

2017

The Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Grief

Kathryn Knutson
Luther Seminary

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/cyf_papers



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Knutson, Kathryn, "The Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Grief" (2017). *Children, Youth, and Family (CYF) Papers*. 14.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/cyf_papers/14

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Papers at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Children, Youth, and Family (CYF) Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact akeck001@luthersem.edu.

Luther Seminary

The Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Grief

Kathryn (Kate) Knutson
CY4597: An Independent Study on Grief and Loss with Adolescents

I. Introduction: My Adventure with Grief

I was 23. My friend Gretchen was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease and lymphoma. The cancer was terminal and she had a maximum of two weeks to live. She was 26. The next two weeks were spent in the ICU, crying, laughing, sharing stories, lamenting, posting on social media to get the word out, and wondering why did someone like Gretchen have to die so soon? Why did someone who was healthy, thriving, and young, have to die? Was this God's fault? Was it the doctors? The question for the year was, "Why?" In a way, my world fell apart that day. It cracked the foundation that I had built for myself for 23 years. I knew that the grief that I had experienced before when I lost a friend in high school was coming back at full speed and I could only pray that it got stuck at a red light, but it did not. If anything, it sped up. Gretchen's passing was the first of many that year. Four months later, three of my friends passed away. Two of them had an undiagnosed heart condition that caused them to die before the age of 30, and my good friend Grant took his own life at age 23. Grief was not a state of mind for me; it was rapidly becoming my new lifestyle. My faith was in crisis mode. I became numb to almost every emotion. Lament was my new method of worship. Church was a danger zone because I did not want to face it. Social media was my way of staying connected with my friends when it would have been easier to ignore them. It was easier to talk about it with my friends behind a screen than it was face-to-face. Although I was being vulnerable, I could still hide from the reality that I had to face: grief is hard. I did not feel alone because I created a community behind a screen of my real friends who knew what was going on in my life even if everything seemed "okay" in person. My grief forced me to be vulnerable when I was on my own, but when I was in

public, there was a feeling that I had to hold it all together. I had to be strong. I had to pretend that this hurricane of grief was no big deal, and that it was a part of life.

After my experience with sudden death and extreme grief, I wanted to study it. I wanted to know why social media became an outlet for myself and face-to-face conversations became less common or more difficult. I wanted to know why it was easier to hide behind a screen when the people I would talk to were the people I would see multiple times a week. I wanted to know why social media was one of my methods of coping. Although I was 23 when this happened, I continuously noticed younger parishioners in my congregation doing the same thing. We did not experience the same type of loss. They did not know about the loss I had experienced, but they experienced their own loss and felt comfortable posting about it, but did not feel comfortable meeting for coffee to talk about it. They emailed me about their grief or posted a picture on social media to cope, but when asked in person how they were doing, they would respond, “I’m good!” and walk away.

This is a phenomenon that will not vanish anytime soon. It is something that church leaders can learn how to use to help the adolescents in their congregation cope with the lament and grief that they will experience in life. My adventure of grief is still unfolding. There are days where it is hard to get out of bed and days where everything feels right. Grief is like that. You may think you know when it is going to appear, but it sneaks up on you, reminding you that even though your loved ones are no longer here, they are still making an impact on your life, and that there are people around you to make you feel a little bit less alone when it hits you. This paper is written from research and experience. Grief is important, social media is a coping mechanism, and it is time that the church starts figuring out how to help young people navigate it by showing up and being present.

II. The Study: Social Media and Adolescent Grief

It is not that adolescents do not have communities. It is that they can now create virtual communities with their friends and find ways to cope that do not include going to church or having face-to-face conversations with their pastor or youth leader. It is a difficult task to find an article that talks about the positive impact that social media has on youth and all too easy to find an article about the negative effects of social media on every aspect of a young persons life. How does this impact how one creates a community in church? How do church leaders intentionally create communities where youth can be vulnerable and open about the trials and difficulties they are experiencing? How one can effectively minister to adolescents while they are grieving and lamenting in a time where it is becoming normal to click send or post something in their virtual community and atypical to reach out to have a face-to-face conversation about the journey of grief and lament? They continue to show up and be present.

Social media has become a tool and an outlet that adolescents use to create community, cope with stress, and navigate life, ultimately having a positive and negative affect on the way that adolescents experience the lament that comes with grief and how one ministers to them during these times of deep loss and extreme emotion. Social media enables youth to hide behind a screen and click “share, send, or post” to receive instant gratification and emotional support when they share their emotions about grief. Social media diminishes adolescents’ desire or need to have a face-to- face conversation, creating an urgent need for grief ministry for adolescents that creates community and addresses the journey of grief and lament that they might experience

at this young age. Using the research and theology of danah boyd,¹ Walter Bruggemann,² Donna Freitas,³ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross⁴, Andrew Zirschky⁵ and Osmer's four core tasks (imperative, normative, pragmatic, descriptive) this study examines social media, adolescent grief, and lament resulting in a study that is centered around the necessity of grief ministry for adolescents.

Before digging deep into creating a new model for grief ministry, a few terms need to be defined. The first term is social media. Social media is defined as "Forms of electronic communication (as websites for social networking and micro blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content."⁶

For the purposes of this paper, social media will be used as a term to describe any kind of communication that occurs electronically through texting, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, email, and SnapChat. The word grief has many definitions that need to be condensed for the purpose of this study. Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson define grief as, "The normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person or object lost."⁷ The emotions and stages of grief will be presented later, as well as more research about adolescent grief. Another broad term that

¹ danah boyd is a Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research, Research Assistant Professor at New York University, and Fellow at Harvard University's Center for Internet and Society. She focuses on how youth integrate technology into their everyday lives and other interactions between technology and society.

² Bruggemann is the McPheeder Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. He is the author of numerous Fortress Press books.

³ Freitas is an author of fiction and non-fiction, she researches young adults and the effects of social media has on their lives, specifically in college.

⁴ Kübler-Ross is best known for her research and seminars about the 5 stages of grief and how these stages impact our daily lives.

⁵ Zirschky is Assistant Professor of Practical Theology and Youth Ministry at Memphis Theological Seminary and serves as academic director at the Center for Youth Ministry Training in Brentwood, Tennessee.

⁶ "Social Media," Merriam-Webster, accessed April 21, 2017, <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/social%20media>.

⁷ Mitchell, Kenneth R., and Herbert Anderson. *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983. 54-55.

needs to be defined is community. A community is a group of people coming together for a common reason; it provides a sense of belonging for the members. This can be virtual or physical, but the purpose of community is the same. For purposes of this study, an adolescent, youth, or young person refers to an individual who is aged from 12-18 and believes in the Triune God. The last term that needs to be defined is lament. Lament is an honest dialogue with God that deals with the reality of specific life experiences highlighting the raw emotions that occur when one is grieving. Lament can be seen as a cry to God for help or comfort, most commonly seen in the Psalms.⁸ These terms and a few additional terms will be discussed in greater detail as the research is presented.

The study will be presented using Osmer's Four Core Tasks of Practical Theology. The four tasks and the questions the tasks ask include: (1) descriptive-empirical asks, "What is going on?" (2) interpretive asks, "Why is it going on?" (3) normative asks, "What ought to be going on?" (4) pragmatic asks, "How might we respond?"⁹. Each task has its own source for this study. Walter Bruggemann's books titled, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* and *Psalmsist's Cry* will be used as my normative and pragmatic tasks. Andrew Zirschky's book titled, *Behind the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected and Alone Generation* will be used as a normative and pragmatic source. danah boyd's book, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* will be used to address the descriptive task. The book *The Happiness Effect* by Donna Freitas will be used as a source for the descriptive and interpretive tasks. Lastly, the work by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying* will be used to address the interpretive task. In the end,

⁸ Bruggemann, Walter. *The Psalms and Life of Faith*. Edited by Patrick D. Miller. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998: 70-71

⁹ Smith, Kevin G. "The Pastor as Practical Theologian | Resources | SATS." South African Theological Seminary. Accessed April 21, 2017. <https://www.sats.edu.za/pastor-practical-theologian/>.

these four tasks of practical theology will help construct and research what is needed for a new model of grief ministry for adolescents.

III. Social Media: The New Norm

It is no shock that social media is becoming the main method of communication for the younger generations. It is an easy task to research the impact of social media on youth, and even easier to believe that social media is consuming, unhealthy, and destructive. In some ways, this is true, but in many other ways it is false. Not only is social media allowing youth to create communities, it is enabling them to figure out how to communicate in many different ways and on many platforms. Social media also enables youth to find communities that make them feel less alone, and it also helps them create communities that they can fully participate in while the expectations on young people continue to become higher. Although face-to-face conversations are becoming less common, the depth of the relationships that youth build is deepening because of social media.¹⁰ A certain level of maturity and acceptance is needed in order to change the societal beliefs about social media because of the misconceptions that have already been ingrained in one's foundation. One thing remains constant: the need for a community where vulnerability is acceptable and judgment is hard to come by is necessary in order for adolescents to feel safe opening up in the same way that they do on their social media platforms. Before moving forward, it is important to address that social media can also be a dangerous place for youth to connect when it is used in a way that is unhealthy. The study is not meant to demean the danger of social media, but rather focus on the way that it can benefit the ministry that is conducted with adolescents. Donna Freitas writes about the effect that social media has on young

¹⁰ Boyd, Danah. *It's Complicated: the social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014: 5

adults. In her book she interviews young adults about their experience with social media, finding that the pressure to be happy and act like everything is okay has a large effect on what they post on social media. Oftentimes, youth present themselves as perfect online, which has the adverse effect. It makes their networked communities think that everything is going well when in reality it is not. Although young people may act as though everything is perfect online, their capacity for empathy has not disappeared. Freitas writes, “They [young adults] may all be presenting themselves as perfect online, which may not seem so empathetic, but in person these young women and men are as open and emotional as ever, and they are suffering under the weight of so much pretending and hiding.”¹¹ This is one negative effect of social media that can have a frightening impact on youth and the adults that support them. Sometimes youth pretend online and sometimes they are themselves. It depends on the individual and what they are experiencing in their real life relationships or sharing on the screen. An adult may see a post about a loved one dying, and think to reach out, but if the undertone of the post is hopeful and uplifting, it may seem as though the young person is handling the grief well. In reality, they most likely are not. Social media can be a tool that is used to learn about an adolescent’s daily life, but it cannot be the only tool because of the desire to post about a perfect life. It can be used as a means to start a face-to-face conversation, but not as the only way that conversation is conducted.

Teens are figuring out new ways to navigate life, which creates a gap between the way that they interact with their parents, leaving their parents in a state of confusion when their teen is always focused on the screen and less focused on a face-to-face conversation. danah boyd writes, “The internet mirrors, magnifies, and makes more visible the good, bad, and ugly of

¹¹ Freitas, Donna. *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at any Cost*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017: 67.

everyday life. As teens embrace these tools and incorporate them into their daily practices, they show us how our broader social and cultural systems are affecting their lives. When teens are hurting offline, they reveal their hurt online.”¹² When teens can witness the good, bad, and ugly of their peers on the internet, it only makes sense that they feel comfortable sharing what goes on in their lives. Social media creates a place that can potentially be safe for teens to share their vulnerabilities that are caused by grief. In order for an adult to understand how this can positively impact a young person, they need to engage in social media to see how it can support a suffering adolescent as well as hurt them. Youth still want to be understood, but the ways of understanding them has changed.

Why do adolescents turn to social media to cope with their lives and learn about their peers and what makes it easier than talking about it in person? These are two questions that are critical to ask in order to figure out how to minister to adolescents. There are a few responses to these questions that can help one learn why social media truly is becoming the new norm when it comes to communication. First, social media is a place where teens have control. boyd writes, “When teens engage with networked media, they’re trying to take control of their lives and their relationship to society. In doing so, they begin to understand how people relate to one another and how information flows between people. They learn about the social world and develop social skills.”¹³ On social media, an individual has time to think about a response to a certain situation or experience, whereas in real life they do not. They can control their response with thought rather than saying something that they might regret later. They develop new ways of communicating, and when faced with face-to-face conversation they may be more prepared to

¹² boyd, *it's complicated*, 24.

¹³ boyd, *it's complicated*, 93.

respond. Social media educates adolescents on social skills and how to have conversations. Anonymity also plays a huge role in the why and what questions of social media. Some websites allow you to remain anonymous. This does not help a church leader know what their youth are experiencing if their youth remain anonymous, but it does allow youth to share what they are experiencing without the fear of being judged. Youth post online because it diminishes the fear of judgment based on something they experienced. Grief extracts many emotions that adolescents may not have felt before, causing them to feel embarrassed by this. When they can write about their experiences to a community that they have created and remain anonymous, it rids them of any fear and relieves them of the emotions they may be feeling. Social media is becoming the new norm because it is something that adolescents have control over and it is a community that they can create and receive what they need with anonymity or without it. In the end, one can see that social media is becoming a place where deep meaningful relationships are being formed. Andrew Zirschky writes, “Teenagers experience a multitude of fleeting and transitory communities and relationships daily, but social media allows them to enact relationships and draw upon the support of communities that are effervescent, always on, and full time.”¹⁴ Social media is a way of communicating with peers, sharing emotions and experiences and relating to each other in a way that is less confrontational than it would be in person. Social media can provide platforms for youth to remain anonymous, which in turn causes them to share more, knowing that there will be no judgment, and if there is, they will not know where from. As boyd said, if our youth hurt offline, they hurt online.¹⁵ The days of adolescents going to the mall to hang out with their peers are not gone, but they are hard to find. The

¹⁴ Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected but Alone Generation*. Nashville, TN: Youth Ministry Partners and Abingdon Press, 2015:14 ¹⁵ boyd, *it's complicated*, 24.

pressures of school and sports teams become greater, and the amount of time spent hanging out with friends becomes low on the to-do list. Social media is one way that adolescents can hang out with each other, especially when there are not enough hours in a day to do so.¹⁵ There are many concerns that are centered on social media and reasons for these concerns. The trick is to figure out how to use social media in a way that engages adolescents to get involved in a community that can support them while they have tough conversations both in person and on a screen. Social media is not something that youth are using to hide, but it is something that they are using to build deep intimate relationships that they do not feel they can find elsewhere.¹⁶

IV. Adolescent Grief: Showing Up

A decade ago the concept of social media and grief did not exist like it does today. The fear of death was as real as it is now, but there were different ways of navigating it. Today, social media has become the new normal when it comes to communication, and a useful tool for community building, especially among adolescents. It is easier to post about someone dying than it is to call someone and tell them. For some reason, social media reminds individuals that they are not alone and that people truly do show up. John Pavlovitz writes, “Almost immediately they surround you with social media condolences and texts and visits and meals and flowers. They come with good hearts, with genuine compassion, and they truly want to support you in those moments of loss. The problem is that you’re never neither prepared nor particular ready for them.”¹⁷ The key word here is immediately. Grief becomes something that an adolescent does not need to process alone when they can immediately post something about their loved one. The

¹⁵ boyd, *it's complicated*, 20.

¹⁶ Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen*, 14.

¹⁷ Pavlovitz, John. "The Grieving Need You Most After the Funeral." John Pavlovitz: The Stuff That Needs to be Said. February 16, 2017. Accessed April 21, 2017. <http://johnpavlovitz.com/2017/01/05/the-grieving-needyou-most-after-the-funeral/>.

response of the community that surrounds them is immediate. The people that show up are there right away. It does not take hours or days, but rather minutes. This changes how one experiences grief.

Grief becomes less about the experience of loss and more about the way that one interacts with the community that shows up for them. The thing is, sometimes adolescents are not prepared for the volume of the support because they have never experienced anything like grief before. Mitchell and Anderson write, “Grief is a major aspect of adjusting to a new experience in a foreign land.”¹⁸ Social media is not the foreign land. It is the familiar land with a map that adolescents have already memorized, which makes it easier to share their grief online, but harder to talk about it in person. After the post is put on social media, individuals receive instant support. It is when that support stops and the post is no longer broadcasted at the top of the newsfeed that grief can make one feel as though they are on a deserted island. Social media is a healthy tool for sharing grief, but when it comes to navigating the darkness and the intensity of it there needs to be a real life conversation as well. There not only needs to be conversation with adolescents experiencing grief, but there needs to be a way to educate adolescents about grief in a way that is realistic, honest, and healthy. Grief should not be something to fear, but rather something to acknowledge as a necessary part of life.

Adolescent grief is similar to adult grief. The main difference is that oftentimes adolescents are not equipped with the tools to navigate these new emotions because they could be experiencing loss for the first time and do not know how to discuss deep loss. Adolescents are more likely to experience sudden, traumatic, or unexpected loss because suicide rates are high at this young age, which increases the intensity of grief leaving adolescents to figure out a way to

¹⁸ Mitchell and Anderson, *All our Losses, All our Grievs*, 53.

cope on their own because of the newness and extremity of grief.¹⁹ A significant loss changes the adolescent's perspective of self, others, relationship to the deceased, death, life, and a higher power. Grief changes everything about an adolescent's life.²⁰ In a research study centered on adolescent grief, adolescents confessed that "fear of death, depression, intrusive thoughts, and a sense of loneliness make coping with loss hard."²² This study shows that even when an adolescent has a system to cope online, there is still a strong sense of fear and loneliness that occurs. Diminishing the fear of death and grief is next to impossible because it has been around for ages, but making adolescents feel less alone is something that needs to be and can be done.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross researched death and dying, and the stages that one must experience while experiencing death, dying, or grief. The five stages of death and dying are denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.²¹ These stages are well known in most cultures, and most churches use them to describe the phases of grief and death that one might experience. Oftentimes it is easier to ignore certain stages of grief and expect that one is to be at a place of acceptance, but the reality is that it can take time for one to get to the point of accepting that death is inevitable. The same goes with death. Oftentimes the process is overlooked because of the fear that death has generated in society. Kübler-Ross wrote, "Death is still a fearful, frightening happening, and the fear of death is a universal fear even if we think we have mastered in on many levels."²²

¹⁹ Doka, Kenneth J. "6 Ways That Adolescent Grief Is Different." The Huffington Post. April 18, 2014. Accessed April 21, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kenneth-j-doka/six-ways-that-adolescent_b_5148211.html.

²⁰ Rask, Katja, Maria Kaunonen, and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen. "Adolescent Coping with Grief after the Death of a Loved One." *International Journal of Nursing Practice* 8 (October 2011): 138

²² Rask, *Adolescent Coping with Grief after the Death of a Loved One*, 140.

²¹ Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, and Ira Byock. *On Death & Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, & Their Own Families*. New York, NY: Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2014: table of contents

²² Kübler-Ross, *On Death & Dying*, 5.

Kübler-Ross argued that the fear of death creates a fear of living, of feeling, and a fear walking with the dying or grieving.²³ Being fearful of death is not a new concept for society to master. The new concept that society, specifically the church, needs to begin to master is the task of diminishing the fear of death and welcoming the vulnerability and shame that death can cause. The church needs to do this with its parishioners who are passing as well as the families that are grieving. Today individuals have become experts at hiding their suffering and grief and amateurs at navigating the inevitability of loss and the stages of grief. Social media makes it easier to ignore the despair that occurs with loss. At the end of the day, physical or technological relationships still experience loss and this is an experience that will never diminish. The fear of death is widespread, which results in grief becoming increasingly more difficult to navigate.²⁴ What would it look like if instead of leaving the grieving after the funeral to navigate the adventure of grief on their own, the church walked with the grieving, reminding them that their grief is real, raw, and still alive? Grief is a lifelong journey that does not have an end, but it does not have to be a journey that adolescents have to navigate on their own.

Shifting the focus back to Pavolitz who writes about his experience with grief, one can see that the response to grief from an individual's support system always has been and always will be immediate instead of long lasting unless church leaders figure out a way to change this concept. The response to grief is immediate for many young people in today's world, which is the main difference from adult grief and adolescent grief. The days of picking up the phone to call someone and tell them about the death of a loved one are slowly going away, and the impact of social media on grief is becoming more immediate because of the volume of support and

²³ Kübler-Ross, *On Death & Dying*, 5.

²⁴ Kübler-Ross, *On Death & Dying*, 11-21.

convenience of this tool of communication when one clicks on the “post” button. Pavlovitz writes:

Just as the shock [of grief] begins to wear off and the haze is lifted and you start to feel the full gravity of the loss; just as you get a clear look at the massive crater in your heart—you find yourself alone. People don’t leave you because they’re callous or unconcerned; they’re just unaware. Most people understand grief as an event, not as the permanent alteration to life that it is, and so they stay up until the funeral and imagine that when the service ends, that somehow you too can move ahead; that there is some finishing to your mourning, but you learn that grief has no shelf life.²⁵

The stages of grief still exist, but they look different. The fear of death is stronger than ever, but never acknowledged which contributes to the lack of care surrounding adolescent grief. Lastly, adolescents need a way to cope with grief that is immediate as well as long lasting. Adolescents need someone to stick with them through death, their grief, and their lament. Adolescents need to know that even though their lives have been altered forever, their relationship with their church can still be constant and consistent. Adolescents need to continuously be reminded that their relationship with Christ will last forever because they are beloved child of a God who suffers with them. Adolescents need to know that grief and lament are partners that are hard to separate. There are ways to cope that do not require them to isolate themselves or avoid despair.

Adolescents need to hear that when the attention and the support from social media stops, their relationship with God, their loved ones, and with the church will not. They need to believe that they are not alone, that death is not something to fear because God has already conquered death and suffers with them, and that the intricacies of grief can be experienced with the people around them without a timeframe or agenda.

²⁵ Pavlovitz, John, *The Grieving Need You Most After the Funeral*.

V. Lament: Don't Skip it

Lament is a natural and needed aspect of one's faith. Oftentimes it is one of the most overlooked components of faith for many individuals. Grief and lament are partners. It is hard to experience one without the other even if you only experience them to a small extent. At the same time, it can be easy for many individuals to ignore or skip lament and pretend that it is nonexistent. Embracing lament is a difficult but necessary task. When one turns to scripture, lament is a theme that occurs throughout the entire Bible, but specifically the Psalms. Lament was expressed and experienced by Israel during times of war and trial. Lament will never go away and one needs to learn how to embrace lament in order to understand the implications it has on the life of an individual's faith. For adolescents, acknowledging that lament is a reality that they will face and teaching them how to express their lament is key in faith development. There are multiple components that define lament and impacts the effect that it has on people. Walter Bruggemann is a well-known Old Testament theologian that has research focusing around the attributes of lament. He writes, "The lament makes an assertion about God: that this dangerous, available God matters in *every* dimension of life. Where God's dangerous availability is lost because we fail to carry on our part of the difficult conversation, where God's vulnerability and passion are removed from our speech, we are consigned to anxiety and despair, and the world as we know it becomes absolutized."²⁶ If God is only meant to be praised, what does it mean to believe in a God that can handle an individual's anger and grief? Is there space for this? It is not that praise is not necessary, but it is also crucial to sit down with God in the darkness, and truly ask the questions that are on one's heart. If individuals do not sit down and say that that there is danger in believing in God because of the darkness of the situation one may

²⁶ Bruggemann, Walter, *The Psalms and Life of Faith*, 108.

find themselves in, they are sitting down and saying that they believe in a God that only appears during the good times, and runs away when evil comes down and vulnerability is necessary. There is necessity in trusting in a God who enters into situations that may feel dangerous to people. God is relevant in every dimension, every situation, and every moment. This does not change. God comes down claiming His children, and reminding them that where lament is present, God is present also. God comes down to remind the kingdom that lament is a normal and real response to grief. God reminds individuals that they cannot skip lament.

Similar to grief, there are different stages of lament when looking at the classic model of Israel.²⁷ These stages are very similar in language, but different in the way that they are applied. Bruggemann says the six stages²⁸ are: (1) God is addressed and named (2) a complaint that identifies the trouble (3) a petition that demands that God acts (4) motivations are added that give God reasons for acting (5) the lamenter may ask for vengeance against the person or situation (6) something unexpected happens, the tone turns to praise. Or one can view lament as the plea and the praise, knowing that all of these stages fall into those two categories. It is also important to note that there is no timeframe for these stages. There is not a single prayer that will change every circumstance. Rather the journey of lament is similar to the journey of grief: it takes time and the individual needs to venture onto this path in order to fully navigate it. One cannot get to praise without first going through lament.²⁹ Just as Israel continually recognized that all was not

²⁷ Bruggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 2007: 54-56.

²⁸ Bruggemann, Walter, *The Message of the Psalms*, 54-56.

²⁹ Bruggemann, Walter, and Steve Frost. *Psalmist's Cry: Scripts for Embracing Lament*. The House Studio and the Work of the People, 2010: 12.

right in the world and used lament as a protest,³⁰ youth cannot navigate their faith without being told lament is acceptable and that God can handle any emotion they are feeling.

One can see that lament has been present since the world was created. Reading through the Psalms and the book of Lamentations can be a beneficial practice when it comes to learning more about the experience and history of lament. Conducting a bible study on any of the stories of lament in the Bible could potentially have a large impact on the way a church leader speaks about lament in a congregational setting. Bob Yoder in his book titled *Helping Youth Grieve* writes about individual and communal lament saying, “Its theological significance lies in the fact that it gives voice to the suffering.”³¹ He continues by quoting Bruggemann, “The lament is the language of the suffering; in its suffering is given the dignity of language. It will not stay silent!”³² The important concept to address here is that lament truly does give a voice to suffering and grief. The Psalms that are heavily focused on the individual’s journey of lament are the Psalms that many individuals identify with today. These Psalms have the potential to show adolescents that lament existed in scripture, and that it still exists today. By teaching them about these Psalms, ideally they will find a voice for their suffering and know that it is okay to talk

³⁰ Yoder, Bob. *Helping Youth Grieve: The Good News of Biblical Lament*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015. Kindle: location 488

³¹ Yoder, Bob, *Helping Youth Grieve (Kindle)*, location 596.

³² Yoder, Bob, *Helping Youth Grieve (Kindle)*, location 596.

about it while fully believing that they are not alone because they are a beloved child of God.

Lament does not always have to be a negative thing and if one were to attempt to change the tone of the conversation around lament to something that was believed to be necessary and even redemptive, one would be on the path to helping youth live into their lament instead of running away from it during times of grief.

VI. Now what?

So, now what? How does a pastor or youth minister engage their youth in acknowledging their grief and lament when it is easier to post online about it? It all comes down to the ways in which their communities communicate with them and welcome them in. The screens that adolescents are always focused on will not be disappearing anytime soon, so figuring out a way to lead them through grief while acknowledging the presence of social media in their lives is necessary. Andrew Zirschky writes, “Christian community is supposed to be rooted in *koinonia*, an immediate intertwining and sharing of life in which Christ is present with us as we are present with one another. The body of Christ is a bold vision of “full-time intimate community,” but a vision that has been too often neglected, especially when considering the nature of youth ministry.”³³ Church leaders need to bring back the concept of *koinonia* in order to get back on track with what it means to navigate both the triumphant times and the times of trial or darkness. If adolescents do not feel as though they have an intimate community in their church, it will be extremely challenging to enter into their lives during times of lament or grief. In order to process grief, there needs to be a trusted relationship with someone who can walk with them without overwhelming them. A ministry of presence needs to prevail in a world where social media

³³ Zirschky, Andrew, *Beyond the Screen*, 16.

21.

Zirschky, Andrew, *Beyond the Screen*,

exists.³⁶

A new model for grief ministry is difficult to create because it will look different in every congregation and context, but what can be linear for every congregation is the necessity for a community that is not segregated but stands together, supports youth, and encourages them to experience the light as well as the dark. Zirschky argues that the church needs to bring back a sense of communion, and that this is a task that can only be done with the congregation relies on the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit.³⁴ This argument can be supported after reading through the research on social media, grief, and lament. Bringing back a sense of community, the feeling of *koinonia*, is one of the only ways that the church will be able to navigate adolescent grief and lament. It is one of the only ways that adolescents will continue to navigate their grief. Where there is a loving community centered on Christ, there is a presence of the Holy Spirit that moves through every individual that continues to show up for the youth that are experiencing grief. I wish that there were an “easy” way of creating a model for grief ministry with adolescents or a list that could be constructed that tells a church leader how to talk with and walk with their youth during times of despair, grief, and lament. Unfortunately, there is not because of the different layers and intricacies that make the journey of grief truly a journey. Although I cannot present a full model, I can present ways that this research has opened my eyes to the necessity of showing up and being vulnerable with the adolescents that come to church. *Koinomia* is necessary. Individuals are yearning for a safe community especially when their community is becoming more focused on a screen than being physically present with someone. Incorporating technology into youth ministry may seem like the solution, but it is not the end all be all. Disrupting screen

³⁴ 21.

Zirschky, Andrew, *Beyond the Screen*,

time with face-to-face conversation and community is critical. Social media has strengthened the need for relationship, showing society that adolescents still yearn for deep relationship, but are slowly losing the skills that are needed to create them in real life. Adolescents lament but do not know how to talk about this lament because they have not been taught enough about lament to know that it is a necessary part of faith. The church is commanded to teach and lead, and by doing this, adolescents develop a strong and mature faith. It feels redundant to stress the importance of community during times of adolescent grief and lament, but it is the only way that individuals, specifically adolescents, can feel the love of Christ which will only help them navigate their grief. Zirschky writes:

The church has to offer teenagers a form of community and relationship—koinonia, or communion—that contrasts sharply with the standard fare of modern society. In communion, youth are incorporated with others in the divine life of non-anxious belonging as they are released to give of themselves in love, while receiving the grace of God in community. All of this gives us cause to be hopeful. Teenagers are seeking something beyond the screen, namely a depth of intimacy and relational presence with others.³⁵

There is not a solution or a how-to-guide on how to navigate adolescent grief, but there are ways to create a community that allows adolescents to build relationships that will help them navigate grief. Educational opportunities can be implemented about grief and loss for adolescents helping them to see that vulnerability, emotion, and relationships are key if they are going to continue to experience life in its full capacity. Relationships can be formed. Retreats can be planned. Worship can be held. Most importantly, youth need to be welcomed in order for them to feel as though they are in a safe place where they can navigate their grief and lament.

³⁵ 149.

Zirschky, Andrew, *Beyond the Screen*,

After this study, one can see that social media only strengthens the need to minister to adolescents during times of grief and lament. This study proves that adolescents need adults and their peers to continue to show up especially after the funeral is over. Grief is extremely life altering in every way possible, and lament is something that needs to be preached and taught, even if it is one of the darker sides of faith. Adolescents need to be surrounded by a community, walked with during their times of despair, and reminded that even though they may feel like they

are living in a foreign world while they are grieving, God walks with them in the unknown, suffers with them when they are suffering, and experiences life with them because of Jesus' death on the cross. Adolescent grief is hard to dissect, but when there is *koinonia* and a determination to navigate grief both on and off the screen, there is hope that they will know and believe that they do not need to journey through grief alone. After the post on social media becomes less important and the funeral ends, they can know and believe that they are in relationship with others while they experience the stages and different types of grief. Yes, it is easier and becoming a critical part of coping to post about one's grief online, but the real work of grief begins when the off screen conversations happen and they believe that even though they lost a loved one, they are still loved and held in the arms of Christ and their church community.

Bibliography

Boyd, Danah. *It's Complicated: the social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

Bruggemann, Walter. *The Psalms and Life of Faith*. Edited by Patrick D. Miller. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.

Bruggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 2007.

Bruggemann, Walter, and Steve Frost. *Psalmist's Cry: Scripts for Embracing Lament*. The House Studio and the Work of the People, 2010.

Doka, Kenneth J. "6 Ways That Adolescent Grief Is Different." The Huffington Post. April 18, 2014. Accessed April 21, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kenneth-j-doka/sixways-that-adolescent-b_5148211.html.

Freitas, Donna . *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at any Cost*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, and Ira Byock. *On Death & Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, & Their Own Families*. New York, NY: Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2014.

Mitchell, Kenneth R., and Herbert Anderson. *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983.

Pavlovitz, John. "The Grieving Need You Most After the Funeral." John Pavlovitz: The Stuff That Needs to be Said. February 16, 2017. Accessed April 21, 2017. <http://johnpavlovitz.com/2017/01/05/the-grieving-need-you-most-after-the-funeral/>.

Rask, Katja , Maria Kaunonen, and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen. "Adolescent Coping with Grief after the Death of a Loved One." *International Journal of Nursing Practice*8 (October 2011): 137-42.

Smith, Kevin G . "The Pastor as Practical Theologian | Resources | SATS." South African Theological Seminary. Accessed April 21, 2017. <https://www.sats.edu.za/pastor-practicaltheologian/>.

"Social Media." Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 21, 2017. <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/social%20media>.

Yoder, Bob. *Helping Youth Grieve: The Good News of Biblical Lament*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015. Kindle.

Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected but Alone Generation*. Nashville, TN: Youth Ministry Partners and Abingdon Press, 2015.