

# Guidelines For Safe Online/Digital Ministry

In the unprecedented situation of COVID-19, when our reliance on technologies and digital platforms for ministry has accelerated rapidly and at a time when many people are anxious, it is vital that we maintain our commitments to being a safe church for all. So we offer these guidelines to assist you in maintaining safe ministry practices.

These guidelines are underpinned by The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, Victorian Child-Safe Standards, the National UCA Child Safe Policy Framework and the Synod Keeping Children Safe Policy. Wherever possible, these guidelines draw upon our existing commitments and documentation, whilst offering additional interpretation for our current situation. We will continue to revise and develop these guidelines.

For ease of navigation, we've highlighted new contexts or challenges, referred to existing policies or resources (highlighting some helpful reminders), and added additional guidelines. If you require further information or advice please go to

▶ [www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/covid-19](http://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/covid-19)

## 1. Online communication & conversations

*(including Discord channels/Zoom meetings/gaming chats/messaging platforms/houseparty/etc)*

### Current relevant child safety policies

▶ [KCS1 – Keeping Children Safe Policy](#)

▶ [KCS4 – Keeping Children Safe Code of Conduct](#)

- Encourage open communication between all children, parents, staff, vulnerable adults, volunteers and people in specified ministries through the use of empowering and supportive language.
- Ensure children's opinions are sought and their concerns are listened to and taken seriously.
- Remember that the following applies to all engagement and communication. Employees, volunteers and people

in specified ministries will not unless otherwise formally authorised:

- be alone with a child,
- Seek to make contact and spend time alone with any child outside program times, including through personal social media networks or face-to-face and phone contact.
- Use inappropriate, offensive or discriminatory language when speaking with a child.
- Behave provocatively or inappropriately with a child and/or in a way that could be considered as 'grooming'.
- Have inappropriate conversations with a child either in person, through social media or in any other way.

▶ [SPSP10 – A Guide for Safe Ministry using digital media \(PDF\)](#)

- Wherever possible, communicate electronically with groups rather than individuals. The best practice when sending emails or text messages, especially with young people, is to include multiple people and ideally another leader in the message. A group chat is ideal in this situation.
- Note the 'age-contextual communications guidelines' in SPSP10
- Leaders need to ensure that contact with those who do not have access to online opportunities to participate in community are maintained and to work to limit any exclusion they might experience

### Guidelines for application

Always advise parents/guardians of planned programs, who is leading the program and the social media platform being used. This may involve offering some orientation to the new technology/platform for parents/guardians. You should also ensure parents understand and agree to any Code of Conduct/behavioural expectations set for under 18s in the online environment.

Where participants may be under 18 years of age, attempt to have (at least) two over 18 leaders and two under 18 participants involved.

Ensure any Codes of Conduct and permission forms are adapted to reflect the online environment any events or activities are now taking place in. These should include guidance about appropriate places for activities to take place in, what is participants backgrounds and whether parents and other siblings can or should be present as well as zero tolerance for online bullying and harassment.

Ensure your risk assessment and mitigation reflect the particular risks of running programs and events in an entirely online environment. Ensure leaders and the governance body understand the vulnerabilities of the chosen platform and how to mitigate for these vulnerabilities.

Ensure leaders have strategies for dealing with inappropriate behaviour, chat or postings

All leaders must have a WWCC and been appropriately screened for the leadership role they are taking on. This is likely to include those who are providing 'behind the scenes' technical support as well as those providing onscreen leadership. This includes any pre-recorded content and those who might provide music or liturgical leadership

When gaming with people under 18, leaders should game using their own name so it clear they are present and engaging in the game. If gaming with people over 18 – whether gaming in your own name or using a gaming pseudonym, those covered by the Code of Ethics must game in ways consistent with the Code of Ethics.

Ensure you have appropriate privacy and security settings to mitigate the risk of unwelcome people accessing the meeting/ game/chat/program.

Consider disabling 1:1 chat function for events with under 18s to reduce the risk of bullying or other inappropriate contact between participants.

When using video conferencing platforms consider blurring your background or using a virtual background to help avoid any

inappropriate background appearances from housemates or family members. It may also help provide appropriate boundaries when many programs and meetings now have private homes as backgrounds.

## 2. Streaming live content

*(including any gathering which is made accessible to the general public)*

### Current relevant child safety policies

#### ▶ [KCS4 – Keeping Children Safe Code of Conduct](#)

- Employees, volunteers and people in specified ministries will not unless otherwise formally authorised:
  - Photograph or video a child without the consent of the child and his/her/ their parents or guardians.

#### ▶ [SPSP10 – A Guide for Safe Ministry using digital media \(PDF\)](#)

#### ▶ [SPSP6 – Image Release Form \(Word\)](#)

#### ▶ [CC11 – Social Media Policy for all Ministers](#)

- Protect privacy
- Respect confidentiality
- Respect copyright laws

### Guidelines for application

- ▶ Avoid streaming the images of children. Even when parental consent has been obtained in the past it would be wise to check if they are comfortable with what is being proposed in these new circumstances. Where necessary, ensure under 18 participants have parental consent and preferably, guardian supervision.
- ▶ Be aware of intended audiences (public, limited, closed) and appropriate platforms. Consider the use of waiting rooms to ensure inappropriate people do not access your virtual gathering.
- ▶ All leaders must have a WWCC and been appropriately screened for the leadership role they are taking on. This is likely to include those who are providing 'behind the scenes' technical support as well as those providing onscreen leadership.

This includes any pre-recorded content and those who might provide music or liturgical leadership.

- ▶ Ensure your risk assessment and mitigation reflect the particular risks of running worship, programs and events as a lived stream event and that you have appropriate mitigations in place.
- ▶ Consider how long on-line content with children should remain on a website or social media platform. Consider whether content should be removed within a short period of time.

### 3. Sensitive pastoral conversations

#### Current relevant child safety policies

- ▶ [KCS1 – Keeping Children Safe Policy](#)
- ▶ [KCS4 – Keeping Children Safe Code of Conduct](#)
- ▶ [SCT3 – Disclosure reporting process](#)
- ▶ [SPSP10 – A Guide for Safe Ministry using digital media \(PDF\)](#)
  - Principle 2: Online engagement must be conducted in an open, transparent and age appropriate manner.

#### Guidelines for application

Document sensitive pastoral conversations.

- Consider recording audio/video when available & consent is given
- Keep a copy of text conversation (screenshot or download text)
- Keep a pastoral diary, documenting the details (Code of Ethics 3.9(b))

Use a common account such as the congregation or program account with shared access rather than a personal account and be clear who is communicating.

Any disclosures made on social media platforms should be reported using the usual reporting processes.

### 4. Adhering to the Code of Ethics

#### Current policies

- ▶ [UCA Code of Ethics & Ministry Practice](#)

Ministers continue to be bound by the Code of Ethics and should note that all online interactions must be conducted with the same professionalism as face to face ministry.

- Confidentiality must continue to be maintained.
- Ministers need to be aware when they are working beyond their level of competency.
- Ministers need to attend to self-care and supervision.

#### Guidelines for application

At this time particularly note should be taken of the changes around the dynamic of pastoral relationships as they move from being conducted face to face to online engagement. Ministers still need to be aware of the power they have from the intimacy of pastoral relationships and of the ways in which anxiety and stress can cause boundaries to blur more easily if they are not well maintained.

If ministers are not confident or skilled in the variety of online environments they are now working in, they should heed the guidance of the Code of Ethics to discuss this with their supervisor, seek guidance from those who have greater competence and look to develop their skills when they are able.

In stressful times even more attention needs to be paid to self-care and spending time with family. You may need to find new patterns and routines to ensure you are tending to your own care and your family and friends.

Supervision needs to continue. If your supervisor is not able to transition to phone, or online supervision you need to find a new supervisor for the duration of the period of working at home. Please contact Sharon Hollis [Sharon.Hollis@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:Sharon.Hollis@victas.uca.org.au) or your Presbytery for an up-to-date list.