

## Eastern PA UMC Youth Ministry in Covid-19 and Beyond

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Youth ministry (6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade) is a relational ministry in which relationships are traditionally built on face-to-face interactions. When done well, youth ministry creates safe places for growth and maturity of youth as they navigate the teen years into young adulthood. It is in these safe spaces that faith development challenges youth to grow into disciples of Jesus Christ. It is also in these safe spaces that allow youth to explore and problem solve their life issues they are managing through participating in youth group, events and conversations with peers and leaders.

Covid-19 has challenged the face-to-face interactions of youth ministry due to safety concerns in spreading the disease. Youth ministry, in general, has met this challenge by creating youth group zoom events complete with activities and discussions.

As the Eastern PA UMC navigates the changing landscape of Government regulations and CDC guidelines, this document is intended for churches to offer meaningful youth experiences. The guiding principles of youth ministry transitioning into face-to-face events are based on the three simple rules of John Wesley:

- 1) *Do no harm.*
- 2) *Do good.*
- 3) *Stay in love with God.*

The goal of youth ministry during COVID-19 and post COVID-19 shutdown is to ensure there is no harm done, safety is created, and all decisions are aligned with God's love in doing good.

All risk cannot be eliminated in face-to-face groups in terms of potentially spreading COVID-19 but risk can be minimized substantially. This document provides questions and guidance for churches to consider as they make their decisions on face-to-face gatherings. There is no one-size fits all approach as each church needs to take into account their specific location and context.

### **Overall Guidelines**

EPA's Bishop, Cabinet and Chancellor have created overarching guidelines that need to be followed. These guidelines may change as circumstances may change. They can be accessed on the EPA website at <https://www.epaumc.org/news-information/2020/05/cabinet-chancellor-explain-church-reopening-guidelines/>. Please check these frequently for any changes.

## **Safe Sanctuaries in the Virtual Environment**

Current polices and guidelines for safe sanctuaries for EPA churches can be accessed on the EPA website at <https://www.epaumc.org/wp-content/uploads/Safe-Sanctuaries-during-physical-distancing-during-the-COVID-Final.pdf>. That document describes best practices in the virtual world, which are listed here again.

*Here are the top five best practices to apply our safe sanctuaries policy to the virtual world.*

- 1. Still use the two-adult rule so that there is NEVER one-on-one contact. At no time should one adult be holding any one-on-one conversations with any youth without other adults knowing there are conversations occurring. In addition, online meetings need to begin with two adults, not from the same family, and then allowing youth to join.*
- 2. Still use all selection, screening and training policies. In this time, it may feel right to let new volunteers lead discussions. Any online discussion should be considered no different than a face-to-face meeting. Volunteers need to be screened and trained before taking on leadership roles. The Eastern PA Conference Safe Sanctuary committee can offer online trainings as well as the coordinator of Youth and Young adults at the conference. Please utilize us as often as you need.*
- 3. Use “ministry-based” on-line platform accounts instead of personal accounts. This means the local church should own the on-line account with access by several church leaders and/or staff so there is accountability of meetings.*
- 4. Maintain the same communication with parents and youth about meetings including times and links to access the meeting. This way everyone knows what is going on. With younger children, under sixth grade, syllabus and activities should be shared with parents or caretakers prior to online meetings so everyone is transparent as to what is occurring. For children sixth through twelfth grade, leaders should provide parents and caretakers with the same outlines of meetings and topics that are typical for your youth group with more transparency being utilized than less.*
- 5. If your current release forms do not give you permission for picture/video sharing either get them updated or do not share pictures/videos of virtual meetings. This includes tagging your youth in the virtual environment. If you do not have permission do not post and tag them.*

## **Questions to Consider in Reopening**

### **CDC Guidance**

Follow overall CDC guidance that has been created specifically for youth programs. That guidance can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/Camps-Decision-Tree.pdf>. Please check this frequently for any changes.

## General Questions

- How can you create a youth ministry that is a blended approach in the future that has both face-to-face elements and virtual or on-line elements?
- How has your vision and mission of youth ministry continued during the shutdown? Where has your vision and mission not addressed the shutdown? How should your vision and mission be revised now that the shutdown has been experienced and the future has uncertainty?
- How well did you stay connected with your youth group during the shutdown? What worked well? What should be added?

## Face-to-Face Meeting Questions

- How will current CDC guidelines be followed during a face-to-face youth event post shutdown? What supplies do you need and what new procedures need to be applied?
- How will physical distancing guidelines be enforced?
- How will face covering guidelines be enforced?
- How will games be modified?

## Guidelines to Consider for Face-to-Face Youth Gatherings

- We recommend resuming face-to-face gatherings when the state government of PA signals green for your county. Follow all green guidelines which can be found at <https://www.governor.pa.gov/process-to-reopen-pennsylvania/>. Please check this frequently for any changes.
- Ensure youth gatherings/events are part of the local churches' overall plan for building use. This includes following all CDC and state guidelines. In addition, be knowledgeable of the plans to follow if a confirmed case has been identified in the church building or youth space.

The following best practices are suggested until a time that there is an all clear for meetings and gatherings.

- Best practice is to maintain small group sizes and limit mixing of groups during gatherings/events. The more limited contact is between people and groups the safer.
- Best practice is to have gatherings/events outdoors and maintain CDC guidelines of physical distancing.
- Best practice is to have gatherings/events outdoors and maintain CDC guidelines of cleaning. Cleaning guidelines can be found at [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/Reopening\\_America\\_Guidance.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/Reopening_America_Guidance.pdf). Please check this frequently for any changes.

- Best practice is to continue to offer online meetings and bible studies regardless of the phase your county is in. The best practice is to integrate on-line activities and meetings into your youth group format even when in-person gatherings resume.

### **Helpful Resources**

1. <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/3-changes-you-need-to-know-about-young-people-as-you-minister>
2. <https://www.churchleadership.com/how-to-guide-for-online-studies/?id=li20200408>
3. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58f66a832994ca1365b35be7/t/5e8b40abe423a30322d07a3a/1586184410956/GuidetoTakingYouthMinistryOnline.Final.pdf>