

Electronic Communication with Youth in the Church

- Approximately 2/3 of teens have cell phones. For those teens the cell phone is the primary communication method for talking with friends.
- 93% of teens are online. More than 65% of online teens use social networking sites and instant messages for communication. Almost ¾ of them use email. (Pew Internet Research)

With numbers such as these the Church needs to ask, “How can we use these technologies to communicate and build community with teens?” Many churches want to use these technologies but are concerned about safety and the potential for abuse by adult leaders.

A church, concerned with abuse, could ban electronic communication between youth leaders and youth altogether, however that ignores the reality of teens’ preferred communication methods. If a church puts too many restrictions on the use of electronic communication and makes it too cumbersome, it won’t be useful. If you don’t place any guidelines on the use of electronic communication you miss out on a great teaching and training opportunity. You may also be increasing the chances for abuse. Where is the balance? That is something each local church will have to decide.

Considerations

Best practice is to have written procedures that govern electronic communication with youth. These procedures should be broad enough to cover the common types of communication, new technologies like Twitter, and other technologies that may coming in the future. This does not have to be formal policy approved by the governing board. It just needs to be clear to youth, parents, and staff.

When developing your procedures you should get input from youth, parents, and staff. This is also a great time to train everyone on Internet safety.

Email – You may want to have all staff save copies of email received and sent for some period of time. This can be helpful if there are accusations of impropriety and you need to produce old email. Some churches require all email to minors be copied to another staff member. If you are doing this, the recipient of the email should know the correspondence is being copied. Do not blind copy without informing all involved. Take time to discuss email etiquette.

Cell phones and Text messaging – Be sure to get parental permission before calling or texting to the youth member’s cell phone. Text messages and excessive minutes can run a cell phone bill up very quickly. Establish some limits on when it is ok to call or text a cell phone. For example, after school hours and before 8:00 p.m. may be a good place to start. Many cell phone providers have parental control features and this is a good time to explore these.

Social Network sites – MySpace and Facebook are the two most popular social networking sites in the U.S. Both allow a user to set privacy settings, select other users as friends, and establish groups around common interests. They allow email and instant message type communication. You can set up a group for your church or for the youth group. Consider making this group open to everyone so there is transparency. Consider having all church staff and lay youth leaders join the group. Again, this is a great time to do training on social network safety.

Stress to everyone that they should never post anything, anywhere online that they do not want everyone to see. Once it is online, it is out of your control.

Remember, even with all these precautions in place, there is still potential for abuse. Once the procedures are in place, have all staff sign a copy of the procedures and keep them on file. That ensures that everyone knows the expectations. The main expectation should always be this, “We will conduct our online communications in a way that reflects the mission of the Church and the Love of God.”

Resources

Pew Internet and American Life Project - <http://www.pewinternet.org/>

That's Not Cool - <http://www.thatsnotcool.com/>

Center on Media and Child Health - <http://www.cmch.tv/>

Facebook – <http://www.facebook.com>

21st Century Sheep – <http://www.21stCenturySheep.com>

MySpace – <http://www.MySpace.com>

My Crime Space - <http://www.mycrimespace.com/>

NetSmartz – <http://www.netsmartz.org>

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