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Sorting through kid's technology use tough for grandparents

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

The oldest of my six grandchildren just turned 9. What a stunning child: Smart, curious, beautiful, creative, obedient, compassionate.

Which is why I worry about her and my five other grandkids, my descriptions of whom would include many of the same words that describe Olivia. But my worry is not overwhelming, partly because she's surrounded by people who are models for her and who can teach her right from wrong.

For instance, she and her family attend a United Methodist Church regularly. This fall she'll be a third grader at a Catholic elementary school not far from where we live. And she has fabulous parents (and grandparents) plus lots more good family and friends in her life.

But is it enough? And are our churches doing all they can to provide the intensive guidance that many young people seem to lack today as they run up against a culture that appears determined to give them bad models, bad advice and bad values?

I thought about all of this recently when I read a David Brooks column about a young teenager named Kiki Ostrenga, who, as Brooks writes, "got mauled by some of the worst forces of the information age."

Brooks, relying on a major piece about Kiki in *Rolling Stone*, describes how this girl -- like so many others -- craved attention and learned that she could use the social media tools to create an alluring online persona. Knowing just that much, you know this won't end well, and it hasn't. She and her family wound up having to move to avoid threats and they went bankrupt.

The opportunities for children to gain international attention today are almost limitless. YouTube videos of kids doing goofy things can go viral in hours. Teenagers can have thousands and thousands of Facebook's so-called friends and express twisted thoughts to all of them in seconds.

Couple this reality with the truth that while all these young people play with fire, a shrinking percentage of them gets connected to faith communities that might teach them solid values, infuse them with modesty and marinate them in eternal principles that foster life, not death.

We know all this because we know that many faith communities are dwindling. It's true of my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and it would be true of the Catholic Church in America if it weren't for immigration.

I'm not suggesting that all people outside of faith traditions are immoral sluggards contributing to our nation's moral collapse. Not at all. Rather, I'm saying that in a nation in which a majority of the population still self-identifies as Christian, churches have an obligation to help young people assess both the threats and advantages of the social networking tools and adopt strategies accordingly.

But the reality is that many of our church leaders are radically out of touch with those tools. And countless grandparents have no idea how to use computers, much less how to send tweets from smart phones. Thus they are no help when it comes to the questions of what it's appropriate for their grandchildren to be doing online.

Why aren't more churches offering classes for both youth and adults (along with some intergenerational ministry) that would help them sort through the kinds of cravings for attention that led Kiki Ostrenga down this destructive path? Can't we learn from the priest abuse scandal that not talking about a subject doesn't mean we're avoiding permanent injury to vulnerable children?

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Olivia and her six-year-old brother already have their own e-mail addresses -- accounts monitored closely by their parents. And when they come to our house, we watch as they play games they've found at the PBSKids Web site.

So although I worry about them -- because it's part of my job as a grandfather -- I'm confident that they're in good hands. And yet that's probably what Kiki Ostrenga's parents and/or grandparents thought, too.

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