

Growing trend among teens causes concern among youth workers, parents

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Cyber communities? What are they and what do they have to do with me or my youth?

Cyber communities are a growing national trend among middle and high school teens and are causing some adults to ask questions.

On Feb. 12 at Trinity United Methodist Church, Anderson, S.C., Don Cantrell spoke to parents and interested adults on this issue.

Cantrell, a member of Ashland UMC, Columbia, is the supervisor of Technology Media Services at the S.C. Department of Education. There he oversees the agency's operation in Television, Web and Library Media Services and Technology Projects.

Having worked in public education for 13 years and the technology industry for 28 years, Cantrell has a vested interest in the area of cyber communities.

About 60 adults, from Anderson, Greenville and Spartanburg, attended the Trinity seminar led by Cantrell.

Chris Lynch, youth minister at Trinity said, "There was a sense of folks looking for someone to educate them in this area, concern over protecting their kids as best they can."

According to Cantrell, this particular presentation was "just for parents and interested adults, to provide an overview to

popular social Internet sites such as myspace.com, facebook, and others."

Further information presented by Cantrell concerned laws of South Carolina that address "Internet-related crimes involving youth, sexual predators and how they operate, and tips and techniques that families can use to help make using the Internet a safer place to engage friends."

When asked, how such a program came about at Trinity UMC, Lynch replied that he "had heard his youth talking about these Web sites and started to hear more through the ParentLink newsletter and then heard Don's presentation at Anderson University."

Lynch went on to say that "Don's approach is new, very balanced. He encourages parents and youth to talk to each other, so parents know what's going on and youth can be safe on the Internet."

Cantrell has presented other seminars in South Carolina and said, "Some of the most popular questions by parents are: 'How can I see if my child has a space on these sites and how can I view them?' and 'What steps can we take to make their space more safe?'"

The overall impression Cantrell has gotten from parents is that they "seem to trust and respect their children to a degree. However, they feel that their youth are naive and uninformed as to the risks of their actions."

In his presentation Cantrell went on to give parents and youth some tips on being informed and safe on the Internet.

The purpose of these seminars are not to tell youth they shouldn't be using these Web sites, because according to Cantrell "technology and the Internet are very valuable tools in today's world and vital to our youth to become contributing and productive citizens in a competitive world."

When asked what his top two tips would be for parents or youth, Cantrell responded, "This is a tough question as there are many equally important tips for parents and youth to remember."

He went on to say, "If I had to choose just a couple 'top tips' it would be for parents to get informed and involved in your child's online activities; talk openly with your child; help your youth set their security options to get the most protection; and do not just take this means of expression and learning from your children."

And tips for youth? Yes he has some for them, too.

"Be open with your parents and include them in what you do to some degree; remember information that is posted online can linger and be used by others for undesired purposes; do not ever post personal identifiable information on the Internet; and save some information about yourself to share with friends the old fashion way, face-to-face!"

If there are parents, interested adults or youth that are looking for more information, Cantrell will be presenting at the Columbia District Youth Explosion March 12 at 3 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. at Ashland UMC.

There are many other resources for parents and youth available online by going to Google and typing "cyber Communities."