ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

Interim Virtual Safe Environment Guidelines

Religious education and youth ministry increasingly utilize virtual tools to engage children and youth and the current public health situation requires more ministry to occur in digital spaces. The following guidelines are intended to help ensure that meaningful catechetical formation and faith accompaniment programs and activities (i.e., religious education, youth ministry) for minors can continue and thrive in safe virtual environments that help young people grow deeper in their faith.

Please note that these guidelines are interim and subject to change pending review by the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Guiding Principles

- Virtual environments are subject to same safe environment principles and procedures as physical environments. All programs and activities must operate in compliance with the existing Code of Conduct.
- Employees and volunteers foster meaningful, appropriate relationships with minors while ensuring safety and avoiding the appearance of indiscretion. Employees, volunteers and other adult participants must model mature, safe online behavior and maintain healthy boundaries with minors. All employees and volunteers must be Safe Environment Compliant.
- Review the Electronic Communications Guidelines and Special Rules for Group Messaging Apps and conduct all virtual classes, sessions, meetings and communication accordingly.

Facilitating Virtual Classes, Formation Sessions and Meetings

- Include an adult facilitator who is Safe Environment Compliant in all sessions with minors. This includes breakout rooms from larger group meetings.
- Publicize all class, session and meeting dates or other activities ahead of time and on a regular schedule, ensuring that the nature, date, and time of activities are known to your supervisor (pastor, DRE, CRE, etc.) at the parish as well as parents. Send out a weekly or monthly update to parents and minors (youth ministry) with the schedule and topics for meetings.
- Maintain attendance records for all gatherings.
- Ensure that meeting settings are set to lessen the risk of hackers or other unintended participants, as well as to lessen the risk of unintentional disclosures. Any meeting host should ensure that:
    - Waiting room feature is enabled, there is a roster of participants to be admitted, and the meeting host knows how to admit attendees.
    - Screen sharing is disabled or only available with permission of the host.
    - Meeting settings allow the host to mute participants and the host knows how to mute individuals and the entire group.
- Consider having participants blur their backgrounds on video calls for increased privacy.
- Disable all recording features and do not allow any recording of meetings by the facilitator or instructor.

Social Media Use

- Complete the [social media request form](#) for every form of communication you use.
- Ensure sure multiple people, including your supervisor, have the login info and are checking it regularly. Your pastor should have administrative privileges on the account.
- Do not use personal social media applications or profiles to communicate with program participants or parents or let them follow or friend you on personal social media accounts. If you use social media to communicate with participants or families, **create a separate account accessible to parish leadership that is used solely for ministry and provide only this account to participants.**
- Set clear policies for which content may be posted without pre-approval from a supervisor or pastor, and which much must be pre-approved. For example (not exhaustive):
  - Program schedules, event details and reminders, and catechetical or formational materials are generally safe to post without pre-approval, provided the information or material itself has already been approved within the context of the program.
  - Catechetical or formation materials that are supplementary to approved content, events not occurring within the parish or approved by the parish, articles, personal opinions and video content created by an employee or volunteer should be pre-approved prior to posting.
- It is best to set up a social media strategy which establishes clear parameters for which type of material will be posted and when. (For example: youth group weekly reflection question from pre-approved program posted weekly on Wednesday afternoon)
- Photos and recordings of minors should not be posted to any social media.

Direct Communication

It is vital that digital communication be transparent and detectable. The following requirements help ensure the safety of all parties.

- General Requirements
  - Keep updated records of parent contact information and communicate regularly with parents regarding religious education and youth ministry activities.
  - Use an app that allows you to create one large group for mass communication to minimize individual contact with parents and/or minors for general program information.
  - Let families know that you are a partner with them ensuring the health and safety of their children. Maintain open communication with parents regarding any concerns relevant to the minors in their care, while protecting the privacy of other minors in their programs. In cases of suspected abuse or neglect, comply with all [requirements for reporting child abuse and neglect in Illinois](#).
  - For minors that my confide in you, ensure they know that while you are a trusted mentor to them, you are also a partner with their parents in ensuring their health and safety. If a parent or guardian asks about a situation or conversation of which you as a youth minister have knowledge, you will not hesitate to share that information.
  - **Do not use your personal cell phone number with minors or parents. Use a platform such as Google Voice to generate a cell phone number that you can use or have an office phone number forwarded to your cell phone.**
  - While you can be available via phone to speak with parents, communicate primarily (if possible) through more recordable means, such as email or a social media platform.

- o If a phone call with a parent is necessary, keep a record of when the phone call occurred and the general nature of the conversation. Phone calls should be limited to necessary situations, such as needing to discuss a specific issue regarding the parent's child.
    - o **Individual communication should not occur with minors by any means.**
- Additional Requirements for Youth Ministry
    - o Youth ministry is primarily a communal faith experience among peers and trusted adults. Minors should be encouraged to seek guidance in parents or guardians, other trusted adults in their family or community network, or professionals such as school counselors for ongoing personal advice.
    - o If you have a concern regarding the physical or emotional safety of a minor, please contact the Office of the Protection of Children and Youth prior to taking any action.
    - o If a minor is making you uncomfortable with their level of disclosure, do not initiate ongoing conversation. Gently ask the minor if you can bring someone more qualified into the conversation – such as a counselor or a parent.
    - o In rare situations, such as a last-minute program cancellation where receipt of the message must be verified to prevent an unsafe situation, a brief phone call is permitted. The youth minister must inform their supervisor and the parent that the conversation took place.

Working with Volunteers

You are responsible for the actions of your volunteers. Ensure that they are aware of and held accountable to the following guidelines.

- Every adult you allow to assist with your ministry must be compliant with Safe Environment requirements for the Archdiocese. This can be done easily, check with your site administrator (most likely your business manager).
- A Virtus account must be established, background check initiated, and mandated reporter training conducted immediately for all volunteers. Virtus training must be complete within 14 days of beginning as a volunteer.
- Verify that volunteers have completed the above requirements within the mandated time period.
- A volunteer catechist can be a content generator for a religious education or youth group social media platform, provided they follow the above Social Media requirements, you check in regularly as an account administrator on their activity, and they follow the above policies for pre-approved social media content.
- If it is required that volunteers communicate with parents via email, they should be assigned an email account by the parish which can be monitored by parish staff.
- Make sure you talk to your volunteers regularly about appropriate and inappropriate digital contact with minors, following the above rules and the Archdiocesan Code of Conduct. All the best practices for sharing personal contact information applies to them as well.
- Volunteers should not give personal contact information to minors (including but not limited to cell phone numbers, email addresses or other contact information).
- Volunteers may not contact minors except when expressly directed by their supervisor.
- While younger adults may have an easier time relating to teens, make sure to be extra clear with them about boundaries. Teach them what good mentorship should look like.

Setting Safe and Reasonable Boundaries
- General Guidelines
  - Set and communicate reasonable hours for one-on-one communication with families. Do not answer texts, calls, messages from parents after pre-established response hours and not after 9pm. Do not post content or respond on social media after 9pm. Turn off notifications if necessary.
  - Be aware of your own general mental health (and that of your catechists and volunteers) and take care of yourself. Regular sleep, exercise, time off, healthy eating and non-church centered hobbies and friends are all important to your wellbeing. Find a good spiritual director and consider seeing a therapist.
  - Know your limits. Direct parents or students who are in need of support to a psychologist, therapist, doctor or other professional if their problem is out of your authorized area of ministry. Offer to accompany them if they seem hesitant.
- Additional Guidelines for Youth Ministry
  - Make sure to keep appropriate personal boundaries between you and minors, as dictated by the Code of Conduct. You are an adult. They are not. You are responsible for keeping everyone safe. Don't abuse their trust.
  - Recognize what is appropriate to share with a minor and what is not, too much or certain types of personal disclosure is unprofessional and leads to inappropriate levels of intimacy.
  - Keep a record of all direct communication between you and a minor. Make sure your pastor or supervisor has access to this record. If a teen is making you uncomfortable, report the incident to your supervisor right away. Email is best so there is a record of the conversation.

Copyright
Follow all copyright requirements for any digital content being used in virtual meetings or platforms. Ensure that the use of any paid content, such as a publisher curriculum or youth formation program, complies with the conditions of your license or subscription.

Documents to Review
Please familiarize yourself with these other virtual safe environment documents.

- Code of Conduct
- Being Safe in the Time of COVID-19
- Electronic Communication Guidelines
- Special Rules for Use of Group Messaging Apps
- Social Media Request Form