



Connecting & Communicating Online

INTRODUCTION

It is important that safe ministry practices and protocols are not forgotten when conducting church activities online. Any form of interaction with a child, young person or vulnerable person comes with a level of opportunity to abuse power. We must always be doing what we can to ensure the safety of all who partake in our ministry activities.

The Breaking the Silence Policy and Code of Conduct will continue to be upheld in these arrangements. The Conduct Protocol Unit (CPU) is here to help you and to be contactable for notifiable circumstances and for providing advice on safe ministry matters. We have provided this information pack to help you think through the various areas that need careful consideration in online church and ministry activities.

The following subjects will be addressed:

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The use of technology and online communication platforms can be a really good way to make church activities more accessible. This will look different for every church, depending on the size and demographics of congregations and access to technology and internet. The important thing is that whatever churches decide to do, they must remember the principles of safe ministry. One way to remember these principles is the acronym **PATH**.

- P**reparation Have we prepared for this ministry activity? (risk management, consent forms, screening and training for all leaders)
- A**ccountability How are we staying accountable in this activity? (always more than one leader, recording incidents, agreeing to code of conduct/boundaries etc.)
- T**ransparency How are we maintaining transparency in our ministry? (online interactions open to observation by other leaders, clear communication to parents etc.)
- H**umility How are we practicing humility in our role? (Acknowledging our limits, getting support from church and CPU, being godly in the way we serve etc.)



CHURCH SERVICES

If you choose to livestream a church service (or components of a church service), be mindful of the platform being used to share it. Think about whether you want to host it within a private group or on a public page.

Private (accounts needed) – *such as Facebook private group*

If you choose this option, individuals will need to be added to the group by someone who is their Facebook friend. It is not appropriate for a person in a position of authority within the church or those involved in kids and youth ministry to connect with young people (under 18s) on social media.¹ You might consider making a church account (that a few appointed leaders can sign into) which can be used for making those connections for church activities.

Private (no accounts needed) – *such as ZOOM, unlisted YouTube livestream*

If you choose this option, anyone with the link to the livestream/meeting can join in. In ZOOM and Congregation Connect, a feature called 'breakout rooms' allows the presenter to split people into several smaller video conference rooms for a set time. If there are children or young people participating, it is important that you allocate these 'breakout rooms' so they are in the same group as their parents/carers, or in a group with other kids/youth and their regular leaders only.

Public (no accounts needed) – *such as Facebook public page, YouTube livestream*

If you choose this option, be mindful that your content can be viewed by anyone on the internet. Therefore, avoid using images of people from your church in your livestream unless you have consent, and consider turning off the comment function or reminding participants of the public nature of their comments. A general image consent form template is available at [insert link](#).

See FAQ's on page 6 for more information on consent.

BIBLE STUDY GROUPS

Bible study groups held online may choose to use a video conferencing platform to meet together. If any members or the group are under 18, you will need consent from their parent/carer before they can participate in the group. See appendix for consent form template for youth group meetings that can be adapted.

PASTORAL CARE

It is important to have transparency and accountability when having private conversations held over the phone or through video conferencing, especially when pastorally caring for someone of the opposite gender. Thought should be given to whether it would be more appropriate to have those conversations with a spouse present, or by being accountable to a trusted leader or friend.

¹ However it is recognised that leaders may be individual friends on social media with young people where the relationship is pre-existing or established via other connections (e.g. they may be related or may have formed the friendship via knowing each other external to the leader/group member relationship.) In these instances, leaders must be transparent and wise with their interactions on this platform.



OLDER PEOPLE

Be Connected is a government initiative committed to increasing the confidence, skills and online safety of older Australians. The website contains a range of resources and short tutorials on skills such as making video calls² that may be helpful to assist older congregation members in maintaining contact with their church community. It is important to continue to connect with older people especially if their situations may make them more vulnerable and less visible.

CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH MINISTRY

It is not advisable for leaders to interact extensively with the kids or young people they lead through any technology-based or online communication. However, some aspects of kids and youth ministries may choose to utilise such means.

The Session (elders) must authorise the commencement of online children's and youth ministry and instruct that the safety of children is prioritised in the implementation of the ministry. You must also gain the informed consent of parents/carers before including any child or young person in any online communication, social media group or technology-facilitated interaction such as video conferencing.

Be aware that the minimum age limit for creating accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Skype and WhatsApp is 13 years old. Some families may also have their own rules around what social media platforms they allow their children to use. Take this into consideration when deciding to use an online platform for youth group communication.

All communications to primary school aged children should go through the parents. Appropriate communications to high school aged individuals would be limited to providing pastoral care and group encouragement and to organise ministry activities or meetings.

HOW DO I CHECK IN WITH MY YOUTH MEMBERS THROUGHOUT THE WEEK?

Before you engage a young person in communication, you must gain consent from parents that they are happy for you to contact their child through specified means outside of regular youth group activities (see appendix for consent form template). Your communication should involve a minimum of two leaders and the pastoral care communications should take place with leaders of the same gender as the youth. If exceptional circumstances lead to a one-on-one conversation with a young person, this should be recorded and made known to the ministry coordinator.

Make sure to only be interacting with school students during the hours where they would normally be contactable (e.g. not during school hours). Additionally, communication with a young person should not take place past 10pm.

² beconnected.esafety.gov.au/topic-library/essentials/connecting-to-others

**WHEN HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH A YOUNG PERSON:**

- Preparation** Do others (parents/ministry coordinator) know that this conversation is taking place? Do you need to seek parental permission first? If video calling, are you in an open area and dressed appropriately?
- Accountability** The “God test” – Remember God is listening. Is this conversation honouring God? The “parent test” - If this young person’s parents were here, would they feel comfortable with this conversation?
- Transparency** Who will be able to observe this conversation? Are your intentions clear and not easily misread?
- Humility** Are you getting in deeper than you can handle? If issues arise that are greater than your ability, who will you refer the young person to? Do you need to notify your ministry coordinator or the CPU about anything that happened in the conversation?

ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS

Online communications can create an intense, relational situation because of the ease of access, the comfort of distance and its unobserved nature. A relationship can be developed far more quickly than was possible before online communication was common. Therefore, the church considers talking with young people online requires the same safe ministry measures as talking with them face to face. The same code of conduct for leaders interacting with young people face to face applies to all types of online communication. Messaging apps and in-game messaging where it is not possible to record conversations should be avoided.

Parents should be encouraged to monitor their children’s online interactions appropriately and cultivate good online habits in the home. It might be helpful to provide parents with resources from the eSafety Commissioner, such as this article [‘Protecting Children from Online Abuse’](#).³

SOCIAL MEDIA

Best practice is for leaders to avoid ‘friending’ on social media with young people within the church or organisation.⁴ This is due to the risks inherent in private relationships which may develop over social media. These risks affect both young people and leaders.

Facebook groups for youth group should be ‘closed’ but not ‘secret’ and at least two leaders should be appointed to moderate the group and ensure all content and conduct is appropriate. Session must be aware of any accounts or groups that ministry groups establish.

Leaders must ensure that a clear “no cyber bullying” message is conveyed to the youth participating and inform them that as the ministry has a strict “no cyber bullying” rule, anyone found to be engaging in inappropriate or bullying conduct within the ministry will be removed from access to the ministry and their parents informed.

³ esafety.gov.au/about-us/blog/covid-19-protecting-children-online-abuse

⁴ As previously stated, it is recognised that leaders may be individual friends on social media with young people where the relationship is pre-existing or established via other connections (e.g. they may be related or may have formed the friendship external to the leader/group member relationship.)



VIDEO CALLS AND CONFERENCES

Many Presbyterian churches use ZOOM or similar to facilitate youth group meetings. Before commencing a youth group meeting using a video conference, make sure you have adjusted the settings so that participants can't record or screenshare during the meeting. It is also wise to disable the private in-meeting chat function to ensure that all communication is in the open. Parents should be asked for their preferred way of providing their child with access to the meeting (see appendix for template). Have a clear start and end time so that parents know the limits of the online interaction.

Ensure that there are always at least 2 leaders present in the video conference. ZOOM includes a feature called 'breakout rooms' allows the host/presenter to split people into several smaller video conference rooms for a set time. If using this function for youth group, is important that you allocate these 'breakout rooms' so there are at least 2 leaders in each 'room'.

Remember young people should be supervised at all times – just as they should be during a physical meeting. Do not allow the video conferencing to continue after the leaders have left.

ONLINE CONDUCT

As a leader of the church you are still regarded as a leader by the members of the group and their parents outside of the ministry activity. Whatever you do needs to reflect the life of a person striving to be holy and as one having authority in the Church. Leaders must uphold the Code of Conduct in any online communications that are introduced.

Remember:

- What goes online stays online so think before you post – is it true, helpful, inspiring, necessary, kind? It is very difficult, and sometimes impossible, to remove things once they are online, so be wise.
- Consider how your words (including reaction GIFs and emojis) may be interpreted or misinterpreted by anyone who may see them. If it could be confusing, misleading or suggestive, don't say it.
- Respect the people in the group – the young people and your co-leaders. That funny photo of them might not be so funny for them and they might not be very happy if you post it for everyone to see. Treat others as you would treat yourself.
- Remember private images and videos you send to friends or post on a social networking page may be easily accessed and passed on to others and uploaded to public sites without you knowing.
- Don't share too much information. If you wouldn't say or show something about yourself in the middle of a shopping centre, then don't put it online.
- Where possible, avoid video streaming from a closed off area (such as a private bedroom) to maintain transparency and establish clear personal boundaries.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What level of consent is required for live streaming, video conferencing and social media communications with young people and children? Does a digital consent form count?

- Informed parental/carer consent for a young person's participation in any of these forms of communication is required and must be obtained (and the record kept) before any interaction takes place.
- If it is impractical to obtain consent e.g. livestreaming service with non-regular children attending who may be invited to sit at the front of the church during a kids spot, the congregation can be made aware that the service is being videoed or livestreamed so parents can make an informed decision. Alternatively, you may choose to only focus the camera on the pulpit so congregation members are not captured in the filming.
- Digital consent is fine, as long as you can identify that it is, in fact, the parent/carer writing the email/ticking the box to give consent. Alternatively, the youth coordinator could call the parent and then make a note recording that verbal consent was attained.

Should we be using the record function when video conferencing with young people?

- Some churches may feel that they want increased accountability measures by recording their youth group's online video conferences. This may be beneficial in encouraging appropriate behaviours and communications by users as well as providing evidence of the interaction, should a concern be raised at a later time. However, parents must be informed that their child will be recorded, and the young people involved should be told at the beginning of the session. You must also be wise in where you store the recordings and never post them online.
- Other churches may feel that recording the session might make participants feel uncomfortable, and that they would not feel confident storing the recordings in a secure way. If they choose not to record, they can ensure transparency and accountability by always having at least two leaders present, by communicating openly with parents about what happens in the sessions, and by immediately reporting any incidents that occur online to their ministry coordinator or Session.

Are parents allowed to join online meetings for youth group?

- If parents wish to join online meetings, they can do so in the same way ministry activities can be open to observation by parents and other adults with a legitimate interest.
- If the parent wishes to help lead, they will need to go through the usual recruitment process and meet the BTS requirements for someone in a role working with children or young people
- If the parent wishes to observe on a regular basis, it is not unreasonable to request that they register their WWCC/WWVP details with the CPU. They cannot be considered as an adult providing supervision. In such circumstances, it is best to discuss this with the CPU.



2023 EDITION

BREAKING THE SILENCE

INFORMATION SHEET

Can new people join online meetings (church services, bible study meetings, youth group)?

- If someone approaches the church, seeking to access a private online meeting, it is crucial that their identity has previously been verified in person. This is due to the risk of online identity fraud.

What should we do if we receive inappropriate technology-based communications?

- In the case where an inappropriate message or image is sent to a leader by a child or a person under pastoral care/leadership via any online or smart phone communication, whether publicly or privately, the leader should not reply under any circumstances. Do not delete the image or message. The leader must immediately notify their ministry leader that this has occurred. The ministry leader may then contact the CPU for advice on how to proceed.



APPENDIX: EXAMPLES AND TEMPLATES

Below you will find examples and templates for:

- Social Media & Communication Approach examples
- Online Meetings Permission Form template
- Contact & Communication to Young People Permission Form template

SOCIAL MEDIA & COMMUNICATION APPROACH EXAMPLES

It is best practice for the church to establish an official page, groups and/or account for any ministry activities that will use the social media platform for communicating. Session should also decide on an approach to social media use in their ministries. This should take into consideration the needs of the congregation, the purpose of a church social media platform and the capacity to maintain good supervision and oversight of ministry activities.

Here are some approaches to consider:

- a) The church has established a *Facebook page* for use by leaders and members of [*name of ministry group*]. This is the only place that leaders should converse with members of the group.
- b) Leaders are only to interact with members of [*name of ministry group*] in open areas of social media where posts can be observed by others. Leaders should avoid private conversations where possible. Leaders should not initiate personal conversation and always be showing preparation, accountability, transparency and humility in the interactions they do have.
- c) Members of the [*name of ministry group*] must not *be leaders' "friends" / be followed by leaders* on *Facebook / Instagram* (recognising exemptions where relationships were formed external to the leader/member dynamic). Private conversations must not take place between leaders and members via any form of social media.

TEMPLATES FOR PARENTAL PERMISSION FOR ENGAGING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE:

The templates on the following pages can be adapted for use by churches, to be sent out to the parents and carers of young people who you wish to:

- a) include in online meetings
- b) contact throughout the week

These completed forms should be kept in your church records and recompleted at the beginning of each year, or when circumstances change.

**[NAME OF YOUTH GROUP] ONLINE MEETINGS PERMISSION FORM**

Dear Parents and Carers,

[Name of youth group] has decided to offer online meetings in place of our normal *Friday night* meetings [until further notice].

You are receiving this form to allow you the opportunity to give or withhold your consent for your child(ren) to join these meetings. They will take place using [video calling software/online communication platform].

In line with advice on practicing safe ministry online, we will be taking the following measures:

- A minimum of 2 (WWCC/BTS compliant) youth leaders present at all times
- A set timeframe of __:__pm - __:__pm
- Leaders to follow the same safe ministry practices that are expected in person: accountability, transparency and exercising wisdom.

The [name of youth group] Online Meetings will have the following format:

1. Greeting and catch up while people arrive
2. Introduction from the leaders
3. Game
4. Bible reading and prayer
5. Bible study in 'breakout groups' - smaller groups of youth and 2 leaders
6. Game
7. Closing comments from leaders

Would you like your child(ren) to participate in [name of youth group] Online Meetings? (select ONE):

Yes No

Parent / Carer's name:

Child(ren)'s name(s):

Preferred channel for your child(ren) to access meetings (select ONE):

Parent's Email Child's Email (Only for ages 16+)

Email address to receive the online meeting link :

[Name of youth group] will update you with any changes that occur to the format of the online meetings. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact [name of coordinator] on [contact number].

**[NAME OF YOUTH GROUP] CONTACT & COMMUNICATION PERMISSION FORM**

Dear Parents and Carers,

We want to stay connected with our youth group and encourage them during the week.

You are receiving this form to allow you the opportunity to give or withhold your consent for your child(ren) to be contacted by specified youth leaders outside of regular group meetings. This communication will take place using one or more of the methods that you select.

The purpose of any contact or communication with youth group members is:

- For pastoral care – encouraging youth in the Christian faith, asking for prayer points, to check in on their wellbeing.
- For organising youth activities – to invite them to group meetings/events, to confirm attendance.

In line with advice on practicing safe ministry online, we will be taking the following measures:

- A minimum of 2 (WWCC/BTS compliant) youth leaders able to observe the communication at all times
- Female leaders will contact female youth and male leaders will contact male youth
- No communication will take place after 10pm or within school hours during term
- Leaders will follow the same safe ministry practices that are expected in person: accountability, transparency and exercising wisdom

Would you like your child(ren) to be contacted by leaders of *[name of youth group]*? (select ONE):

Yes No

Parent / Carer's name:

Child(ren)'s name(s):

Preferred method(s) of contact (select and provide relevant contact details e.g. email address):

Email _____

Facebook group chat _____

Mobile (group call) _____

ZOOM/Congregation Connect _____

[Other specified method] _____

[Name of youth group] will provide you with the name(s) of the youth leaders who will be contacting your child(ren). We encourage you to monitor any interaction we have with your child(ren) as you see fit. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact *[name of coordinator]* on *[contact number]*.