

Social networking actually involved talking to people



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IT is hard to imagine that the main social network for young people in the 1950-1960s was the youth club. Looking back at what we did in the youth club may appear quaint and rather innocent. The concern I have today is that the more time we spend interconnected via the numerous online links available, the less time we may have left to develop the true friendships I experienced as a young man.

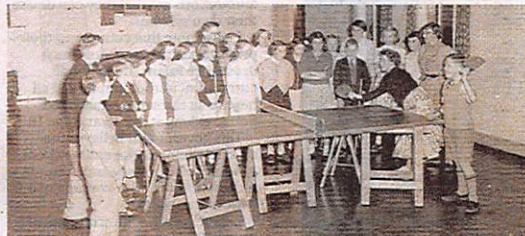
In 1961, I was a member of the Methodist Church Junior Fellowship, the Methodist get-together for young people every Sunday evening. The enrolment fee was half a crown, one eighth of a pound. Out of the enrolment fee and weekly subscription we managed to buy a record player for £14 13s 4d.

I was also chairman of the Junior Fellowship Club Committee. The youth club met every Wednesday night in the church hall. We held debates, invited speakers and ran sports events.

The debates that took place reflected the key issues of our time. We debated 'The age of chivalry is not dead'. Obviously an important debate when the idea of giving up your seat on a bus for an older person was fading out.

We also discussed really contentious issues. Nuclear disarmament was high on our agenda. The 'Ban the Bomb' debate divided the group. In 1960, at least 60,000 protesters gathered in Trafalgar Square, the largest demonstration London had seen since the start of the century. Bertrand Russell, the philosopher and Canon John Collins spoke. The church link was clear right from the start. Some wore Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) badges and would later take part in CND campaigns including the Aldermaston Rally. CND, formed in 1957, advocated unilateral nuclear disarmament. A year later, in 1961, the USSR detonated a 50-megaton bomb in the largest man-made explosion in history. It was only 16 years since the first atomic bomb was dropped by the United States on the Japanese city of Hiroshima.

While the events of the 'Winter of Discontent' and the Miners' strikes were many years in the future, one of our debates was 'Starving and



► Youth club table tennis in a more innocent time

strikes. Who's to blame?'

'The Colour Bar' was another title for our discussions. Post-war immigration attracted, for the first time, large numbers of workers and their families from outside Europe - mainly from the Caribbean and from India and Pakistan. Bed and Breakfasts displayed signs saying 'No Coloureds Allowed'. It wasn't until 1968 that the Race Relations Act was introduced, the same year that Martin Luther King was assassinated at the age of 39.

On January 18, 1961, the youth club debate was entitled 'Comprehensive Schools are better than Grammar Schools'. Even then, I chaired an education debate! Comprehensive schools, not selecting their intake on the basis of academic achievement or aptitude, had been introduced on an experimental basis in the 1940s and became more widespread from 1965. The conversion to comprehensives impacted on the North East later than the rest of the country. The school I would eventually teach in did not become comprehensive until 1971.

The gradual changing norms of the time were reflected in debates, which would have been considered risqué by our parents. One really adventurous debate was 'There is too much indiscriminate snogging among young people'. Another was 'This house believes there is an increase in immorality among teenagers'.

We also had talks. One was called 'One man's view of Palestine' by an ex-Palestine Police Force officer. Mandatory Palestine, a geopolitical entity under British administration ended in 1948. The All-Palestine Government, a Palestinian Arab state proclaimed by the Arab League on September 22, 1948, was seated in Egyptian-occupied Gaza Strip. It was later absorbed into the United

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Arab Republic in 1959.

Our annual talent show clearly reflects the difference in culture of the youth of the 1950s, before the invention of teenagers and the introduction of rock and roll. We performed songs mainly from cinema musicals such as 'We're a Couple of Swells', 'Oh What a Beautiful Morning' and 'Getting to Know You'. We also took part in short comedy sketches. Table tennis matches were played against other youth clubs, including St Barnabas Catholic Club.

To the modern young person, we must have looked a very strange bunch when we went to the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs event at the Royal Albert Hall, sponsored by Halfords 'for all your cycle accessories'. The highlight of the programme was being entertained by Pearl Fawcett, Junior Accordion Champion.

As we stood outside WH Smith & Son at Newcastle Central Station, what would appear odd to the modern teenager was the fact the girls wore skirts and cardigans and the boys jackets and ties. At another club outing to Alnmouth, again, the girls wore dresses and cardigans and the boys wore jackets; we removed our ties specially for the beach.

However, other things do not change. Pasted on a window in one of the compartments was 'Special Notice to British Railways passengers. Owing to engineering work on the main line between Peterborough (North) and Barkston Junction (North of Grantham) in connection with our programme of modernisation your train will be diverted via Sleaford'.

Amid this 'innocent' tradition of 50s youth, a revolution was coming. One of our flock, Keith (Digger) Graves started a rock band called 'The Grave Diggers'. The Beatles also performed for the first time at the legendary Cavern Club. The rock and roll years were about to begin.

There is, of course, a danger that we look back at our youth as a time of innocence. This may be a self-deception. Perhaps we had no innocence to lose.

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