

# Making Connections

## The Renovations are almost complete

by Dave Armstrong

At the beginning of December, my wife Wendy and I moved from our townhouse of 15 years into a late 60's era bungalow. We loved our townhouse, but the stairs were becoming a concern. Anticipating future challenges, we decided to make a change now. Although older homes often need work – ours is no exception – it had great bones and we felt it would serve us well for many years. Similarly, when I joined Highlands in late 2019, I saw that it too, had great bones but recognized the need for immediate attention in some areas and major renovations in others to adapt to the future and ensure ongoing ministry impact.

Three months into my role as Executive Director, COVID changed everything. It forced us to pivot our approach to connecting with youth in order to continue ministering despite lockdowns. Unable to meet in person, we found many creative ways to stay connected with youth. Not only did we survive, I think we thrived, growing stronger as a team.

To ensure long-term sustainability, we made a number of renovations. We implemented Community Engagement Teams to better support frontline staff and a Lead Team to reduce decision-making bottlenecks and develop our leaders. Most importantly, we deployed an “*adaptive ministry*” style, encouraging staff and volunteers to minister using their unique gifts and passions, sparking new creativity and fervour.

At the governance level, we updated our bylaws to comply with the Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act and enhanced our charitable purposes for greater ministry flexibility. We also fully digitized our operations, implementing online tools for communications,

donor record-keeping, payroll, staff and volunteer management, and accounting.

Our YFC Canada National Director, Tim Coles, praised Highlands as one of the strongest chapters in Canada based on youth engagement. Despite being a small team, we are, as they say, “*punching above our weight class.*” All praise to God! He is clearly moving in our midst.

As with home renovations, there comes a time to set down the tools and clean things up and we are approaching that season in Highlands. While a few renovations remain, the major projects are largely complete, and it's time for this “*tradesperson*” to set down his tools. At my request, the Highlands Board of Directors is seeking my successor, someone who will enjoy the renovations and leverage them for greater impact in the years ahead. Please pray for the Board and the Search Committee that the Lord will clearly identify His appointed next Executive Director.

I have always felt God called me to my role for a reason and a particular season. As my time with Highlands draws to a close, I will reflect fondly on the past almost seven years, warmed by the friendships formed and the joy of seeing God at work in the lives of our staff, volunteers, community partners, and the youth we passionately long to see experience the love of Jesus. Thank you for the encouragement you have given me and the entire Highlands team. It has been my pleasure to serve. May God continue to bless you and the work of Youth Unlimited™ | YFC Highlands.



### UPCOMING EVENTS

- **Wanders Media & Cycle Tour**  
Until Sep 15
- **Summer Ministry**
- **CampFire**  
Aug 17-21
- **Ride for Refuge**  
Oct 3

# The Digital Migration

by Aaron White

One of the important roles our staff and volunteers play in the lives of the youth we serve is to help them think through some of the challenges that they face in today's current cultural moment. For younger Gen Z (16-18 years olds) and older Gen Alpha (12-15) youth, navigating the on-line world is huge. Aaron White (Collingwood) has been pursuing ministry in digital spaces starting in the pandemic and continues to explore and engage youth in that setting. Here are some timely thoughts.

## The Digital Migration: Beyond the Ban

As debates grow across Canada around banning social media for youth under 16 because of mental health concerns, it is understandable why people support it. Protecting youth mental health matters. But the reality is more complicated than simply taking away the internet, and the solution itself may create more problems than it solves.

Teens are smart, adaptable, and digitally savvy. When one platform gets restricted, they do not stop communicating. They simply move somewhere else, usually somewhere less visible. This creates what could be called a "digital migration," where youth move toward

smaller, less moderated spaces online. In many cases, these spaces

have fewer safety guardrails and less accountability. Even tools like VPNs (Virtual Private Networks), designed to provide privacy online, can expose youth to greater risks by pushing activity further out of sight from parents, schools, and trusted adults.

For many teenagers, social media also acts as a digital third place. When I was younger, this was often the mall, or a friend's basement. Today, many youth connect online. It is where they socialize, decompress, and feel connected. Removing that space without support or transition can ironically increase feelings of isolation and disconnection, and other mental health issues.

The concerns around cyberbullying, addiction, and mental health are real. But I am not convinced a total blackout solves the deeper issue. I think the better long term solution is digital literacy. We

should be teaching young people how algorithms shape what they see, how online influence affects them, how to recognize manipulation, and how to build healthy habits in a digital world that is not going away. A ban may create temporary silence, but education builds long term resilience.

The goal should not just be protecting youth from the digital world. It should prepare them to live in it wisely.

## The Digital Future with AI: It's not "if" but "how"

Over the last few weeks, I've been exploring AI with our youth through a short video series built around three questions: What is AI? What happens when AI begins doing our work? And what does it mean when machines begin creating art, music, writing, and media?

One of the biggest things we discussed is that AI is not truly "thinking" like a person. It is processing patterns, predicting responses, and generating content at incredible speed. Yet because it sounds human, many young people are beginning to wrestle with deeper questions about identity, creativity, and what makes people unique in the first place.

We also explored what happens when technology begins replacing not only physical work, but creative and intellectual work as well. If machines can write essays, generate videos, make art, and automate daily tasks, what happens to learning, growth, creativity, and the value of effort itself?

Interestingly, many youth are already pushing back. A phrase that keeps appearing online is "AI slop," used to describe low-quality AI-generated content that feels empty or emotionally disconnected. Even in a world flooded with artificial content, young people still recognize authenticity when they see it.

That has led to one of the most encouraging observations from these conversations: youth still deeply value real human connection. Real friendships, lived experience, honesty, struggle, creativity, and belonging still matter. In many ways, the rise of AI is not just changing technology; it is forcing a new generation to ask what it truly means to be human.



## FUNDING UPDATE

God has been good to us! Our needs have been consistently met through the generosity of many individuals and businesses who partner with us. As there are always ongoing needs, we invite you to keep us in your prayers. To make a gift to any of our programs or staff, please visit [yfch.ca/donate](https://yfch.ca/donate). Thank you for your generosity. We are grateful!

## Navigating Change

by Seth Veenstra

All of us are challenged by change. When those changes are initiated by external forces outside of our control it's especially difficult. Driving in inclement weather is a perfect example: to safely reach your destination you need to adapt to changing road conditions and the unpredictable actions of other drivers. Anxiety is natural in those moments, but overreacting can quickly lead you off course.

Over the past few months, I've had to learn this lesson while planning and delivering programs for **ARTz Fusion**, a weekly creative arts ministry. Frequent school bus cancellations due to weather often forced us to postpone programming for another week. These interruptions disrupted momentum and, at times, made it difficult for regular participants to return consistently. While frustrating, we press forward and look for ways to adapt.

The challenge has been finding a balance between consistency and flexibility. In practice, this has meant using online platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Discord to stay connected with youth through messaging and video chats. We also launched



the ARTz Fusion Café, a larger monthly gathering that gives focus to our weekly activities while creating a welcoming space for youth who may not be available every Wednesday. In addition, we noticed many participants enjoy board games, so we now intentionally set aside time each week for pizza and games together.

Our goal is to remain innovative and adaptable in how ARTz

Fusion operates while staying consistent in our purpose and mission. Like driving through weather, we are trying to stay on course while responding wisely to changing conditions around us.

Through all these challenges, prayer has been the steady source of strength that keeps me moving forward. Personal prayer, prayer with family and staff, and the prayers of my ministry partners sustain both me and the ministry we share together.



## Emsdale Shop Grand Opening!

On May 30, we celebrated the Grand Opening of our newest youth centre in Emsdale! A short drive north of Huntsville, the centre will serve kids in the Almaguin Highlands region from Novar north to Burk's Falls. Ryan Campese, our Community Director, is a licensed carpenter who joined our staff in 2020. He is contagiously enthusiastic about introducing youth to carpentry but more importantly, introducing them to **Jesus, The Carpenter**. The new facility is a former auto service station refit to create safe and welcoming space, a remote hub for a Huntsville-based food bank, and of course, a carpentry shop. Along with teaching skills, it will produce woodworking projects for sale, generating revenue to help offset some of our operational costs. For more information, go to [YFCH.CA/EMSDALE](https://www.yfch.ca/emsdale)

## Prayer Corner

- Summer Ministry
- CampFire
- Fall Ministry Kick Off
- NMC Jun 24-30
- September Staff Retreat Sep 14-15

# Saying Hello



Ann McCallum

**Ann McCallum** is a dedicated ministry leader with over 30 years of experience within Youth Unlimited / Youth for Christ. After starting her career in Hamilton, Ontario, she transitioned to YFC Highlands in 1994. She eventually served for 22 years as its Executive Director, notably becoming the first female ED in YFC Canada. Currently, Ann serves as a Spiritual Director and Supervisor, working part-time for the Emmaus Formation Centre.

Ann's commitment to YFC remains deep; she facilitates national retreats and provides spiritual direction to staff across Canada. Having been married to her husband, Keith, for 43 years, she is a proud mother of three and grandmother of ten. She now seeks to join the Board of Directors of YFC Highlands, leveraging her extensive knowledge, lifelong passion and spiritual gifts to support our mission of *"every young person living fully in Christ."*



Kevin Van Dyken

**Kevin Van Dyken** has spent his life investing in youth and family ministry. His ministry journey began in his teen years at Muskoka Bible Centre and continued through five years of service at Memorial Baptist Church in Stratford. Kevin later served as Director of Family Ministries at Compass Community Church in Orangeville, where he led programs that supported children, teens, and parents for seven years.

Kevin and his wife Nadine have long been active in church life—teaching Sunday school, serving in VBS, and leading youth ministries together. Their heart to

care for young people continues today as they foster children through CAS.

Kevin holds a Bachelor of Religious Education and a Master of Theological Studies from Heritage Seminary, along with Occupational Health and Safety certification from Seneca College. He currently works as the National Safety Manager at Proax Technologies, overseeing safety initiatives across Canada. Kevin and Nadine live in Orangeville, ON, and are grateful parents to five children, from grade 7 through university.

# Saying Goodbye

## Danny Deeks

While work with youth was certainly impacted by the disruption of COVID, the "business" side of Highlands continued with a number of significant governance and operational projects on the go during that time. Danny joined the Highlands Board in September 2022 at a time when a number of these projects were underway. He was an important voice as we navigated the rewriting of our charitable purposes and corporate Bylaws through 2023. He also held the position of Treasurer during our first-ever audit closely followed by an accounting system conversion.

As the National Director of Business Development, Strategy and Planning for Deeks Insurance, Danny brought not only specialized insurance knowledge to the board, he also brought a big-picture, strategic perspective that will be missed. Perhaps the biggest loss will be his contagious sense of humour and genuine care for our staff, the youth we serve, and for our mission. We wish him all the best in the future!



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