

Safe Sanctuaries during physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

April 6, 2020

Eastern PA Conference of the United Methodist Conference's Safe Sanctuaries committee affirms that our current policies and procedures found at <https://www.epaumc.org/resources/safe-sanctuaries/> are relevant during COVID-19 physical distancing requirements but also realize the need for best practices and how to apply our current policies in the virtual environment. During times of swift change that are unprecedented it can be easy to forget standing policies and procedures when working with children and youth. During times like these, it is even more important to be diligent and follow all of the screening policies as they may be overlooked when someone offers help in this time. Unfortunately, those who seek to abuse use times of confusion and change to their advantage. Again, these guidelines are not meant to prevent ministry from happening but to ensure ministry occurs in safe ways. And now we need to ensure ministry occurs in safe ways in the virtual world.

Towards this end, Eastern PA Conference of the United Methodist Conference's Safe Sanctuaries committee is offering the follow resources and guidance in applying safe sanctuaries policies to the virtual world. These resources and guidance do not replace legal advice, and are intended to be used in conjunction with our conference's safe sanctuaries policies.

Three resources we recommend you review and utilize are:

- Discipleship Ministries, Young People's Ministries guidelines and resources can be accessed at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/safe-sanctuaries-supporting-a-shift-to-online-youth-ministry-meetings>
- A Guide to Ministering Youth During a Time of Physical Distancing by Rev Angela Gorrell, PH.D. and Paul Gorrell and be accessed at <https://www.angelagorrell.com/resources>.
- "Safe Sanctuaries in a Virtual World." by Joy Thornburg Melton and Michelle L. Foster. Which can be purchased at <https://bookstore.upperroom.org/AdvancedSearch/DefaultWFilter.aspx?searchTerm=safe+sanctuaries+in+a+virtual+world>

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.