

## COVID-19 – Principle of Safe Ministry in an online context

### Is your youth ministry considering going online while we are in social isolation?

As you consider how to reorganise youth ministry, potentially for a few months with reduced face-to-face contact, the need for video streaming, conferencing and other online forms of communication will perhaps be needed in conjunction with other forms of communication to maintain relationships, pastoral care and teaching.

Although the best practice is to “never” engage in online streaming/chat rooms with youth there is scope within our existing policies to consider exceptional circumstances. On page 24 of the Safe Ministry Blueprint for Churches it says:

*There may be exceptional circumstances that arise from time to time, and common sense might dictate that a leader deviates from their usual practice when it comes to electronic communications. In those situations, leaders must be transparent and above reproach and, where possible, should seek advice from their ministry leader.*

It certainly seems that we are operating in exceptional times, so as you navigate how to set up new systems it will be important to take a principled approach and think of ways to organise online interactions with youth so as to maximise transparency.

Two helpful resources that you should consider in your planning are the

- 10 Key Principles for communication with young people in the Safe Ministry Blueprint documents (see [Head of Youth Ministry Blueprint](#), p10-11) and
- The Safe Ministry [Social Contact Policy](#)

We have also provided some principles or guidelines below particularly if you are considering using video streaming services.

- Planning is crucial. You must take care with the message you intend to communicate through both the words and images you use as it may be perceived differently by those who view it.
- Youth group members, their friends and parents should be directed to the Church or Youth Group’s official video streaming/conferencing account and not an individual leader’s account. These accounts should only be used in a one directional manner e.g. the Church account must not add, follow or comment on any followers account.
- Caution should be observed with the use of any sites that delete posts, images and comments.
- Schedule times for online forums and make these times known to youth and parents (chatting outside organised times should be discouraged).

- Clear guidelines should be made known to parents and participants about the forum e.g. maintain respectful conversations, observe appropriate dress codes, where possible leaders and participants should be in a public place (not private bedrooms) and be respectful of other household member's privacy when meeting.
- A senior leader (e.g. Youth Minister/Rector) should also be informed of when and how groups are meeting online.
- There should be at least 2 adult leaders present in any online gathering and all leaders should be clear about what their responsibilities are in this forum e.g. sharing a talk, leading a discussion, moderating/responding to comments.
- Leaders should never have a group with students only of the opposite gender.
- There should be no private contact or conversations with any student in Years 7-9. Any private conversations with older youth must be recorded and never deleted.
- Make sure there is clear communication with parents about the changes so they are aware of the new means of connecting and communicating and can be alert to it.
- If youth are going to send prayer points to a leader through a social media messaging platform we would recommend use of more public forums such as group chats with two leaders rather than private messaging.
- Where possible, invite others in to video conferences and chats rather than conducting them one-to-one. (If it is not possible to invite someone else, consider postponing the chat or informing your head ministry leader of the chat and the reason for it).
- Ensure all leaders, parents and participants know whom to speak to regarding inappropriate behaviour by leaders or ministry participants.

There are a myriad of ways in which different churches will no doubt seek to be creative in facilitating fellowship through digital and online means and the challenge will be to ensure that it is done in a way that is safe and accountable. We are certainly operating in uncharted waters and it is a blessing that technology can help us stay connected when we are being advised to engage in social isolation. The challenge, as with all our ministry, will be to conduct ourselves in manner that seeks to be above reproach, transparent and seeks to ensure that children and young people are safe.

### **Helpful resources**

Information for youth, parents and leaders on having a safe experience online.

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/how-to/social-media-online-chat>

Online safety basics as well as targeted advice and tips for parents of kids 5-12yrs and teens 13-17yrs.

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/skills-advice/online-safety-basics>

A downloadable online safety guide for parents - available in a variety of languages.

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/online-safety-guide>

Information on how to deal with unwanted online contact.

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/staying-safe/unwanted-contact>

Guidelines for social media use, video sharing and online collaboration (aimed at schools but the guidelines are helpful for other contexts).

[https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-02/prepare\\_4\\_-\\_guidelines\\_for\\_social\\_media\\_use\\_-\\_video\\_sharing\\_and\\_online\\_collaboration.pdf](https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-02/prepare_4_-_guidelines_for_social_media_use_-_video_sharing_and_online_collaboration.pdf)