

How a “phone chateau” helped our youth group

Brendan Fong and Barry Wong

About six years ago, adult leaders of our youth group started to notice that phones—especially so-called smart phones—were becoming a problem in our group. Some youth would be physically present at youth group events, but socially and emotionally they were with friends somewhere else. On a practical level this was a problem, because when leaders gave instructions, the youth who were on their phones did not know what was going on, and they could not fully engage in activities, or they would distract others who wanted to be involved.

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But the use of phones was also disruptive on a deeper level. We wanted our youth group to be a place where we could experience how being friends with Jesus means being friends with each other, as part of one group. We also wanted the walls that nor-

mally divide us to be broken down. But when some of us pulled out our phones, it tended to reinforce those walls and fragment us.

Our Friday night youth group is diverse socioeconomically and racially. The youth participate in different school groups, and some of them grew up in the church while others just attend our youth nights. It was our desire that they all experience the presence of God and the presence of each other. We wanted a place where all would feel welcomed and loved. But instead of helping us focus on those who were physically present, the phones prevented us from experiencing real relationships with each other. Small groups of youth would huddle around their gadgets, while others felt excluded because they did not have smart phones.

At first, adult leaders asked the students who were using their phones to put them away. Usually, within ten minutes the phones

would be out again. Some youth just couldn't control their need to be digitally connected. We needed to do something else, but we didn't want to single people out (that happens at school, and it doesn't work), we didn't want to focus on bad behavior, and we didn't want to be punitive.

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We wanted instead to focus on the joys and benefits of face-to-face relationships and on the idea that to really get to know Jesus, we really need to get to know each other. So we came up with the idea of the “phone chateau”—a place where our phones could go on a spa vacation while we were getting to know Jesus and each other. The phone chateau was just a box we passed around to collect everyone's phones. During youth group, the phone chateau would remain in a place that was visible to everyone, so no one needed to worry that their phone would be stolen or lost.

Reactions

The responses of the youth varied. Some understood at a basic level why we did this. Others found it awkward and uncomfortable to give up their phones, even for an hour or two. Some lied and said they had left their phones at home. After one youth made multiple trips to the bathroom in a short span of time, we caught on to what was going on. Many kept reaching into their pockets for their phantom phones. One youth had such a strong visceral response to being separated from his phone that he started sweating. One time we even saw him “air-texting” (pretend texting). At the time, we couldn't help but laugh at what we were seeing. Only later did we realize what a powerful—addictive—hold Web connections and online social networks had on the lives of these youth.

Interacting with the people you are with helps build respect for each other. As an adult, I (Barry) can react negatively to youths who are constantly looking at their phones when I'm trying to get their attention, but if I can see the addiction, the power of the phone over them, or that what they are searching for on that phone can only be filled by Jesus and his people, then I can have

compassion for them. Instead of being stopped by their behavior, I can find a way forward to a trusting and respectful relationship with them.

What was incredible was that after four or five months the youths who initially struggled the most were the first to look for the phone chateau. It did not stop them from coming!

Success?

We used the phone chateau for about three years. After youth group took a break, we kind of forgot to bring it out at the first re-gathering. When we realized that we had forgotten it, we noticed that youth were not whipping their phones out. It had become normal that the people physically present with us were, at that moment, more important than the people in our pockets.

Over the years another thing had changed. The adult leaders had gotten better at leading the group by including youth as partners in being hospitable to strangers. The older youth were encouraged to get to know new youth and to show hospitality. When the focus is on someone else, there is little room or desire to peek into your device, and new youth didn't feel the need to reach for the familiarity of their phone friends.

These subtle but intentional changes in helping youth show hospitality to strangers account for some of the success, but there was also cultural change in our group. In company with the people you care for and the people who love you, youth group became *fun*. You don't want to be with your pocket friends then, because you have friends and will-be-friends right there with you. We came to experience how "connecting" and "sharing" on Facebook could not compare with the real-life connection we experienced at youth group. Without our phones, we were more present to each other and more present to God.

Recently two youth who were not originally from our church gave their testimony. They are very different: one is intellectual and reflective, the other more free-spirited. Both of them used the word *family* to describe Redeemer Community Church, and they contrasted it to other communities they are a part of. One of these youth had years earlier resisted giving up his phone at youth group, and he had struggled with not having instant virtual access to his friends. Today he wants to be involved with helping

younger kids feel welcomed when they come. He realizes that a phone is no substitute for the love and care of a church family, and he wants to share that love and care with other youth.

Youth don't *need* to live their lives through gadgets

It is true that phones are an important part of daily life for many teens, and many would have a hard time giving them up. Phones connect us with the people we want to be with and the things we want to do. High school students help each other with homework using Facebook and other social media. But when we look at the overall effect phones have on us, we realize that it's mostly spectacle. It's mostly about entertainment. It feeds on us, not we on it. And precisely because it can be so fun, it can have power over us.

Youth need to learn that we can have fun and relationships without phones, fun that is joyful and relationships that are deep and enduring. It's kind of like when you go to a movie theater and you are reminded that there is a time and place for phones, but the theater is not the time or place. Our youth group is aware now

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that there are *lots* of places, not just movie theaters, where phones don't belong, because experiencing the love and care of Jesus through attentive friends is all we need.

Seepage

We'd like to say that the phone chateau experiment led us to start many other intentional practices, but it has not triggered other things in a super-radical way. But once you have a place where phones are not crucial for being together (and where, in fact, they *hurt*

being together), the effects of that experience can't help but seep into other parts of your life.

Reflecting on our experience with the phone chateau has helped me (Brendan) appreciate some of the rules and limits my parents put in place that I thought were dumb when I was younger. (I hope my parents don't read this. Well, I guess they probably know it already). For example, I was not allowed to have a real phone, a smart phone that could connect to the Web, until I was in high school. I respect and trust my parents' rules

now, even if I don't always agree with them, because I know they love me and ultimately they respect me.

More recently, our pastor asked our whole church not to use electronic devices during our Sunday worship service and our Wednesday night Bible study. He talked about why it is important not to use gadgets in church and why it is important to read scripture from the Bible, a book, not off an iPad or smart phone. Reading scripture from a gadget can be distracting when an alert comes in and your mind wanders from God's word. So much of our lives are taken up with these things. But when you hold a Bible, you are aware bodily that you are reading from and part of a great big story of God's love that is very old but goes far into the future.

Technology has invaded our lives, but our hope is to have our church experiences of worship and Bible study and family seep in to help all of us—including our youth—recover some of what's been lost.

About the authors

Brendan Fong and Barry Wong attend Redeemer Community Church in San Francisco, near Silicon Valley. Brendan is a high school junior and enjoys building computers. Barry is a youth staff leader and a physical therapist.