

Technology In Ministry

Effective communication can be a valuable tool for adult leaders in ministry. Young people communicate constantly with one another; they are more tied to technology than any generation in history. If adult leaders are to adequately engage young people in the life, mission, and ministry of the Church, we must also communicate with them and with each other, consistently and appropriately.

Before gathering young people together, whether in a classroom or for a parish event, properly trained adult leaders in ministry must already understand the need for setting appropriate boundaries and creating safe environments.

Properly trained adult leaders in ministry also understand that the use of technology, no matter how effective, is never a substitute for human connection. Rather, technology makes available a new avenue for the Church to communicate the Good News.

Adult leaders in ministry are committed to life-long learning. This continued education must include technology. As technology and means of communication continue to evolve, it is the responsibility of adult leaders in ministry to keep pace with the latest tools and threats that this evolution brings about.

Establishing a safe environment for face-to-face relationships is the responsibility of all church personnel. Ministry in a virtual setting must reflect the same principles. All technology-oriented activity performed in the execution of ministry to, with, and for young people must be in full compliance with the ethical and moral standards of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington, and its program for safe environments, *For the Sake of God's Children*.

Parental Consent

Effective August 2009, Form A (Annual Consent and Release) and Form B (Event Specific Consent and Release) includes parental permission for adult leaders to communicate electronically with young people. This permission does not extend to other adult leaders in ministry that might communicate on behalf of the parish or school. If a Coordinator of Youth Ministry, for instance, intends to share the personal information that is gathered with catechists or other adult leaders in ministry, parents should be informed of such intention and be given the ability to opt out of having that information shared.

Adult leaders may not initiate electronic communication without explicit parental consent. Even when consent is granted, adult leaders should not assume carte blanche access to young people. Communication should always include appropriate and healthy boundaries.

A Word of Caution

As effective as techno-savvy ministry can be, there are realities that adult leaders would be wise to consider:

The Internet gives individuals a false sense of anonymity/security.

Individuals, especially young people, will often be more apt to disclose personal information via the Internet, than they would if the conversation took place in person. It is impossible to adequately communicate emotion electronically and it is easy for inappropriate relationships and unhealthy attachments to develop online. Adult leaders in ministry must understand appropriate boundaries and when it is necessary to involve other adults, namely parents, into the conversation.

Important online or mobile technology exchanges should be followed-up with an in-person conversation.

Technology can give a false sense of availability.

Adult leaders in ministry, whether paid or volunteer, should not be accessible to the young people they serve on a constant on-call basis. Adult leaders must be equally present to their own personal, spiritual, and family life as they are to their ministry. Twenty-four hour access by parents or young people does not promote a healthy lifestyle or a safe environment.

Once published online, it is forever online.

Adult leaders in ministry inherently have the greater power in relationships and therefore are the party responsible for maintaining appropriate boundaries. Anything posted on the Internet will remain there indefinitely. Adult leaders can be terminated from paid or volunteer positions should their online activities reveal behaviors that are inconsistent with either the law or the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Going in Search of Information

Adult leaders in ministry should avoid purposely searching for information about the young people to whom they minister for the purpose of catching young people in the act of illicit, immoral, or illegal behaviors. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Performing a Google search to find information about your students, youth group members, or team members
- Searching social networking sites to seek information about the young people with whom you work or the organization for which you are employed or are a volunteer
- Searching video sharing sites for videos of the young people and/or their family members

Confiscating and/or Searching Cell Phones

There will be times when adult leaders in ministry are made aware of materials or information on a young person's cell phone that is offensive, illegal, or immoral.

If a parish or school has a written policy that cell phones are not permitted and that if phones are found they will be confiscated, such policies should be enforced fairly, judiciously, and uniformly. Parents should be made aware of such policies in writing.

The question of whether a cell phone can be searched is more problematic. If a cell phone is found on the floor and its ownership is unclear, a quick scroll through the phone to locate the phone's owner is appropriate. Searching the phone to read texts, emails, or view pictures of that same phone is inappropriate.

To that end, any search of a phone should only occur if the phone is suspected to contain materials that pose a threat to the welfare of the student population. Materials on a cell phone that might pose a threat to the welfare of the student population could include evidence of textual harassment; inappropriate pictures or videos involving nudity, drugs, weapons, or other contraband; or even web history files that indicate the student was visiting a bomb-making or anti-establishment web site.

Probable cause dictates that there must be credible information that such materials exist before the phone is searched.

For the protection of the student and the adult leaders in ministry, any search should be done in consultation and, if possible, in the presence of, the parents of the young person.

Sexting: A New Phenomenon

In a new nationwide survey of 1,280 teens and young adults, researchers found that one in five teens are using technology to do what else? Send sexually explicit pictures of themselves to others — either posted online or sent via cell phone. One in five teens and one-third of young adults said they had sent a nude or semi-nude image of themselves to others.

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2009/01/06/teens-sex-and-technology/>

Adult leaders in ministry must communicate the moral and legal ramifications of "sexting" to the young people they serve as well as their parents. Sexting (a combination of the words sex and texting) is the act of sending sexually explicit messages or photos electronically, primarily between cell phones. Because this is a relatively new activity, there are not many laws pertaining directly to sexting. But the laws on child pornography in our nation are clear, and when nude photos of minors are electronically distributed, whether over the Internet or via cell phone transmission, senders and recipients are potentially looking at serious penalties, including jail time and felony charges. Parents who provide cell phones to their young people are potentially liable in such cases, depending on state laws, evidence and other factors.

In Maryland, sexting can result in charges of felony sexual exploitation of a minor and creation, possession and distribution of child pornography. In the nine Maryland counties of our diocese, young people who "sext" on cell phones run the risk of imprisonment of up to ten years and a fine of \$25,000 or both for a first offense. For each subsequent violation the penalties double to 20 years and a fine of \$50,000 or both (Annotated Code of Maryland under the Criminal Law Article, Section 11-207 and 11-208).

An adult or young person in possession of a film, videotape, photograph, or other visual representation, including an image on a cell phone, media card, or computer of an individual under the age of 16 years engaged in sexual conduct, a state of undress, or a state of sexual excitement is guilty of a misdemeanor and on conviction for a first violation, is subject to imprisonment not exceeding one year or a fine not exceeding \$2,500 or both; and for each subsequent violation, imprisonment not exceeding two years or a fine not exceeding \$5,000 or both (Criminal Law Section 11-208)

In Delaware, sexting can result in possible charges of sexual misconduct with a minor.

Throughout the United States, it is against federal law to possess lewd photographs of minors.

Adult leaders in ministry would be well advised to share this information with parents and with teens to encourage the avoidance of such behavior

Technology in Ministry Acceptable Use Policy

E-Mail

When using electronic mail (e-mail) to communicate with young people, parents, or colleagues, adult leaders in ministry must:

- Obtain permission from parents before using e-mail to communicate with young people who have not yet graduated from high school
- Protect the privacy of others by using the "blind carbon copy" (BCC) sending protocol when sending to more than one recipient
- Use an e-mail account on a computer that is protected by anti-virus software
- Maintain a separate electronic mail address for their professional communications and personal communication
- Communicate only in ways that are kind and respectful
- Never consider electronic communications to be private
- Never distribute private information about others or themselves
- Use proper spelling, grammar and punctuation; your electronic communication should be professional and clearly worded
- Never use email to discuss confidential matters. Face-to-face conversations are more appropriate and professional
- Never infringe copyrights by illegally sharing copyrighted materials (i.e., music, games, or movies)
- Refrain from using "Reply All" feature even if others in the communication thread have done so
- Never intentionally access, transmit, copy or create material that is illegal or immoral (including but not limited to obscenity, stolen materials, pornographic materials, discriminatory, sexist, or racist materials)
- Refrain from sending spam, chain letters, or other mass unsolicited mailings, even if it is religious in nature
- Maintain appropriate boundaries in compliance with the ethical and moral standards of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington, and its program for safe environments, *For the Sake of God's Children*
- Report any violation of this policy to the appropriate supervisor

Instant Messaging

When using Instant Messaging services (including but not limited to AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), Microsoft Instant Messenger (MSN), Yahoo! Instant Messenger, Google Talk (gtalk), Skype, Jabber, ICQ, Facebook messenger, Gadu-Gadu, or Zephyr), adult leaders in ministry must:

- Obtain permission from parents before using instant messages as a means of communicating with young people who have not yet graduated from high school
- Protect the privacy of others by not sharing access to your database
- Set boundaries as to when and by whom adults can be contacted
- Establish a separate user name or screen name for professional use
- Never publicize a screen name used solely for personal use
- Document conversations that raise concerns and follow-up with an in-person conversation at an appropriate time
- Maintain appropriate boundaries in compliance with the ethical and moral standards of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington, and its program for safe environments, *For the Sake of God's Children*

Text Messaging

When using Mobile Text Data (Texting) & Short Messaging Service (SMS), adult leaders in ministry must:

- Obtain permission from parents before using text messages as a means of communicating with young people
- Protect the privacy of others by not sharing access to your database
- Set boundaries as to when and by whom they can be contacted
- Discuss appropriate content with those given permission to contact you in this manner
- Use mass-texting services when available (i.e., bloove.com, group2call.com, closingalerts.com, clearSMS.com, and gismoSMS.com)
- Avoid one on one text messaging conversations
- Know when not to respond to a text message (content is inappropriate)
- Know when to inform the parents about inappropriate behavior
- Maintain appropriate boundaries in compliance with the ethical and moral standards of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington, and its program for safe environments, *For the Sake of God's Children*

Social Networking Sites

Adult leaders in ministry who use social networking sites (Facebook, MyCatholicVoice, DisciplesNow, etc.) as a means of communication to those involved in ministry must:

- Establish a separate account for personal and professional use
- Do not use your personal page for professional use
- Set all account settings to private on your personal or professional page
- Never accept a "friend request" from a young person
- Utilize the group feature or fan page feature to establish communication with young people or with parents
- Set group to closed and only admit those for whom you have permission to electronically communicate
- Monitor all activity on your professional page on a regular basis
- Establish a secondary administrator for all youth related groups as an added means to protect you and the young people
- Hide the "Show Related Groups" feature on all group pages (Facebook)
- Only post pictures of those young people for whom you were given permission to photograph
- Never let young people upload their own photos on the group page
- Report any inappropriate behavior or content to parents, supervisor(s), and/or law enforcement agencies
- Maintain appropriate boundaries in compliance with the ethical and moral standards of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington, and its program for safe environments, *For the Sake of God's Children*

Please Note: Due to its more explicit material, and the lack of sound internal controls on content and material that is supported by the site proprietors, the use of MySpace is prohibited for use in ministry.

Blogs

Adult leaders in ministry who use online journals and web based logs (blogs) as a means of communicating with young people or their parents must:

- Maintain a separate blog for personal use and for professional use
- Not express opinions or promote beliefs not in keeping with Roman Catholic tradition or doctrine on either your personal or professional blog (*Note: signing a volunteer covenant or ethical guidelines for work in a parish or school has broad implications for your life outside ministry*)