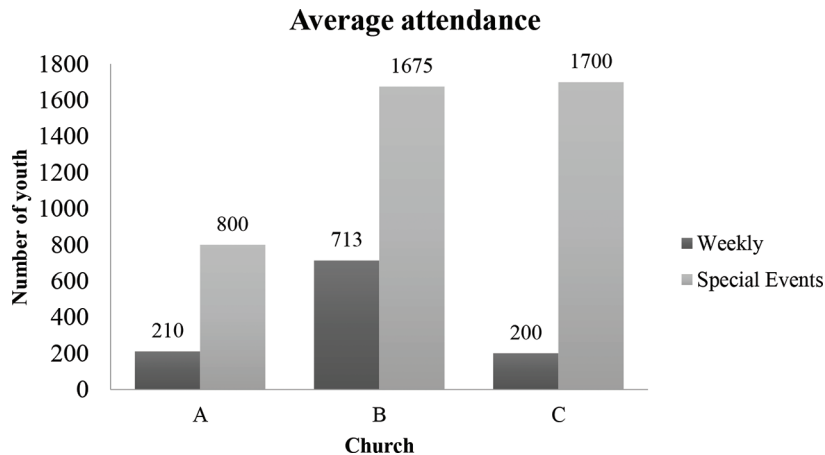


Figure 2. Average attendance at weekly youth activities and annual events.

or taking advantage of vulnerable people (including youth), in order to grow disciples. The Marks of Mission include: “to respond to human need by loving service” and “to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation” (Zink, 2017). These particular aims can be interpreted as seeking the well-being of all people (Zink, 2017). Bickley (2015) suggested three areas of concern to churches working within their communities: “prioritizing the public good, respecting the dignity of religious and other minorities, and protecting vulnerable service users” (p. 68). In order to challenge these concerns, churches are advised to be “transparent and consistent” (Bickley, 2015, p. 68) in communications and relationships with individuals and external organizations. The well-being impact of such policies on churches working with young people apply in this context; churches should respect existing beliefs and ensure that they protect the vulnerable. Thus, the core aims of the church seek to include a wide interpretation of well-being, in particular when working with young people.

Interviewees were asked how many young people attended their youth activities; responses were averaged to give the statistics in Figure 2.

Average Attendance at Weekly Youth Activities and Annual Events

There is a clear increase in attendance at special events including the annual conferences, and there

are differences between the three churches. For Life Church, while weekly attendance at the time of our 2016 research reached 200, their annual conference attendance attained 1,700, far surpassing that of Heart Church. By 2019 Life Church’s annual youth conference attendance had grown to more than 2,500. From observational analysis and our personal involvement in each church, these figures reflect the wide reach of the churches, with Life Church and Hillsong both having multiple campuses across the UK as well as European campuses.

Consideration 2: Events Within a Church Context

Research suggests that by delivering events it is possible for organizations to encourage and build a sense of belonging, community, and identity (Jepson & Clarke, 2015; Wood & Moss, 2015). To be inclusive of and engage with the wider community is an aim shared by the majority of mainstream religions. For most churches, growing such affinities focus on their own church and local area, while some aspire to build links with communities connected to the ethos or interests of the church. This experience of community is less likely to be cultivated if someone only attends an hour-long service on a Sunday (Dowson, 2015), so churches (like many commercial organizations) choose to invest resources in activities that facilitate relationship building and networking, in order to care for others (Elford, 1999). This aim entails people sharing their everyday lives (Dowson, 2015; Tomlin, 2002).

Our 2012 research into three churches in inner-city Bradford found that almost three-quarters of participants agreed or strongly agreed that church-related activities and events were part of their everyday life (Dowson, 2015). Churches identify relevant opportunities to engage with people through events, just as other organizations and companies do through their marketing mix. Events provide churches with potentially successful approaches to influence individuals in the long term, and build sustainable faith communities. These activities may include targeted youth events or integrating youth elements within churches' planned services and activities. The churches in our study engage in regular youth activities and prioritize young people through their annual youth celebration events.

We asked respondents whether youth events impacted upon general church attendance. Some 97% of respondents agreed, and this response was expected, in line with the literature. Dowson (2015) and Tomlin (2002) suggested that the time spent together enhances relationships and deepens connection, impacting the wider church. The beneficial reasons behind these responses included participants gaining a sense of community, making friends, personal growth, engagement with others, and developing their faith. Respondents explain that the larger youth events are easier to invite friends to, and subsequently new youth are attracted to attend the weekly youth activities. These new participants often go on to become embedded within the life of the church as a whole. Church becomes more accessible to young people and church youth event attendees are encouraged to build friendships with young people in the wider community. The presence and engagement of youth within the churches are viewed as positive, encouraging change, enriching the church community and well-being, and growing new generations of leaders. This influx of new members to the youth activities and to the church also has a positive impact on the local community and the issues they face. Although teenagers from church-going families often prefer not to come to traditional church settings with their families, unchurched teenagers are more likely to bring their families to church, whatever the church's style and tradition. From our research, it appears that youth participation does impact positively on the wider church. However,

it is also clear, and somewhat unexpected, to see that this manifests itself differently in the three churches. In one church, Hillsong, many youth members did not wish to attend Sunday church services, perceiving Friday night youth sessions as their "church." From interviews and observational analysis, Hillsong's ethos has been focused on the youth being integrated into the church rather than being seen as a separate entity. In Hillsong's global campuses where there are Friday night services, Sunday attendance often drops because young people are more inclined to simply attend their weekly youth service.

Consideration 3: Well-Being and Church Events

The focus of this article is on youth events and churches, and the relevance of well-being. This section begins by reviewing how aspects of well-being might be considered within this context. Kaiseler et al. (2019) suggested that the definition of well-being lacks a consensus in the academic community, identifying two types of well-being:

- "Hedonic or subjective well-being relates to pleasant and unpleasant life experiences and happiness,"
- "Eudaemonic or psychological wellbeing refers to the individual's realization of their true potential, including their experience of purpose and meaning in life" (Kaiseler et al., 2019, p. 112)

In the context of this study, it is possible to apply both types of well-being to the participation of young people at Christian events that are full of fun and music, providing pleasant experiences. The resulting relationships can embed them into a solid community that nourishes them and enables their growth potential in leadership roles within youth activities and to move on to leadership roles in the wider church (Sutherland et al., 1997). These festivalized events contribute to the overall embedding of young people's well-being within the life of the church.

According to research by South et al. (2017), key factors that influence well-being are the social relationships built within a community. The UK's National Institute for Health and Excellence (N.I.C.E.) defines community as "a group of people

who have common characteristics or interests” (N.I.C.E., 2016, p. 7). South et al. (2017) suggested that communities can be defined by shared bonds, including religious beliefs. South et al. (2017) indicated that community well-being includes “strong networks of relationships and support between people in a community” (p. 7), and feelings that people belong to a community. Ashley and Weedon (2020) cautioned that the fragmented nature of belonging has a negative impact on individual and community well-being. South et al. (2017) recognized the diverse nature of communities, including communities of interest, and suggest that community well-being can influence individual well-being and vice versa. In a study on youth engagement in community contexts, Lekies (2009) provided examples of ways in which young people might be incorporated in the life of a community, including activity programs, clubs, and special events. Characteristics of well-being develop and enhance a sense of “self-efficacy, autonomy, growth as social actors and sense of belonging to society” (Pienimäki, 2019, p. 364) in the individual. The important aspects of safety and fun in learning activities for youth are noted by Silverberg et al. (2003).

In an influential longitudinal study of US teenagers, Smith and Denton (2005) identified the

dominant religious outlook of “moralistic therapeutic deism” (p. 163), which summarized the purpose of religion as: “to make people happy, teach them how to be good people, and ensure that they will go to heaven when they die” (McKinley, 2005). Singleton (2014) observed that this therapeutic element centers on attaining well-being. McKinley’s (2005) critique of this approach finally admitted that for such believers, “faith stays on the top, veneer level of life, rather than penetrating too deeply into the inner reaches of the heart” (p. 1). Such a conclusion rocks the foundations of efforts to embed deep faith, as the impact of contemporary culture (including celebrity culture) is felt on religious practice. Thus, happiness and well-being are privileged over deeper spirituality.

Maurits and Nykvist (2018) studied the impact on youth well-being through sports activities developed by Christian leaders in a Swedish church context. These leaders emphasized the importance of church-led sports activity impacting positively on well-being, because “Christian faith should not be confined to the Sabbath, but rather should be an important part of everyday life, including sport activities” (Maurits & Nykvist, 2018, p. 34). Roberts et al. (2018) found that participants in mountain biking experienced positive mental health

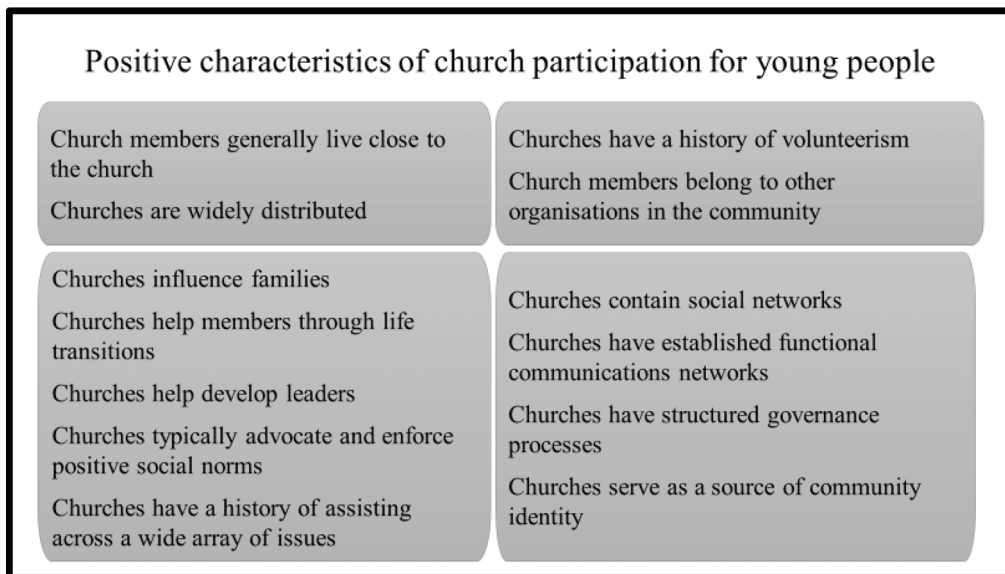


Figure 3. Positive characteristics of church participation for young people (adapted from Sutherland et al., 1997, p. 206).

benefits. Lloyd et al. (2019) found that active leisure facilitated the realization of potential in children, while enhancing well-being. In parallel with sports and active leisure, in our research with leaders and participants of church youth event programs were asked if church is part of their everyday life.

Research by Sutherland et al. (1997) identified positive characteristics of church participation for young people that are relevant to the context of this study, shown in Figure 3.

Positive Characteristics of Church Participation for Young People (Adapted From Sutherland et al., 1997, p. 206)

These characteristics identified by Sutherland et al. (1997), while being identified from US churches, can be applied to churches in the UK. Although some of the characteristics exert positive motivations that pull individuals towards accepted or preferred behaviors, others might be seen as exerting negative motivations that push individuals away from unacceptable behaviors, or in what might be interpreted as protecting them against such behaviors. The positive development of programs of activities, including special events for target audiences such as young people can include both push and pull factors.

The Catholic Church emphasizes the importance of including children and young people in church activities. According to Pope Francis, this is “because they too are part of the church” (Gregory, 2019, p. 9). Meanwhile, evangelical American Christianity frames the benefits of “making loyal customers” (Wymer, 2008, p. 1) out of young people through the provision of youth ministries and their associated activity programs that embed Christian teachings into later life. An evangelical UK ministry program took the Christian message to Ibiza adopting popular club and rave cultural practices to club venues on the island to convert young people there who were seeking an experience of the numinous (Lau, 2006). The churches in our study have adopted and adapted contemporary music culture for their own, with professional musicians, singers, and technical support, releasing their own branded worship for consumption around the world. Stachowska (2012) questioned whether

such mediatization infects churches, turning them into products of capitalism and commerce.

The Bible, and in particular the Gospels, contains stories of Jesus responding to children. Mark chapter 10 verse 14 and John chapter 16 verses 20–21 contain Jesus’ seminal words: “Let the little children come unto me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Isbășoiu, 2015, p. 113). The importance of these words echoes down the ages as churches seek to initiate new participants and transform them into becoming active members, starting from a young age. This is fundamental to the church’s concern for the well-being of young people and children.

Consideration 4: The Role of Popular Culture in Churches

Some seven decades ago, Christian theologian Niebuhr (1951) declared that the debate on popular culture in churches “is as confused as it is many-sided” (p. 1). A contemporary classification of popular culture provided by Turner (2013) suggested popular culture is where the rubber of faith hits the road of real life. Possamai (2009) asserted that in addition to amusing, entertaining, instructing, and providing relaxation, popular culture can provide an inspiration for religion, yet Carson (2012) warned that “culture is not only moving away from Christianity, it is frequently openly hostile toward it” (p. 6).

However, Turner (2013) criticized churches for attracting people through the “show” (141), rather than through discipleship or faith. In order to provide elements of spectacle, churches install stages set with sophisticated lighting and LED screens, high-volume, and increasingly professional high-quality sound to rival audio and visual technology systems (<https://www.dbaudio.com/global/en/applications/houses-of-worship/>) found at the best secular music events and venues. But if the church is fighting against popular culture, vying for the attention and understanding of its youth, then attempting to keep up with popular culture may help young people to discern that which is harmful and fun, and that which counters their beliefs.

Possamai (2009) declared that “at times religion creates and regulates popular culture” (p. 26). He suggested that religious social actors involved in

popular culture are shaping it by facilitating some experiences and denying others. Some churches use popular culture content to support religion, while others censor it. However, Possamai (2009) countered that, “at other times, popular culture can shape the form and content of religion” (p. 26) with artefacts of popular culture such as songs, images, film, and radio being used to influence and practice religion or spirituality. Perhaps this is where events inhabit a space that crosses over from sacred to secular and back again? When assessing the cultural aspects of youth activities in churches, current younger generations are certainly immersed in popular culture. Even in 2014, statistics suggested that they were exposed to approximately 9.8 hr of media consumption a day, compared to the 5.2 hr in 1945 (Johnson, 2014). Today, attributes such as ethnicity, class, political affiliation, tastes, distastes, and religion are not transmitted from generation to generation as easily as they once were. We create our own biography and identity: people search for what works for them, drawing on the wide range of resources available, picking and choosing to fit their beliefs (Possamai, 2009). The church youth worship events studied by Sonnenberg and Barnard (2015) revealed that such recreation provides a direct contrast to secular culture. The overwhelming impact of events on culture today is bound to influence the activities that churches organize to reach young people, but the continuing ascendancy of “moralistic therapeutic deism” (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 163) has repercussions for well-being here also.

Our research aimed to identify any links, trends, or effects between youth culture inside and outside of a church context. Overall, the most common reason for attending youth events was stated as “to learn and grow,” which correlates with Sonnenberg and Barnard’s (2015) identification that a key characteristic of participation in youth worship is learning. Music and fun were equal, but ranked lowest. In our 2016 research, the reasons for attending were similarly distributed for both genders, as shown in Figure 4.

Reasons for Attending Youth Events, by Gender

When these responses were distributed into age brackets, for those aged 18–21 the greater reason was to learn and grow; for 22–25-year-olds the top motivations were equally split between wanting to be a part of something, and because their friends were going. For 26–30-year-olds the most common reason was to learn and grow, and for those over 30, the main reasons were for the fun, and to be a part of something.

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate elements of popular culture within the youth events at their church on a scale of extremely necessary/beneficial to completely unnecessary/not beneficial. The expected response, anticipated from Turner (2103) and Possamai’s (2009) work was that music, fashion, and entertainment would play pivotal roles, with popular culture being necessary and beneficial to youth events within church, ensuring

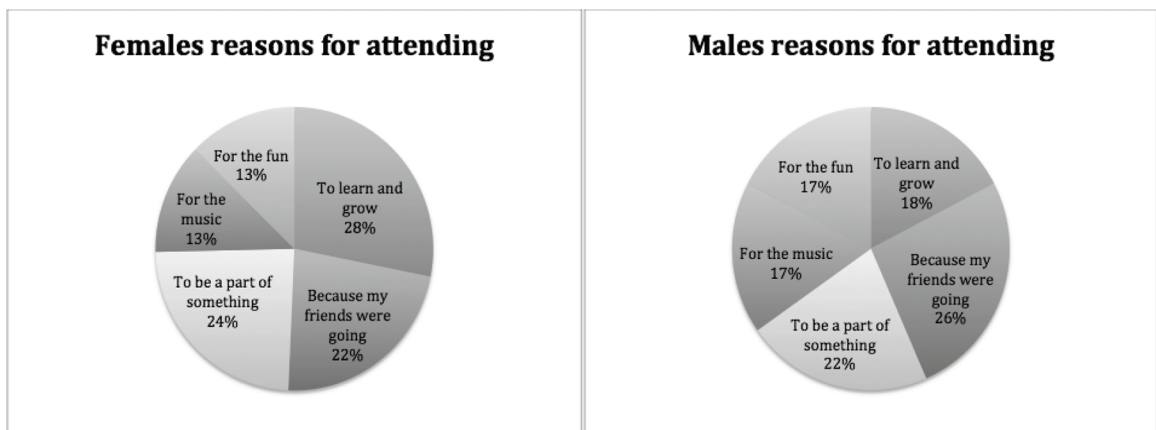


Figure 4. Reasons for attending youth events, by gender.

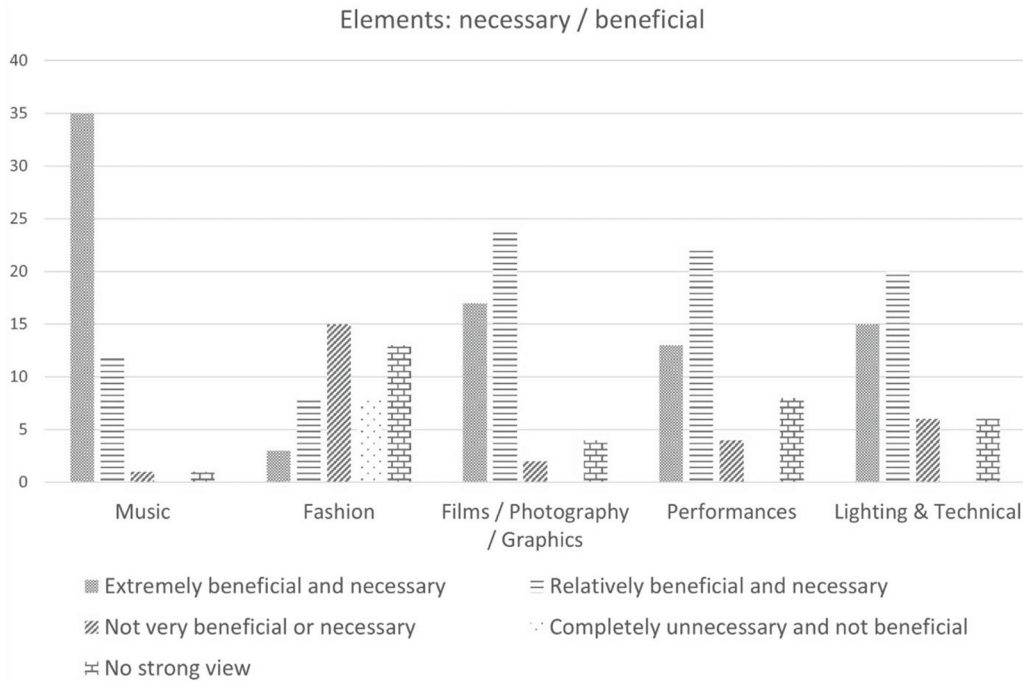


Figure 5. Rating the importance of elements of popular culture in youth events.

they are relevant. The chart in Figure 5 presents the results, showing the percentage of respondents that ranked each element on each point of the scale.

Rating the Importance of Elements of Popular Culture in Youth Events

It is clear to see that music ranked the most highly, with nearly 70% of respondents stating that it was extremely necessary/beneficial. This could indicate that although it may not be the major stated reason for attending, it is an important component of the events. Some 69.2% of respondents stated that music was an extremely necessary or beneficial element of these events, which is reflected across all demographics. Although a higher percentage of women rated fashion positively than men, their most frequent rating of fashion was “not very necessary/beneficial” whereas the males’ most frequent ratings were both “relatively” and “not very beneficial.” Some 51.3% of responses rated media as relatively necessary or beneficial, which is again reflected across all demographic groups as the highest ranking. Females rated performances

as higher than males. When analyzing lighting and technical aspects, our research shows that females and those aged 18–21 were more agreed on its necessity/benefits.

We are aware from our research and involvement with all three churches, that the introduction of small groups by Hillsong encourages a deep sense of family, community, and friendship. This encourages an increase in Sunday church attendance and integration into the wider church, as the youth events are not seen as a separate entity from the main church. Churches with Friday night services integrate and encourage youth to attend a specific service, taking ownership of it. This supports Sonnenberg and Barnard’s (2015) research findings, that youth viewed their own services as better than general services.

The literature identifies the pursuit of well-being as a theological imperative for many churches. In the interviews with youth pastors and church youth event leaders, this was evidenced by a recognition of the sensitivity of working with children and young people under 18 from a safeguarding perspective, with awareness of the need for caution

in the way that churches attempt to influence children and young people, in particular because they are more easily influenced when young. Although some interviewees felt that their churches were trying too hard to be “cool” in order to gain acceptance by young people, they reflected that it was not possible to compete with secular worldly levels of “cool.” Several interviewees identified the primary motivations for young people participating in their church’s youth activities was not the music or the lights, but “the thing that attracts people is God.” Their experience suggests that “recruitment” (i.e., proselytism) from the larger annual youth events is minimal. Instead, more young people are convinced through their day-to-day experiences, building relationships, encountering God, and meeting in small friendship groups. The importance of this pull of encountering the divine through discipleship is reflected in Roman Catholic and other church statements, identified as the primary purpose of working with youth. The leadership benefits for young people are demonstrated by the fact that in one church, the small groups are led by 17–18 year-olds, overseen and supported by an adult, developing and embedding experience in leadership skills from an early age. These skills contribute not only to the well-being of the individual, but also to their peers and to their families, as well as to their future education and career prospects. As the Roman Catholics see young people as part of the church, interviewees expressed the view that youth were the future of the church. From either perspective, the church’s long-term well-being is dependent on those young people continuing to lead and to contribute.

Dangers are also recognized. The example of a “Kardashian-like” American Christian reality TV show (starring Richard Wilkerson of Vows Church, Florida), provoked awareness of the dangers of following the “hype” of Christian celebrity culture, and the “danger of wanting to emulate something because it seems cool.” If popular culture is “all about self,” the church is demonstrating counter-cultural values even though it might look similar. This factor is especially relevant in the Christian music and worship scene. The idea of “dancing on stage is a big deal at 15”; even more so if the venue is the local 13,000 capacity arena. Interviewees suggested that big events “inspire young people” and

have a significant effect on their lives. As young people bring along their school friends to church events, this has resulted in the setting up of small support groups inside and outside of school, as well as Christian Union groups. These groups and the relationships that are built as a result, are able to support individuals through the “constant battle” of life outside the church. Thus, the church’s aim is to protect the youth from society’s values, such as instant gratification and sexual experiences; but “the heart is always to have people come to Jesus.” The awareness of staff and volunteer teams as to their ultimate leader (the “King of Kings”), enables them to focus their responsibility on the well-being of those children and young people in their care. They see the church as providing a safer environment than that found outside: “they have a place to be on a Friday that is gonna keep them out of mischief.” And the range of activities and strength of relationships draws young people away from “MTV’s butts and boobs.” Responses to the online questionnaire also identified that churches offer counselling, pastoral care, and the ability to build human relationships, all contributing to young people’s well-being.

Consideration 5: Celebrity Culture and Churches

Turner (2013) addressed the phenomenon of celebrity within popular culture. The celebrity influencer class now sets trends: celebrities are watched, followed, and copied, their lives lusted after and values mimicked. Lives are laid bare on Instagram or YouTube, with millions of followers hanging on their every word or following their latest whim. There exists a celebrity culture within the Christian world also, as church leaders, evangelists, and worship bands become global stars. The social media accounts of churches, youth ministries, and prominent preachers become visible as they socialize with celebrities, and as celebrities attend church events and services. Social media followings in Table 3 support evidence of celebrity culture in the Christian world. Statistics have been gathered for the number of followers and subscribers on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. It is noted that the second most active youth social media channel Snapchat, with 433 million active monthly users (Kellogg, 2021), only allows the

Table 3
Social Media Followings, Correct as of 12/10/2020

Individual	Twitter 330m Active Monthly Users	YouTube 2bn Active Monthly Users	Facebook 2.45bn Active Monthly Users	Instagram 1bn Active Users
Joyce Meyer, American Evangelist	6.2m	431,000	11.98m	3.5m
Bethel Music, Worship Band, Redding, California	255,600	3,010,000	2.3m	1.6m
Christine Caine, Former global team member, Hillsong Church; Founder of anti-trafficking charity, A21	427,700	up to 729,000 views	833,000	1m
Brian Houston, Global Senior Pastor, Hillsong Church	607,400	38,300	354,000	732,000
Rich Wilkerson Jr., Pastor, Vows Church, Miami Florida; star of 'Rich in Faith' reality TV show	93,200	174,000	35,000	864,000
Carl Lentz, Pastor, Hillsong Church, New York	162,600	39,400	82,287	680,000
Charlotte Gambill, Senior Pastor, Life Church, Bradford	30,900	12,800	39,892	81,100
Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, senior prelate in the worldwide Anglican Communion	153,800	5,040	187,000	38,400

account holder themselves to view the number of their friends who have been active within a 24-hr period, and does not give access to count other people's followers.

Social Media Followers (Correct as of 12/10/2020)

For perspective, the award-winning English rapper, Stormzy, had 3.1 million Instagram followers when he deleted his social media accounts in February 2020, while the most popular Instagram account belongs to the footballer, Cristiano Ronaldo, with over 237 million followers (Clement, 2020). It is interesting to note that the person who tops this table, with almost double Stormzy's former Instagram followers, does not lead a physical church, but instead travels around the world preaching, often to audiences of around 1 million people (especially across Africa and in India). The female pastor of a large independent church in the Yorkshire city of Bradford has more than double the number of Instagram followers as the Archbishop of Canterbury, and it is notable that the top six high-scorers on our list have visited and spoken at events (including youth audiences) at that same Bradford church. This fact evidences the existence of strong bonds between some independent pastors and mega-church leaders around the world. In terms of well-being, Christian celebrities (pastors, churches, and worship bands) offer young people an alternative to the views of the world, a substitute for the values of influencers beyond the church.

However, the evidence that younger generations are more engaged with social media has been well recognized for some time (Flory & Miller, 2010), and this is reflected in the sway of "moralistic therapeutic deism" (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 163) that permits multiple acceptable perspectives.

Conclusions

The potential for well-being can be found at different levels: individual, family, small peer group, local community, and local church, with positive well-being consequences and outcomes made possible regionally, nationally, and internationally. Research into such events contributes to our understanding of the eventization of faith, and the different well-being outcomes that can arise.

The model in Figure 6 has been developed to express the relationship and influencing links that can arise out of a Christian youth event.

Model of Connections and Influence of Christian Youth Events

Although well-being may not be a stated or even intended purpose of youth events, it is clearly one of the outcomes, in protecting or shielding youth from external cultural influences, replacing them with Christian activities, values, and influencers, as popular culture is integrated and reinterpreted.

Our study explored the motivations behind youth church events and the inclusion of popular culture, providing insights into the experiences

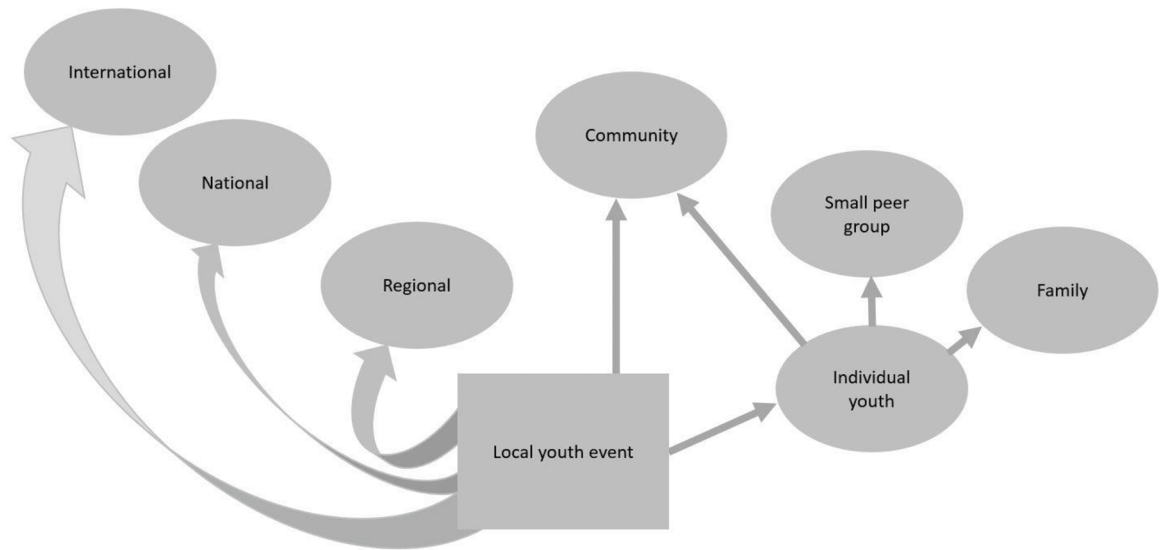


Figure 6. Model of connections and influence of Christian youth events.

of those involved. This research involved three churches that involve elements of popular culture in youth events and church activities. These events have positively impacted on the growth of the youth groups, as well as providing an environment that young people can relate to in the context of their well-being and safety. Elements such as contemporary music do not appear to distract participants from the underlying message of their meetings, of engaging with God. Our understanding of the concept of eventization of faith is deepened, as we observe the role that well-being can raise out of events in church. Through this study, the concept of the eventization of faith gains an additional aspect:

- Churches developing events activities for specific local/national/international stakeholder groups (e.g., youth, women, men)

Well-being elements include developing a sense of belonging to a community and building relationships. These relationships may be simply within the youth context but they may progress to developing relationships more widely within the church. We can see a progression within leadership roles from an early stage in the process—beginning within the youth team and extending into the wider church.

In summary, festivalized youth events, along with associated regular activities, can:

- provide a safer space than commercial secular alternatives (music festivals), with age-appropriate activities.
- contribute to the overall intention of Christian churches for the care of creation, as well as supporting local communities through youth programs, including summer holiday activity clubs, breakfast and afterschool clubs, annual youth events, and regular weekly youth activities.
- connect young people to Christian role models and influencers in a way that relates to the contemporary popular culture in which they are immersed, offering a Christian alternative to secular celebrity culture.
- support societal well-being through community building and cultural development,
- provide liminal spaces for youth, with new experiences that aid well-being and development, disrupting the norm.
- transplant young people into an alternative context, shifting boundaries and posing new thoughts and experiences.
- connect with wider (unchurched) youth and their families in the local community.
- empower and develop young people.

Youthful church has an important part to play in British Christian youth culture, with the potential to enhance the well-being of young participants, their families, and the churches themselves.

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