Online and smart phone usage guidelines

For people in ministry roles

The following guidelines are to assist all people who work with young people and all people who are in positions of authority within the PCV. Where the phrase "young person" or "young people" is used it is always defined as a person or people under 18 years of age. This is because a "child", within the child safety legislation in Victoria, is a defined person under 18 years of age. This advice provides useful general guidance in regard to online and smart phone communication (i.e. all electronic communication).

In cases where ministry outcomes are in part effected through the use of social media then it is recommended that particular practice guidelines pertaining to that ministry are developed and clearly communicated to the leaders. The SCU is available for assistance in establishing such particular guidelines.

Safe Church

The Safe Church Code of Conduct states at point 1: "As a person in a position of authority within the church you must always be concerned about the integrity of your position, likely perceptions of the church and the wider community, and the need to acknowledge the real or perceived power given to you as a result of holding this position. You should avoid situations where you are vulnerable to temptation or where your conduct may be construed to be a breach of this Code of Conduct. You will make yourself familiar with the provisions of Safe Church - PCV."

This point has application to your use of all electronic communications as a person of authority or person working with young people in the PCV.

Basic Principles

There are three basic principles when having any type of conversation with a young person:

1) Remember God is listening:
   - The 'God test' – is this conversation honouring God?
   - The 'parent test' – if this young person's parents were listening/reading this, would they feel comfortable with this conversation?
2) Seek transparency in conversations with young people and do not converse where you can't be observed by others.
3) Don't get in deeper than you can handle – if issues arise that are greater than your ability or in an area of your weakness refer the young person to others who are better equipped to deal with it. When in doubt, ask for help.

Online and smart phone 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 and via smart phone to be exactly the same as talking to them face to face. **The same code of conduct for leaders interacting with young people face to face applies to all types of online and smart phone communication.**

Specific conduct guidelines:

Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/blogs/websites

If your church ministry or organisation establishes any of the above social media platforms as a method of communication within the group this is the best place for leaders to converse with members of the group as all conversations may be held in public. Ensure there is no option for private conversations to take place on this facility.

Best practice is for leaders not to be individual friends on social media with young people within the church or organisation. This is due to the risks inherent in private relationships which may develop over social media. These risks affect both young people and leaders.

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, for example they may be related or may have formed the friendship via knowing each other external to the leader/group member relationship. In circumstances where leaders are individual friends with young people on social media leaders are at all times to adhere to the basic principles above.

SMS Text messaging/emails

Best practice is to only use the above methods of communication as a "one-way" avenue for communicating within the group. Make it clear to all members of the group that while SMS texts/emails will be used for communication leaders will not reply individually to any response from group members, unless a matter of urgency arises and in every case, with a fellow leader copied in on the reply. Give parents the option of always being copied in on any communication from the ministry or organisation leaders and add those parents to the contacts list.

When sending group emails always remember to send any email to yourself first and put all contacts into the blind copy (BCC) field to ensure you do not distribute email addresses without permission. Always copy in fellow leaders. Follow the same privacy protocols if using SMS texts to do mass communication within the group.

Zoom or other group meeting software

If Zoom or other group meeting software is to be used for online ministry to people under 18 years of age, Sessions must authorise the commencement of this ministry and instruct that the safety of children and young people is prioritised in the implementation of the ministry. There must always be two adult leaders present in every online ministry event with children and/or young people. This is as much to protect our leaders as to protect our children.

It is not recommended to use Facebook, Instagram or other social media sites as some parents in the Church have a "no social media" rule for their children and these sites are already known to be locations where there are clear risks to children's safety from grooming.

Zoom is one platform that many Christian organisations are using as the following capabilities are possible:

- Multiple users at one time
- Users can turn off their video stream and mute themselves, allowing protection of privacy and identity if desired
- The meeting host [i.e. administrator/moderator] has the ability to set up the platform and specify the tools available for users
- The in-meeting chat facility can be turned off by the meeting host so that users cannot direct-message/chat to each other via texting, see support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203650445-In-Meeting-Chat [it is essential to turn this off so all interactions are via sound and/or video and hence transparent to all users]
- The whole session of the ministry can be recorded so that it can be viewed later and also for the purposes of transparency and protection of the children. This also encourages appropriate behaviours and communications by users. Finally, it also provides evidence of appropriate behaviour by leaders and children, should a concern be raised at a later time.
- Access is by a Zoom meeting ID number sent directly to the user by the meeting host in email – hence, this is not a "public event" on the internet
- Break-out rooms and waiting rooms

Every meeting with children and/or young people must have a password to prevent "Zoom-bombing" – that is, non-authorised, uninvited participants joining the meeting. If Zoom is being used then a password can be generated when you schedule the meeting and create the meeting invitation.

If using Zoom enable the "waiting room" facility so that the meeting host can check the identity of each person wishing to enter the meeting and be confident that only invited attendees are admitted to the meeting. If a "waiting room" equivalent facility is available in other online group meeting platform/software being used within the church congregation make sure to use that facility in all meetings.

If using break-out rooms for smaller groups with young people, there must be two adult leaders in each break-out room.

Whichever platform is used in ministry to children and young people, there must be a disabling of the direct messaging/chat facility so that all interactions are transparent to all users. The platform must not be a "public" event on the internet and instead must be by invite only, sent by the meeting host/administrator/moderator, directly to the parent of the child's email, so that parents can choose whether or not their child participates in this ministry.

It is essential that parents of children participating in the online ministry are provided with information about:

- the platform being used for the ministry
- who will be leading the ministry
- who will be monitoring the ministry (this must be two leaders as a minimum and a Session member must also be appointed to provide oversight via access to the platform and oversight of all communications occurring within the ministry
- who parents can contact if they have any questions or concerns (for example, how to contact Session and/or SCU if parents wish to raise a concern)
- these Safe Church Online and Smart Phone Usage Guidelines must be provided to parents
- that the ministry will be conducted in accordance with the Safe Church Policy, Code of Conduct and in compliance with the Victorian Child Safe Standards
- that the ministry has a strict "no cyber bullying" rule and any child found to be engaging in inappropriate or bullying conduct within the ministry will be removed from access to the ministry
- that it is recommended that the child access the ministry in an open part of their home for maximum safety.

Parents of children participating in the online ministry must provide permission for their child to do so, either via email or letter to the Session and Ministry Leader(s). A recommended permission slip for use is available at :

www.safechurchpcv.org.au/forms

Ministry leaders must read and implement the Safe Church Online and Smart Phone Usage Guidelines.

Ministry leaders must ensure that a clear "no cyber bullying" message is conveyed to the children participating and inform them that as the ministry has a strict "no cyber bullying" rule, any child found to be engaging in inappropriate or bullying conduct within the ministry will be removed from access to the ministry and their parents informed.

Children must be advised that they are only to use their first name for their profile (unless parents give permission otherwise).

Any recordings made during the ministry must never be posted to the internet. Recordings must be stored securely and in perpetuity, in case any concerns are raised at a later date. If recordings are to be made in the ministry then the documented permission of parents of people under 18 years of age and any participants must be obtained. Permission provided by an email (which is also stored in case it is needed at a later date) to the ministry leader is sufficient.

Phone/Skype/FaceTime/Messaging Apps/In-game messaging

In the main seek to avoid where possible individual contact with young people via online and smart phone communication. Aim to have 100% of communication to young people via group communication. Should a need arise to use phone/Skype/FaceTime you should be accountable – always get parental permission **before** you talk with a young person over the phone and tell a co-leader that you are conversing with a young person by phone. If using Skype or FaceTime again always get parental permission **before** you talk with a young person using this facility. Ensure both you and the young person are using this form of communication in an open area where people can see you or there are others present, e.g. not alone in your room.

Do not use messaging apps or in-game messaging to communicate individually with children or people under your pastoral care in your Church role.

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 the ministry or organisation leader that this has occurred. The ministry or organisation leader may then contact the SCU for advice on how to proceed.

Cyber bullying and image based abuse

Sadly, there is an increase in the prevalence of cyber bullying and image based abuse targeting both adults and children in Australia, mostly via social media. Both State and Federal parliaments have begun to address this societal problem through legislation and the provision of assistance to Australians via the Office of e-safety – www.esafety.gov.au

If you become aware of cyber bullying or image based abuse within the church context visit www.esafety.gov.au and contact SCU for assistance and reporting.

This information is available at www.safechurchpcv.org.au/resources

General Advice:

- Online and smart phone communications breed relationship that feels like a deeper level of intimacy than would occur in normal communication between people, in less time than it would take face-to-face
- This is why online and smart phone communication has significant potential risk involved for all users in a ministry setting
- People can find themselves "getting in deeper" than they intended and struggle to exercise self-control or healthy boundaries when they engage in online and smart phone communications with people the minister to
- It is not unusual for people to find they have over-stepped appropriate boundaries almost without realising
- Don't be embarrassed if this happens to you – simply stop, do not delete the messages or images but instead seek help from a trusted senior leader and speak up sooner rather than later about what has happened
- Remember – there are sexting laws in Victoria which make certain types of electronic communication criminal – don't be unaware of this!
- Adhering to these guidelines will help minimise risk
- Always seek transparency in online and smart phone activities
- Practice online and smart phone behaviour that demonstrates a true witness to the Christian faith
- In ministry, as much as possible, adopt an approach that uses electronic communication as a 'broadcast' communication tool to a group rather than an individual
- If a situation develops online that you need advice or guidance about **call the Safe Church Unit 0499 090 449**