# **Safe Sanctuaries: Supporting a Shift to Online Youth Ministry Meetings**

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The rapid response to COVID-19 continues to evolve and influence ministry, sometimes forcing a church to quickly expand its online presence and outreach through worship, small groups, fellowship opportunities and more. Along with providing meaningful connections, inspiration, and support for discipleship, ministries with youth, children, and vulnerable adults have the added challenge of adapting Safe Sanctuaries® guidelines and applying them online. This is a constantly changing challenge, especially with new platforms, devices, and technology being introduced regularly.

The thoughts and suggestions below are not legal advice and should not be understood in that way. They are suggestions to help increase the transparency of virtual interactions with vulnerable age groups and help a ministry leader maintain a sense of safety and security that allows for genuine ministry and connection.

You’ll first see a “TL;DR” section (Too Long; Didn’t Read) so that you can get the highlights of these suggestions. Other posts and documents will follow in separate articles and posts, each with more detailed descriptions and thoughts that you could use in a training or to refine and create a social media policy for your ministry.

Additionally, there is an excellent [*Guide to Taking Youth Ministry Online*](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58f66a832994ca1365b35be7/t/5e8b40abe423a30322d07a3a/1586184410956/GuidetoTakingYouthMinistryOnline.Final.pdf); written by Rev. Angela Gorrell, PhD & Paul Gorrell published April 2020 by Yale Theological Seminary.

## Safe Sanctuaries: Eleven Online Gathering Suggestions

1. Continue to apply the two-adult rule. Use platforms that allow multiple adults to be logged in at the same time preferably. If it is a single-user platform, or if more than one adult cannot be present at the same time, allow another user to have adult administrative privileges to go in and monitor accounts on a regular basis. This helps meet the “window in a door” or “open door” policies familiar for in-person meetings. Also, consider having an adult (like a parent) on the youth side of the call or video simply appear and wave, acknowledging that the adult knows this conversation is taking place.

2. Use “ministry-based” accounts instead of personal accounts. This helps everyone understand that the conversations are part of ministry and outreach. It also allows for multiple administrators. If your church or youth ministry does not yet have an official account, create one and coordinate your messaging and gatherings from those accounts. This also allows you to easily create and share links as well as use password protection features, to avoid unwanted guests crashing your online gathering.

3. Use platforms that allow for some kind of record to be created. Save chats or texts. Save or record videos. Create an activity log for which an adult is logged into an account and using a ministry-based platform (day, time, basic notes about who conversations were with) and keep it current.

4. Create a basic schedule and communicate that with youth and parents, so that they know when a ministry-based account is being monitored or in use. Anything on that schedule, or that comes from a person logged in to the ministry-based account should be considered as a representative for the church and conversations should follow covenants and guidelines that would be used for in-person gatherings.

5. If/when a personal account is used:

* Adults should never send connection requests from a personal account. If a youth reaches out, the adult can connect, but the adult should also inform the church/staff of that connection.
* If an adult ends up in a one-on-one conversation with a youth, it is VERY important for that adult to have a written record if possible. At minimum, document the time, date, and topic; save the actual text of the conversation if possible. Consult existing Safe Sanctuaries® materials for the definitions of confidentiality versus secrecy. Informing a parent about the occurrence of a one-on-one interaction or conversation can be done either before (if scheduled in advance) or after the conversation (if the conversation is spur of the moment) takes place is responsible and honors confidentiality regarding the topics of conversation.

6. Ensure that everyone, staff and volunteers, in conversation with youth and their families from a ministry-based account is familiar with your local Mandatory Reporting Procedures. These should already be covered in your standard Safe Sanctuaries® trainings, and this is an excellent time to review those!

7. Maintain the five-year age gap. Leaders of virtual groups should be five years (or more) older than the group they are leading, just as for in-person meetings.

8. Clearly have staff and volunteers use their real names when possible, and have a log of “handles” or “usernames” used by people guiding conversations. It is important for people to know whom they are talking to. This is similar to the name tags and i.d. suggestions for in-person gatherings.

9. Make notes about attendance and plan group chats/online activities when possible. Document who is there, just as you would take attendance in person.

10. Do a training! Review what your in-person policies are for in-person gatherings for church staff and volunteers, and talk through how you’ll adapt those policies to online connections. You can host a brief training online to supplement a future in-person training, and look for resources from excellent online providers like [Ministry Safe](https://ministrysafe.com/), [Safe Gatherings](https://safegatherings.com/).

11. If you don’t have picture/video sharing permissions as a part of the release forms young people complete to be active in your ministry, get those created and returned as soon as possible. Don’t share pictures or videos of minors unless you have that written permission! Likewise, don’t tag people in photos without permission. Youth can choose to tag themselves of course.

Resource:

Wilterdink, Chris, internet, “Safe Sanctuaries: Supporting a Shift to Online Youth Meetings,” Discipleship Ministries, UMC, 4/8/20.