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## **The Effective Use of Technology in Faith Formation Programs**

Lindsey Bernardy

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The Effective Use of Technology in Faith Formation Programs

By

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Context

The world of education is rapidly and vastly changing alongside the development of technology. When 95 percent of students have access to an unlimited expanse of information and resources at their fingertips through the internet (Children's Internet Access at Home, 2021), holding their attention in academic settings is increasingly challenging for their teachers. In a post-pandemic world where school-aged children are accustomed to hybrid learning models and teachers' pedagogical methods and ideals are geared toward drawing the students' short-lived attention through the use of iPads and Chromebooks, sensically, the model for teaching anything would follow suit.

In church settings, however, many catechetical or religious education programs are sticking to the tradition of lecture-based learning, which was arguably outdated before the COVID-19 pandemic was even a thought. Even without the lack of change in these programs' pedagogies, interesting a student in a faith, especially if they do not have a personal connection (aside from potential parental guidance) to that faith, is a large undertaking.

My opinion is that even if the traditions and rites of church remain the same, the means by which the faith draws people in must evolve with the times. If educational pedagogy evolves, so should the ways religious education is being taught. If this does not happen, people will not be drawn to the faith or interested in learning more, and it will ultimately either fill a church with poorly catechized people, or empty the church all

together. The question I pose is: *how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?*

### **Personal Journey**

From a young age, I found myself drawn to the idea of technology and its powers. Due to the times and our location in rural Minnesota, my family did not have cable television or internet access until I was in upper elementary school, and the closest thing I had to a smartphone was the solitaire game on our desktop computer used for bookkeeping. As I continued to grow and technology continued to advance, I pursued activities and hobbies that integrated technology in, at the time, innovative ways. Photography became a passion, and from that passion stemmed a love for other forms of digital art, such as videography, audio production, and web design. However, this integration was not evident in many facets of my life for many years, including in a classroom setting.

Utilizing technology in the classroom setting is at front of mind for me as a lifelong student, as a teacher, and, most recently, as a director of youth faith formation for a Catholic church. Having grown up in a time and place where technology was rarely utilized in a core-content classroom, and despite being a naturally-gifted student, I found the lectures in school to be dry and monotonous. The content did not feel engaging, and I was most excited to go to my typing or photography classes because I knew we would finally be doing something different. The pedagogical views from the early 2000s and 2010s, especially in a rural area with little funding, were progressive enough to allow students to use a calculator on a math test. Despite my jest, I truly feel as though my educational experience was enhanced the moment we integrated SmartBoards into some

core classrooms. Even a technology as simple as a glorified whiteboard was able to bring a new life into the classroom by providing access to activities and collaboration opportunities we would not have had otherwise.

However, even after the new age reached my town that was stuck in the past, certain programs did not have the means to integrate technology into their work: particularly, the religious education program. My Catholic upbringing was strong. Born and raised in the Church, I never questioned that I *was* Catholic, but I often questioned *why*. I went to a Roman Catholic elementary school, I went to church every Sunday with my family, and I attended religious education classes each Wednesday until I celebrated my confirmation. Still, despite my parents,' teachers,' and catechists' best efforts, I was lacking a deep sense of faith.

All I had known prior to the summer of 2016 regarding the Catholic faith was from the book. That summer, I was encouraged to attend a weeklong Catholic service trip with our church. I was hesitant, but I decided to attend because my friends were going. For one week in the summer of 2016, I witnessed faith presented in a meaningful, applicable, and obtainable way for the first time in my life. I saw technology being used in ways I had never imagined within a church setting, and I connected with the content in ways that I had never connected before.

### **Professional Journey**

In 2021, while working toward my Bachelor of Arts Degree in digital media arts, I returned to the same camp that had changed my faith life as a staff member. I held the title of media manager: in charge of all things digital. The sound design, live program presentation, lighting, video, and photo elements were all under my control, and I had the

ability to enhance the experience for the campers in the same way my experience was enhanced in 2016 and two summers following. I found so much joy in the ability to show others my love for my faith through technology, and I resolved to continue to share that love in any way I could.

When I returned from my second summer as a staff member, I was placed in a public high school for my student teaching. As a teacher in a high school English classroom where each student was given a MacBook, I was forced to be introspective about my biases toward what an effective education looked like. Initially, I was against a major integration of that specific technology because I saw how distracted students were becoming while I was trying to guide them toward learning. I thought, if I made it this far, and if I never had access to this technology, these students will succeed without it, too. After a very brief time with them, I remembered my boredom and annoyance at the teachers who had forced me to sit up straight and read straight from the textbook to receive the knowledge they were trying to impart.

Similar to my experience staffing the Catholic camp and utilizing technology in a way I never thought possible in a church setting, I found the best way to connect with my students in the public school was to fully embrace the technology I had been shown, despite it not having been part of my own academic growth as a student. When I would not allow laptops to be open while I was teaching, the students were disengaged and using their technology anyway. When I was able to create a curriculum and lessons that utilized that same technology, the students were excited and respectful of my wishes when I asked them to give their attention to me before (rather than instead of) opening their computers. Not only is the perception of freedom powerful, but the connection to



the students' lifestyles creates an environment in which students feel comfortable and willing to learn.

I am currently a Director of Youth Faith Formation. The job title includes the responsibility of catechizing young people and forming them in a way that helps them find God and continue on their faith journeys individually after high school. In a position where students look to me for guidance, I find myself struggling to keep up with the current trends and the true dangers of the power of technology. Not only do the students get sucked into the addiction of their screens, but the rate by which they intake (and expel) information is increasing, often leading to one of two outcomes: forgetting important information being taught, or remembering content that tears down their self-image or sense of morality, to name a few. I have seen how impactful utilizing technology can be in a classroom, and a youth group is largely the same. However, when the very thing that can break students down emotionally and morally is the same (and often only) thing that can catch students' attention, unique challenges are presented in the discussion surrounding religious education pedagogy.

While there are concerns regarding the morality of technology (or, more specifically, how it is used), I still believe technology is a powerful and necessary tool in helping students find their place in the religious world. Technology allows students to explore themes, ask difficult questions they may not feel comfortable asking anyone in real-time, and connect with others who have found power and joy in their own faiths. My professional journey has led to the desire to find effective ways to integrate technology into a faith formation program because I have seen its effects in a general education

classroom, and I believe students deserve those same growth opportunities in their journeys toward God.

### **Societal Significance**

In my opinion, the long-term impact of utilizing digital and technological resources in the classroom is yet to be discovered. In the larger picture, the scope by which technology has been efficiently utilized in classrooms is small, and the tangible effects can only be seen through test scores, the reliance of which are being disputed by pedagogical theorists around the world. Additionally, the first generation of students to have gone through schooling with what we would consider modern technology are only beginning to make their mark on the working world. However, many educators would argue they see the intangible impact of technology in their own classrooms in real time. Engagement, classroom rapport, and accessibility have all largely increased due to the development of technological tools in classrooms.

This sense of rapport and accessibility should not be limited to individual areas of teenagers' lives; if the intangible effects of technology seem to be positive within a general education setting, I feel churches and faith communities should be keen on following a similar path. The Roman Catholic Church is growing older in population, and many programs reject modernity to maintain a certain level of reverence. Before the pandemic, only 3% of Catholic churches streamed their services compared to 22% of non-Catholic traditions, and only 12% of the former recorded the services for later viewing compared to 52% of the latter (Holleman & Chaves, 2022). Traditionalists in the church are those who uphold the tradition of the Tridentine Mass (the Latin Rite that was standard before the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II) (Wikimedia Foundation,

2023). They can often be seen veiling at Mass and show disdain at the thought of contemporary music and guitars, preferring the traditional hymns accompanied by the organ (Catholic Traditionalism, n.d.). Traditional Catholics do not approve of technology in the context of worship because they feel the Eucharist should be the focus, and any extraneous production in the Mass is a distraction to that central sacrament.

Contrarily, following Vatican II, the Charismatic Revival gripped churches across the world. This was largely due to the liturgical changes to the Roman rite from Vatican II, which gave the laity a more accessible and intelligible churchgoing experience by approving vernacular translations (Cunningham, McKenzie, Marty, Pelikan, Knowles, Frassetto, & Oakley, 2023). The basis behind the Charismatic movement was a new wave of baptism: baptism in the spirit. People around the world were experiencing God's love through the Holy Spirit, and the effects included worshiping in ways primarily seen in Protestant Christianity prior: meeting for prayer in others' homes, dancing and singing, hosting bands at Mass, speaking in tongues, and openly witnessing and testifying about their faith (Pollock, 2020). This revival created a divide among parishes, but a spark in many's faith lives. Saint Pope John Paul II is quoted saying, "I am convinced that this movement is a sign of the Spirit's action . . . a very important component in the total renewal of the Church" (About catholic charismatic, n.d.). In a post-Vatican II world, the modern-day Church includes Charismatic Catholics who believe that people can (and even should) connect with God through high-level productions, digital Masses, screens and videos in the church, and a full reimagination of what the Church has come to be. While they still believe in the miracle of the Eucharist, they do not believe the Eucharist is the only means to find a relationship with Christ.

When considering the implications of a youth faith formation program, the Charismatics have a point. To fully embrace technology for its power and utilize it to connect with youth in such a setting could be wildly effective in growing the younger population and creating the future of the Church. For the Tradismatics of the Catholic Church, the hope is that this could occur all while retaining a sense of piety and tradition. This subgroup finds the tradition of the Catholic Church to be the means in which they spiritually connect in a Charismatic fashion: through the Holy Spirit (Stallwood, 2020). It includes those who appreciate the traditional hymns at Mass, but feel a sense of awakening through the new-age rite. They feel God's mercy through contemporary worship music, but are likely to heavily revere the practicality and tradition of the Church (Harrold, 2022). The Tradismatics are the grey area between pre and post-Vatican II, and it is in this middle ground that I find the cultural significance of my research.

Many people's grievances with the Catholic Church come from its lack of change or adaptation with the times. If we, as a Church, are to maintain a sense of relevance in society, we need to keep up with the desires of those who are involved. However, the traditional aspects of the Catholic Church are a large piece of the reason it is such a prominent and long standing religious practice around the world. By creating a program in which technology is utilized, but traditions are also upheld, people will be able to connect with their faith in unique ways, all while understanding the importance of the tradition of the Church.

### **Summary**

Since churches are not often viewed at the same level as schools in terms of educational formation, technology's place in religious education has been minimally

considered or discussed. As someone who feels a deep sense of joy in my faith, I want to provide a space for young people to discover that joy in an accessible and exciting way. We live in a digital age, and if churches and places of worship do not join the masses, they will be left in the dust by the youth who can receive instant gratification and answers to many of their questions from elsewhere: specifically from technological resources.

My journey to this research led me to pursue the question, *how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?* In Chapter Two, I break down statistics that provide insight around the decline in Mass attendance, discuss the effects of technology in general education, and provide details about both the current state of technology within religious education, and the possibilities of its integration in the future. Chapter Three provides an overview of a faith-based social media application for youth groups that has the potential to bring faith formation into the digital age.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Overview

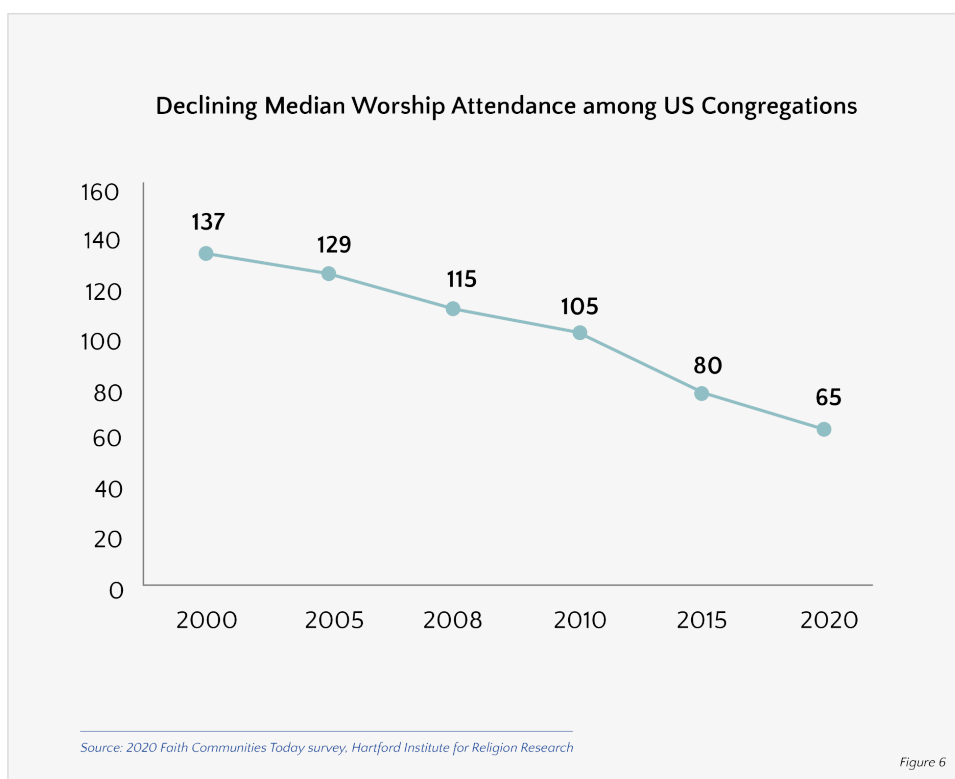
In a 2018 study, a group of teachers reflected on the use of technology within their general education classrooms. The research showed that many, whether they already utilized technology in the classroom or not, spoke positively of the effects technology had on their students' learning outcomes. Additionally, in contrast to the control group that did not participate in the reflection, their desire to increase the use of technology in their classrooms was prominent (Kale & Akcaoglu, 2018). Similar to classroom teachers, I have seen many directors of religious education (DREs) stick to the status quo of what faith formation looks like and not feel the need to truly reflect on potential changes in pedagogy and teaching standards.

The Roman Catholic Church is facing a mass exodus spearheaded by its young people. In 2020, Catholic churches faced a median decline in attendance of 9% (Thumma, 2021). A 2015 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that only 30% of Catholics ages 18-29 attend Mass weekly (Wormald, 2015). Pew Research Center later reported that 69% of self-proclaimed Catholics do not believe the Eucharist truly becomes the body of Jesus, leaving only 31% who believe in the transubstantiation (Smith, 2019). The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that at the core of the religion is the belief in the transubstantiation of the Eucharist (Catholic Church, 2000), yet DREs have largely failed in teaching this core belief to young members of the church. A Springtide Research Institute study found that 35% of 18 to 24 year olds claimed to be unaffiliated with a specific religion, a 15% increase in just 10 years (Springtide, 2020). In

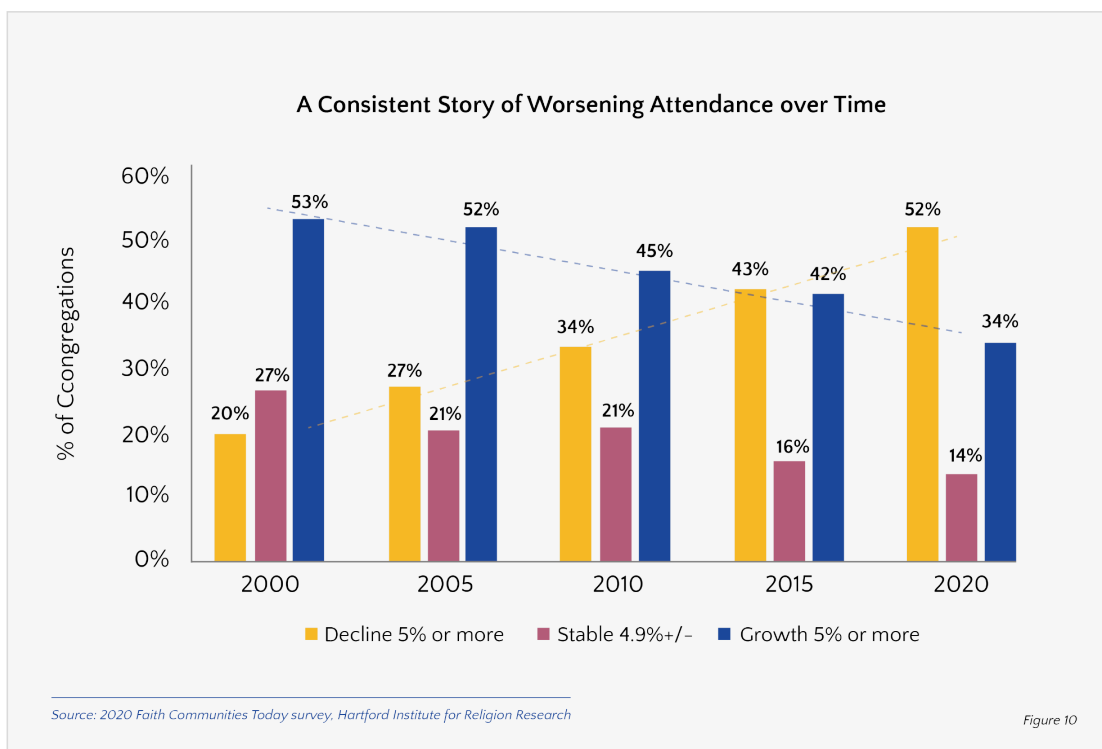
a 2021 survey of over 10,000 Catholics from ages 13 to 25, the same institute found that 44% of respondents do not participate in organized religious celebrations or have a faith community. Of the same demographic, 71% considered themselves “at least slightly religious” (Springtide, 2021). For the Church’s young people, the dwindling participation in the Mass is not due to a lack of desire for faith, but a lack of understanding or personal connection to the faith they claim (or, for some, leave). The charts below provided by Thumma from Faith Communities Today in 2020 illustrate the consistent decline in congregational size and weekly Mass attendance (see Figure 1), suggesting that when youth or young adults leave the Church, they are not likely to return to it (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1**

***Decline in Catholic Worship Attendance***



*Note.* Figure from Thumma, Faith Communities Today

**Figure 2*****Consistent Decline in Congregation Attendance***

*Note.* Figure from Thumma, Faith Communities Today

Despite these statistics, many DREs are challenged only by the “what” of the matter: that youth are not interested in forming their faith. Instead, they should be looking at the “why” of the matter: are DREs’ curriculums, and how they are taught, really applicable to youth in modern times? In an effort to alleviate that lack of introspection, this capstone will attempt to answer the question of “why,” and more specifically, *how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?*, by exploring pedagogical theory and practices for general and religious education and comparing various technologies and media already found in faith formation programming.



## **Pedagogy and Technology in General Education**

The word “integration” is important when considering the impact technology can have on student learning outcomes (SLOs). Studies show that when technology is utilized in the class throughout the learning process rather than being used solely during a review session, the desired SLOs are more commonly achieved, and the content remains in the students’ minds for longer periods. The integration of technology within a general education classroom also needs to be differentiated for various learners (Petto, 2019). In other words, simply utilizing technology is not enough to achieve and enhance SLOs: the technology must be relevant, applicable, and engaging to students on an individual level to be effective. Moreover, multiple barriers hold teachers back from utilizing technology appropriately in their classroom, broken up into the following categories: access, time, professional development, beliefs, vision, and experience (Kelly, 2015). The external barriers (access, time, and professional development) often restrict teachers who would like to utilize technology, while the internal barriers (beliefs, vision, and experience) are linked to personal preference and pedagogical style. The teachers struggling to break through the latter barrier show little to no desire to implement technology because many of them stick to what they have always known or do not know how to operate the technology they would like to implement (Kelly, 2015; Kerr, 1996). Some educators are unaware of the barriers they face, providing a solid argument for the importance of pedagogical reflection and introspection.

In a study on teachers’ reflection of technology use, the largest driving factor in a teacher’s desire to increase technology use was student motivation (Kale & Akcaoglu, 2018). Again, the effectiveness of the technology does not lie in the technology itself, but

how the technology is utilized by the teacher to connect with the students. The danger of technology within the classroom is when the teacher relies on the technology to either do their job, or to be a classroom management tool. When technology is used as a substitute for a teacher rather than a supplementary tool, passive involvement replaces active engagement from students and teachers (Glover, Hepplestone, Parkin, Rodger, & Irwin, 2016; Walsh & Seldomridge, 2006), and the line between technology helping and hindering SLOs blurs.

While the educator needs a basic understanding of technology before being able to properly utilize it in a classroom setting, the effectiveness of technology usage in the classroom is also dependent on the self-efficacy of the students (Mehmet & Bilge, 2016). Access to technology is seen as a barrier to its implementation, especially within marginalized communities and across varying geographical areas (Garland & Wotton, 2001; Kormos, 2018; Owens & Waxman, 1995; Vogels, 2021; Yentes, 2015), but a Pew Research study found that 95% of teens in the United States had access to a smartphone in 2018, and 45% of teens said they were online “almost constantly.” This is a 20% increase from only four years prior in 2014, when only 24% of teens made the same claim (Anderson, 2018). These statistics suggest that not only are teenagers well-equipped to utilize technology in a variety of ways, but that their dependence on and understanding of technology is only going to grow.

The students’ self-efficacy and overwhelming access to technology has paved the way for many pedagogical advancements, including the pedagogy-first approach, commonly referred to as a flipped classroom (University of Washington, 2022). In a pedagogy-first approach, the assumption is that students are equally capable of learning

content individually as they are of learning with others in a classroom setting. In this approach, teachers provide students with a curriculum to be completed at home, often online, and the physical classroom is used as a space for further inquiry, discussion, and activity-based application (Bower, 2008; Glover et. al., 2016; University of Washington, 2022). Utilizing this pedagogical format helps students enhance their critical thinking skills because they are forced to learn the content as well as the vehicle used to provide the content. Subsequently, the students advance their understanding of technology at the same rate that technology changes, and they are more capable of adapting to updates and multiple technological learning platforms (Bower, 2008).

Due to students being able to adapt so quickly to the technology and resources available to them, discourse surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) have been prominent in pedagogical theory. Chat-GPT, a natural language processor trained algorithmically to answer questions and hold conversations as a human would (Gilson, Safranek, Huang, Socrates, Chi, Taylor, & Chartash, 2023), has become popular among school-aged children. Some educators, such as English Professor Gaurav Majumdar from Whitman College, view Chat-GPT as a “refusal of [one’s] own intelligence” (AI Chat-GPT, 2023), while others, like John Bruer, believe that the program will enhance a student’s ability to use intuition, think creatively, and expand their own knowledge in a way that will apply later in life (as cited in Blum & Alvarez, 2023). While this technology has the potential to help students find themes and use creativity to find solutions to their own problems, a number of risks and negative consequences are attached to the use of AI in the classroom. For example, Berendt, Littlejohn, and Blakemore (2020) explained that algorithmic data may ignore the

experiences and voices of varying marginalized communities, predictive technologies based on academic scores may negatively influence students' choices and confidence regarding their futures, and the one-stop-shop of seemingly limitless information may turn into a one size fits all approach where all students are coming to the same conclusions about certain topics rather than thinking critically and finding numerous, reliable sources.

On the contrary, studies show that academic achievement and growth is consistent in classrooms that implement VR (Ogbonna, 2021), where students are able to explore questions and situations they would otherwise face repercussions or consequences for (e.g., when a toddler touches a hot stove, they learn through consequence that a stove can burn their skin. When using VR, a student can explore an activity such as skydiving or place themselves in a historic war without facing the real-life repercussions of injury or death). Additionally, the use of VR in a classroom allows for nontraditional forms of teaching and learning, including extensive and multicultural collaboration and roleplaying, which have been proven effective in retention and engagement in the classroom (Howard, 2018; Ogbonna, 2021).

Understanding the evolution of general education pedagogy is essential to understanding how students learn. In order to determine how religious education programs can integrate technology, one must first determine how general education classes are paving the way. Students spend a majority of their time in a general education setting, so making the transition from general education to religious education as smooth and pedagogically-consistent as possible should help them retain content in all areas, including religious education. Additionally, as DREs continue to consider the importance

of technology in the students' lives, the format of religious education is likely to be shifted toward a student-centered approach, which is further outlined in the next section.

### **Pedagogy and Technology in Religious Education**

Religious education is most effective when, similar to general education, the educator takes a student-centered approach to the pedagogy and meets students where they are at spiritually (Baudry & Puechner, 2017; Carmody, 2013). If students are engaged with learning religious content in a nontraditional way, such as dramatizing Biblical events, planning a party for Jesus in the modern day, or even learning about secular historical events that connect to a religious event or theme, they will be more likely to invest their time and effort into the content (Howard, 2018; O'Grady, 2008). This approach allows students to explore their interests while providing them with a space to connect their faith to their everyday lives. Additionally, approaching religious education through a community-based lens creates a safe haven for many students who yearn for peers with similar values and interests. For example, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd approach, which stems from Montessori values, provides a space free of judgment for children, generally under six years old, to learn the technical elements of the Catholic Mass through hands-on activities rather than memorization and flashcards (Bennetts & Bone, 2019; United States Association, 2022). The official stance of the United States Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is that "children need their own place to foster the growth of that relationship [with God]; and that the child's spiritual growth is best served through tangible but indirect means" (United States Association, 2022, para. 3). Though this approach is aimed toward young children, the effectiveness of community building can be translated across age groups, and having

space to foster relationships is essential to social-emotional and spiritual growth (Baudry & Puechner, 2017; Fussell, 2021). A DRE's official role is to plan, promote, coordinate, and direct programming such as sacramental preparation and faith formation within a parish (Roszkowski & Berna, 2012), but if the teachings of the church are presented to the students before the emotional connections, the students will be less likely to return to religious education courses (Davig & Spain, 2003). A sense of buy-in to the program is necessary in order to properly and effectively catechize youth, so the initial concern should be heavily placed on the real-life applicability of the text rather than the content of the text (Carmody, 2013). Madden (2017), a veteran catechist and religious education teacher, explained that there are three gaps in the content of religious education: intentionality, diversity, and complexity. However, the content still needs to be taught in a manner meaningful to the students.

Since the average age of a youth minister in the United States as of 2021 was 51 years old and the majority (77%) were over the age of 40 (Zippia Careers, 2023), those who utilize technology within a faith formation program are understandably few and far between. As Lee, Dabelko-Schoeny, Roush, Craighead, and Bronson (2019) and Sullivan (2021) suggested, the technological competency of the instructor in any given course directly correlates to the effectiveness of the use of technology within an academic setting. Without the resources or time to complete the training necessary to gain the competence required, youth ministers unsurprisingly succumb to the temptation of continuing lecture-style faith formation programming. Lee et al. (2019) claimed training educators in the technology they are expected to use in a general education setting would increase student retention of the course material, but many parishes and archdioceses do

not find technological efficacy important enough to require training. In fact, the professional development requirements for youth ministers and catechetical leaders in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston include the following (Office of Adolescent Catechesis, 2018):

- Level One: Completion of the following required formation for all Parish Catechetical Leaders of Youth and Adult Volunteers:
  - Archdiocesan Child Protection training and background check
  - Complete a Personal Learning Plan with the Associate Director for Formation
  - Retreat Formation
  - Formation Toward Christian Ministry
  - Human Sexuality Catechesis Formation
- Level Two: Intermediate formation for the Youth Ministry Leader with 3 or more years of parish experience
  - Complete a Personal Learning Plan with the Associate Director for Formation
- Level Three: Additional formation opportunities available to youth ministry personnel:
  - Professional Growth and CL Days
  - Adult formation workshops
  - Catholic Youth Conference, National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry, and National Catholic Youth Conference

Despite a variety of theologically-based professional development opportunities, technological efficacy and pedagogical competence are not on the list of the perceived required qualifications of a DRE. Bart Epstein is the CEO of EdTech Evidence Exchange, a United States based organization researching educational technology implementation and training. He explained that often, those that purchase technological educational tools or licenses opt out of purchasing the recommended training due to budget limitations or the assumption that the employees and volunteers can figure the programs out on their own (as cited in Sullivan, 2021). Additionally, the average budget for a youth minister's programming and professional development would not cover such a training. Faith Communities Today is a research initiative that has been tracking religious trends in the United States since 2000, and in 2020, they broke down congregational expenses and budgets. Only 11% of the overall budget was dedicated to program support and materials, such as religious education, and 5% of the remaining funds went to miscellaneous purposes (which could include professional development and salaries) (Thumma, 2021). In a national sample of 390 Catholic parishes, the overall budget was \$566,564 annually (Shakely, 2018), meaning only around 62.3 thousand dollars were allotted for religious education materials, and 28.3 thousand went toward miscellaneous expenses, including professional development and employee compensation.

Though these implications of using technology effectively in a faith formation program hold many back from attempting it, there is not a lack of desire, nor a lack of opportunities, within faith communities. Despite technological disparities among parishes with varying demographics (smaller congregations did not grow in their online presence through the pandemic, and rural parishes struggled to switch to virtual programming)



(Holleman & Chaves, 2022), a 2015 survey from Faith Communities Today found that 90% of all participants would respond positively to the implementation of technology in their religious education classes (Crockett, 2016). This desire sparks additional opportunities within faith formation to relate the content to the concurrent goals of assisting students' cultural enrichment and scientific understanding in tandem with their spirituality (Tran & Nguyen, 2021). Technologies such as VR and the exploration of alternative teaching strategies could allow youth to explore varying perspectives without claiming those perspectives (Howard, 2018; Ogbonna, 2021), making the church a safe place to "explore difficult questions without posing a direct threat to the religious views that they already hold" (Howard, 2018, p. 286).

Collaboration and community are of the utmost importance in faith formation, and technology (like VR) can be a means for congregations to form in a nontraditional, non-physical way in fellowship and education. (Thumma, 2010), but even with community at the forefront of faith formation planning, John Roberto, president of Lifelong Faith Associates, explained the importance of differentiation within faith formation programs. He said "the key to having faith and Church matter more in the lives of our people is to 'scratch their itch,' i.e., feed them in the areas of their lives that matter most to them connecting faith to their lives" (Arland-Fye, 2013, para. 3). One way to achieve this differentiation is through the use of AI to personalize theological content to relate to each student's personal interests or personal plans. In early research, the use of AI in a religious education context has been proved to have positive impacts on students' engagement, levels of excitement toward attending classes, and positive attitudes toward the values being taught (Tran & Nguyen, 2021).

This literature helps convey the opportunities available to use technology in a religious education context. The question: *how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?* can be more closely examined by first knowing the desire for technology from parishioners and people from individual faith communities. Then, understanding the varying ways by which technology can be used to enhance individualization in theology can assist in actually creating curriculum that will impact students in a new way. Technology in Christian and Catholic contexts has become more prominent, and some of its current programming is outlined in the next section.

### **Current Technological Catechetical Resources**

The post-pandemic world has accelerated technology's role in faith formation programming, and a few organizations have made names for themselves in Catholic education and programming. Ascension, formerly known as Ascension Press, has provided faith formation programming since 1998 and offers curriculum for sacramental preparation and general Catholic religious education. In 2015, they expanded their brand to offer multimedia resources and built an online presence. Jonathan Strate, owner, CEO, and President of Ascension, explained that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 1.5 million out of 15 million baptized Catholics in America were actively engaged at their parish; and Ascension's goal was to engage those members of the Church in a way that encouraged them to return to their parishes (RNS Press Release, 2021). With this expansion to multimedia platforms came partnerships with names such as Jeff Cavins and Father Mike Schmitz. Jeff Cavins, a Catholic Evangelist who left the Catholic Church, spent twelve years as a Protestant pastor, and reverted to Catholicism, is most widely

known for his time on the Eternal Word Television Network, where he hosted *Life on the Rock*. Cavins and Father Mike, along with Ascension, produced the podcast *The Bible in a Year (With Fr. Mike Schmitz)* in 2021 to supplement Cavins' "The Great Adventure" Bible study program. It was downloaded 350 million times (and counting), landed at the top of Apple's charts in the religious podcast category consistently throughout 2021 and 2022, and reached the number one overall spot twice (Marchese, 2022). The draw of Father Mike's podcasts is the supplemental nature: they do not replace the Bible, they simply accompany listeners as they work their way through the Bible themselves (Rau, 2016). The podcasts also create digital communities and provide space to discuss the content with people a listener may not otherwise be connected with (Ciancio, 2021; Tate, 2020). Bishop Ronald Herzog expressed that what Pope Benedict XVI called a "digital continent" should be inhabited by those looking for opportunities to evangelize and engage a world of people they would otherwise not have the chance to reach (Baudry & Puechner, 2017), and ministers such as Father Mike have acted on that call.

Father Mike is not the only member of the clergy who has reached the digital continent through multimedia content. Bishop Robert Barron was ordained a priest in 1986, and ordained a bishop in 2015. He founded Word on Fire, a media production company whose mission is to "spread the Good News of Jesus Christ through multiple media platforms, engaging people with the goodness, truth, and beauty of Catholicism" (Our Story, 2021, para. 1). Bishop Barron's documentary series, *Catholicism*, was aired on PBS in 2011. Saint Pope John Paul II's biographer, George Weigel, is quoted as saying *Catholicism* was "the most important media project in the history of the Catholic Church in America" (Word on Fire, 2020, para. 1). Bishop Barron found the project to be

rewarding in its ability to engage the imaginations and hearts of viewers worldwide (O'Hare, 2018). This work did not stop after *Catholicism*'s success, as he continued producing weekly video, audio, and social media content. As of February 2023 (Bishop Robert Barron), he had tens of thousands of weekly listeners, over 125 million views on YouTube, and 540,000 recipients of his daily email reflections. The Word on Fire Show, his weekly podcast, had been viewed over 22 million times, and he had acquired the social media following outlined below:

- 3.1 million Facebook fans
- 610,000 YouTube subscribers
- 366,000 Instagram followers
- 230,000 Twitter followers

Despite his large following, he claimed his media company played supplementary roles in his life and others', saying that there was “no ambiguity’ in his mind that his work as bishop” preceded that of the media apostolate (McKeown, 2022, para. 1).

Members of the clergy are not the only means to find faith formation in a digital realm. Organizations such as Our Sunday Visitor and Loyola Press offer sacramental preparation with videos and interactive learning segments, and the Hallow app provides guided meditations with the goal of “meet[ing] people where they are, both physically on their mobile devices and metaphysically wherever they are on their faith journey” (Alessandro, 2021, para. 8). The Hallow app landed at the number three spot on Apple’s app store on Ash Wednesday in 2023 (Prestigiacomio, 2023). FORMED, a product of the Augustine Institute, is another digital means of formation. They stated, “the digital age demands that we go beyond the brick and mortar approach to reaching souls for Christ”

(FORMED, para. 1), and they aim to do so by providing parishes the opportunity to subscribe and give parishioners free access to Catholic ebooks, audiobooks, films, and TV shows for all ages.

The TV series *The Chosen* is another example of evangelization in modern-day media. The show, which follows the life of Jesus through the eyes of his friends and followers, was the highest crowd-funded media project in history (Robinson, 2021) and was translated into 50 languages for viewers worldwide (Dolinger, 2022). The creators claimed that the show was not meant to be a replacement for the Bible, but, again, a supplement to it. *The Chosen* provides cultural context to the Bible and allows for empathy toward Biblical characters otherwise looked past (DeVillie, 2023). These programs and platforms are examples of the modernization of faith formation within the Catholic Church, but do not extend into the context of religious education in a formal setting. Reviewing the precedents of technology within faith formation allows further insight into answering the question, *how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?*

### **Summary**

Pedagogy for general education is transferable to that of religious education, and technology has a place in learning environments of all types. Media-centered faith organizations have seen the desire for technology integration in religious communities and faith formation programs, and resources have been made more readily available and accessible, but little is known about the effectiveness of these resources. Chapter Three will outline a faith-based social media app in which students can connect with their youth group leaders and peers to discuss their faith and view upcoming events. It will explore

the effectiveness of variables such as media type, presentation mode, and Catechetical content.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

Faith formation and technology are not often two words that are placed together, but the purpose of this research and project is to envision what effects combining them could have on youth participating in faith formation programming. Research from Chapter Two emphasized the importance of social-emotional connections in pedagogy and retention, and it provided insight on the potential applications and effects of technology within a religious, catechetical context. Chapter Three continues to explore those effects by explaining the timeline, logistics, and means of measurement for effectiveness for a project created to answer the question, *how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?*

The project's purpose is to act as a less formal means of religious education. It focuses on emotional, relational ministry more than academic Catholic literacy, and it implements technology as discussed in Chapters One and Two. In Chapter Three, a project description and research to support the development of the project (a mobile app) will be provided, and the details of the development itself will be laid out before breaking down the analysis of effectiveness.

#### Project Description

I developed a social media-style app for mobile devices called Ministry Media that provides students with a space to interact with their peers in a safe, supervised, and Catholic environment. The app allows youth to join their church's youth group to view

and share content surrounding their faith, see upcoming youth group events, and ask their burning questions about Catholicism and the Catechism. It also allows catechists, DRE's, and other faith formation leaders to interact with students in a safe, public, VIRTUS-approved manner. VIRTUS is derived from a Latin term meaning valor or honor. The program was created by the National Catholic Risk Retention Group to promote safe practices within religious organizations when interacting with minors and vulnerable adults, and to minimize risk and improve the experience for all churchgoers (The National Catholic, n.d.). My project took shape as a mobile app that integrates technology into the students' church experience and allows youth ministers to meet the students where they are at: online. Table 1 will provide an overview of the features that make this app unique and applicable to a church setting.

**Table 1**

*Describes the relevant features of the author's project*

App name: Ministry Media	The title of the app clarifies the intended audience for the social media platform: those in faith-based ministry.
General features	Ministry Media is a social-based platform that runs similar to Instagram or Twitter in its ability to post text, images, or a combination of the two to share with friends. The unique element of the app is its intended purpose of sharing faith-based



	content and updating youth on upcoming events and information about youth group.
Administrator privileges	Each post from a youth group member or non-administrator must go through the administrator for approval. This ensures a safe, appropriate environment for all in the community.
Chat restrictions	VIRTUS policies state that all digital interactions between a minor and their youth minister must be reported to their parents. This is to ensure transparency and trust among the adults, and to hold the students accountable if, for example, they tell a youth minister they are out of town, but they tell their parents they are going to youth group. This app automatically emails the primary parent contact with the chats that are sent between administrators of the platform (the youth minister) and the minor in question.
Friends and groups	Often, youth from across the diocese or

	<p>even the country will connect through various diocesan-wide events or mission trips. Users of the app can add the people they meet in these contexts as friends, which will help them stay connected.</p> <p>Allowing users to input an assigned group number individualizes the app to each youth group that decides to use it, so even if a user has various friends posting about events from their own churches, there is a space where the user can see their own youth group's events and announcements.</p>
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### **Research and Rationale**

According to DesignRush (2019), a business-to-business marketplace that works closely with app developers, mobile optimization (e.g. image sizes and concise language) and the ability to engage with consumers through the platform increase engagement and boost sales for companies. Through an app where youth can stay on their phones, receive instant gratification with many visuals and little in-depth reading, and talk to their peers as well as their religious directors and spiritual guides, students (especially those who have little experience within a faith formation setting) have more access to the conversations and connections that can be difficult to attain through in-person interactions. In 2022, teens were using YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat,

respectively, as their top forms of social media (Atske, 2022). The downfall of platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and Tumblr suggest that teens prefer social media that incorporates images and videos rather than writing and blogs. To engage students with something as old as the Catholic Church, the Catechism and ideals it adopts need to be provided in a format young people will respond to. In my opinion, that format is social media, but the social media youth have access to are not environments that are conducive to growing closer to God or their faith.

Instead of bringing the Catechism to the social media platforms that already exist simply to be lost in the shuffle of the secular world, having a platform solely for faith-based material holds the power of freedom in that the youth who use the app do not have to fear judgment. While many content creators across various platforms post Christian content, teenagers may struggle with interacting and engaging with that content for fear of their peers witnessing it. Dedicating a space to Catechetical resources and Christian content provides an open space for youth to explore the content without the distraction of the secular world or the perception of what exploring their faith could do to their social lives.

### **Setting, Participants, and Timeline**

This app is designed for the intended audience of a Catholic church's youth group, including students from grades five through twelve. The demographics of the youth group are mostly middle-class, urban and suburban-dwelling youth. The specific community the project is designed for is a mostly white Catholic community of middle-class families.

The project development and implementation in a youth group setting took around three months, and the effectiveness will be measured over the course of the subsequent years. The means of evaluating effectiveness is outlined in the following section, and the timeline for development can be found in Table 2:

**Table 2**

*Describes the timeline of the author's project*

May-July, 2023	Develop the app
July-August, 2023	Spread the word among youth group members
August-November, 2023	Track growth, host events, and implement themes from app engagement during youth group events

### **Assessment of Effectiveness**

The goal of this project is to increase engagement and participation in a youth group in order to walk with youth as they grow in their faith. The effectiveness of the app will be determined by the number of registered users as time advances (as well as physical attendees at related events) and the number of monthly posts and discussions among the platform's users. The backside of the app collects data from each user, including number of posts, number of engagements (likes, comments, and chats), post content, and time spent on the app. If sixty percent of users have posted once in the span

of a month, and if seventy-five percent have engaged with someone else's post (including the youth minister's), I will consider the app to be working in the way I intended.

Additionally, having access to the screen time on the app can assist me in my evaluation. Often, students who are more timid or not as sure in their faith will be less likely to share in the same way as their peers. Their lack of active participation should not be mistaken for indifference. Instead, their curiosity about the content and willingness to take in the themes being shared should be taken as a positive sign. If the users who are not actively engaging with others or posting themselves are using the app monthly, I will consider that an effective means of faith formation, too.

### **Summary**

A Christ-centered social media platform fosters the opportunity for students to engage with other young Catholics in a judgment-free zone and in a manner they are familiar with. The question, *how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?*, can be explored through this platform by targeting youth engaged in the Catholic faith at varying levels. The app includes space to view upcoming youth group events, discuss questions and ideologies with peers and catechetical leaders, and share encounters with God and thematic musings through photos and videos.

This project's development led me to many realizations about the state of religious education and technological pedagogy; these realizations are outlined in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reflection/Conclusion

#### Overview

The research, application, and project description found in Chapters One through Three helped answer the question, *how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?* After seeing research repeatedly confirm the significant roles technology and screen time play in teens' lives, the natural approach to connecting them to their faith seemed obvious to me: bring it to them through a medium they are familiar with. I created a mobile app that is marketed toward youth ministers to be a one-stop-shop to create and share content, provide updates on upcoming events, and provide a space for teens and youth to discuss their faith-based questions in a safe, familiar community. By creating comprehensible faith formation content and placing it in a format they already gravitate toward, I believe students will feel as though they have more opportunity to explore their questions about faith that they may not be comfortable asking out loud. Additionally, they may become more enthusiastic about the idea of participating in church events if they see them marketed in a modern way. Chapter Four will revisit the major learnings and takeaways from the first three chapters, discuss the implications of the research and the project development, and lay out the various benefits of the project and next steps for implementation.

## **Learnings**

Through many searches, sources, and hours of deliberating the appropriate approach to bringing technology into a faith formation program, I have learned, above all else, that the United States of America is fully accustomed to (and expectant of) constant access to modern technology (Anderson, 2018). A plethora of information about any given topic is readily available for any person of any age, and parents around the world are granting their children access to this wealth of knowledge at increasing rates (Children's Internet Access at Home, 2021). Additionally, with the expanse of searches and websites that are accessible to children, monitoring youths' intake of media is increasingly difficult. At the heart of the Catholic Church is tradition, and few places in its tradition does it meet society's expectations regarding technology use. In fewer places still does it morally align.

However, my second major learning is that, in contrast to a society that seems to be "all technology, all the time," people feel welcomed, comfortable, and excited to learn more in the physical space where technology is utilized and tradition is combined with innovation (Tran & Nguyen, 2021). In a context where technology has not been heavily accepted as a means of transferring knowledge, I was surprised to learn that people do not necessarily want to replace the traditional modes of learning about faith, but rather desire supplemental materials and further opportunities to grow in faith (DeVille, 2023; McKeown, 2022). The foundation of the Catholic Church is not under fire. Rather, the desire to implement modern technology in a meaningful way proves people's desire to better understand that foundation. The benefits and sense of community that come with the physical space are not understated, but the addition of accessible resources and more

meaningful content would be an additional appeal to these physical spaces and to learning more about faith.

The third theme within my research that did not surprise me as much as inspire me to continue with my project proposal was the theme of success from various Catholic media outlets and projects. While there is not an expanse of resources available for Catholic media intake, the few big names that exist do very well compared to other faith-based projects and to secular programs and media. Not only do people who have a strong base for their faith engage with the shows, apps, podcasts, and other forms of media provided, but these media outlets are able to reach tens of thousands of people who have never considered a Christian faith or who would not have stepped in a church. The accessibility and privacy of faith formation in a digital medium allows for people to explore without judgment or fear, and is far less daunting than the obligation of a physical appearance in a church.

Research regarding technology within faith formation is limited, but when looking at both pieces of the research individually and seeing the success stories of the platforms that have started to pave the way in combining the two, my research showed the need for further collaboration between two areas I'm passionate about: faith and technology.

### **Implications and Limitations**

As stated above, the implications of my research included reaching the necessary quantity of reliable sources to fully flesh out what the integration of technology in a faith formation program could look like. However, while I do not feel my research is



exhaustive, I do feel as though the evidence I collected is strongly in favor of the combination, despite the lack of it in many faith communities.

Another implication and important note is that the research pertained to faith as an overall theme and was not specific to any denomination. I was not solely searching for studies within Catholic settings, but instead was looking for technology's usage in all contexts, and any faith's role in people's lives. While my project is meant to be geared toward a Catholic youth group, other denominations could be interested in following suit, and the project may not have the exact features people of any particular group are searching for. Again, as more research surfaces, there will likely be more evidence to suggest that the app would be widely accepted from all demographics. But, with nothing of the sort being common yet, this app will take on somewhat of an uncharted territory.

Finally, in addition to general time constraints, the limitations of this project's development included only having access to the free version of the program I used to create the app. This limited features available to me, as well as the ability to create a custom domain and publish the application more widely. I am not a professional coder, nor do I have experience building an app that is optimized for mobile devices or interactive in the same way this project was, so learning some components of the process as I went hindered my ability to completely adapt the program to do what I would have liked to see it do, such as create a separate interface for parents and youth.

Based on the development process and the limitations above, I would hope for the app to widen its reach in the future in the following ways. First, the ability to cater to different faiths and their needs within a mobile application would enhance its experience. By having a slightly different user interface depending on the faith community it is being

geared toward, the app could be more customizable and user-friendly to various groups. Second, the ability to join a specific youth group using a code or different means of separation would help in spreading the app outside of a single youth group. As it stands, despite the calendar events and posts being specific to my youth group, anyone could theoretically view them if they downloaded the application. Third, being able to integrate permission slips and sign-up forms into the app directly instead of requiring links to outside sources would enhance the user experience. Lastly, I see the app separating interfaces for parent and student use. In similar ways to the enhancement opportunities above, this would create a space in which parents would be able to quickly find what they need to find (events, updates, permission slips, payment portals, etc.), and the students would feel as though they still had their own space.

### **Benefits**

I believe this project benefits the world of youth ministry because it seems to be stuck in the past in many ways. The ideas of joining a youth group and participating in religious education classes seem outdated and arbitrary to many youth I work with. This app is one way to connect with them and, at the very least, show an effort to draw them in. Not only would it be a one-stop-shop to help youth ministers coordinate events and send out updates, but it would be a space where parents and youth could feel safe and comfortable logging on, asking questions, and connecting with peers. Faith formation starts with discipleship, and without youth that buy into the idea of connecting with their faith, discipleship dies. This app allows for that discipleship to commence and remain active in an exciting way.

## Summary

Creating Ministry Media gave me a broader understanding of not only the time and work needed to create a functional social platform, but also an idea of how I envision youth ministry and technology working together in the future. As I worked through the development, I was continuously thinking of new features or other elements that would be beneficial to the app's relevance and usefulness, and I believe this project is one I will be able to work on for years to come.

This app was intended to make everyone's life easier: from the parents of the youth, to the youth, to the youth ministers. I believe that in developing this program, I not only succeeded in doing so, but I also came to understand my own priorities as a youth minister. Understanding the features I needed in order to make this app worthwhile as a youth minister helped me better articulate my priorities and goals in my role and helped me more clearly align with the requirements and mission of the church.

*So, how can utilizing technology within a faith formation program provide opportunities for students to grow in their faith?* Saint Pope John Paul II famously quoted, “[the youth] are the future of the world, the hope of the Church.” I believe in that sentiment, and I believe that in order to keep that hope alive, we as a church need to invite the youth into the space in a way they can relate to. Technology has the power to unite people, and when youth are brought together in a space where faith is encouraged, they are able to disciple one another and grow in their faith together. While my project will not solve many issues of the world, it will provide a space for youth to come together through faith and, hopefully, be inspired to solve those issues as a community.

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