

ATLANTIC CATECHETICAL ASSOCIATION ATLANTIC ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC YOUTH MINISTERS

Pastoral Guidelines for Gathering Minors in Online Spaces

Each Roman Catholic diocese in Atlantic Canada has an existing responsible ministry protocol to follow when ministering to young people (and vulnerable persons). These combined with some common sense should help each of us safely and responsibly navigate the pastoral context of online meeting spaces. When using video conferencing services such as GotoMeeting, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams, refer first to your diocesan protocol for guidance.

Nevertheless, there are valid points to consider by those gathering young people together in virtual meeting spaces, and the Atlantic Catechetical Association has collaborated with the Atlantic Association of Catholic Youth Ministers to prepare a list of suggested guidelines and best practices to follow.

A note on security: Since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, some video conferencing services have experienced unfortunate privacy and security breaches which the providers of the services have responded to by taking measures to prevent future disturbances. Although some of these breaches could have been avoided by following the guidelines laid out below, be aware that you are never 100% guaranteed protection from invasive hackers who might transmit pornographic images.

Before the Meeting

- Ensure you have installed the latest version of the video conferencing service you plan to use. Additionally, ensure your Windows updates are in fact up-to-date, since they should theoretically protect your computer from known threats.
- **Do not use a video call if you do not need to.** Turning off your webcam and listening in via audio prevents anyone from learning about you through background objects. Audio-only gatherings also save network bandwidth on an internet connection, improving the overall audio and visual quality of the meeting.
- Ensure your facilitators/group leaders are versed in the technology being used so they can address issues if they arise.
- Many diocesan protocols require two unrelated adults to be present at all times with young people. This protocol should be followed when gathering virtually. **Two adults with up-to-date criminal record checks should be present at all times during online gatherings, including during the use of break-out rooms.** If you know your gathering will involve the

use of break-out rooms, you will need to account beforehand for the number of adults you will need.

- Conversely, it is also possible to have too many adults present. If adults outnumber the young people present, it may inhibit the engagement of some young people.
- For each web gathering with young people, acquire parental consent. A sample consent form will be included with this document.
- **Never publicly post a link or invitation to an online gathering of young people.** An adult facilitator should be delegated as the gatekeeper whom everyone must contact to acquire the link. This may seem onerous but will help prevent uninvited guests from causing disruptions.
- Appropriate timing/scheduling should always be considered. Generally, it would be inappropriate to physically gather young people together at 11:00 pm, and it would be similarly inappropriate to gather them in an online meeting space. Our suggestion is any time between 11:00 am and 8:00 pm is suitable.
- Before video conferencing be mindful of your physical space and personal appearance. Respect your own dress code. What you would wear in person when gathering with young people is what you should wear when you are on webcam. Be mindful of what is visible in your physical space when you are on webcam lest you unintentionally divulge personal information about yourself, your family members, or house mates.
- Remember to have a clean computer desktop if you are planning to share your screen or will be using presentation mode. When you share a screen, everything you are looking at may be visible to others, which might include unsolicited and inappropriate pop-ups or advertisements. Please also be mindful of privacy rights (getting a link from your email may inadvertently expose other emails). File names or shortcuts, open tabs, etc. are visible to participants.
- Check your camera, microphone, and speakers ahead of time to ensure people will see and hear you clearly.

During the Meeting

- Depending on the virtual gathering space you use (Zoom, GotoMeeting, Google Teams, etc.) there are various security options that will be useful. Review the options available to you in the service you use.
 - Disable private chats if possible.
 - Set all microphones to mute by default or ask everyone to mute their microphone and unmute it only when they wish to speak to the group.
 - Ensure that password protection is enabled.

- Enable waiting rooms when possible. The host of the meeting will need to admit participants in one by one, so they can exercise control over who is admitted to the meeting.
 - Once everyone is supposed to have arrived, lock down the meeting if possible, preventing anyone further to join.
 - Disable screen-sharing from members of the group unless required. As a default, only the host and/or adult facilitators should have unrestricted access to screen-sharing.
 - Encourage participants to use their full, real name when signing on, and not “iPad,” or “iPhone”.
- Many web conferencing applications offer the host(s) the ability to record the gathering. **Recording of meetings is not recommended.** Although some leaders may elect to record their web conferencing meetings as a precaution, there is a real possibility this may infringe on the privacy of young people and/or their families even if consent has been granted. According to one article in *The Washington Post*, thousands of recorded Zoom calls were discovered and viewable on the open web.¹ Issues of security aside, if young people know they are being recorded, it may inhibit their engagement.
 - If you do decide to record your meeting, ensure each participant is aware they are being recorded and that you have obtained signed permission from their parents to be photographed/recorded. For the sake of simplicity, you may want to add this as an option to the parental consent form granting permission to attend the meeting.
 - Review your local “House Rules” with the entire group at the beginning of the gathering, ensuring they understand any misconduct or inappropriate behaviour may result in their removal from the gathering.

After the Meeting

- Any personal information received from participants before or during the meeting should be stored in the same fashion of other personal information given to you.
- Some dioceses require the regular maintenance of attendance records for all catechism and youth gatherings. This should include a log of when the meeting began/ended. It should also indicate which adults were present for the gathering.

¹ Harwell, Drew “Thousands of Zoom video calls left exposed on open web,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2020, retrieved on July 22, 2020 from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/03/thousands-zoom-video-calls-left-exposed-open-web/>.

General

- Following existing parish and diocesan protocols for in-person gatherings will help guide online practices.
- Persons, volunteers or employees, who will be involved with vulnerable sectors should have completed the necessary background checks, even if they will only have virtual contact.
- When holding a meeting with minors, it is important to have parental or guardian consent for the minor's participation. Here is [a sample consent form](#) you can send to parents and guardians to fill out and return.
- Keep in mind that anything said or shared online can be recorded (possibly without your knowledge) and be seen by anyone and everyone.
- Help parents and guardians to have a conversation about how to be safe online by sharing [tips about online safety](#). The [Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#) offers numerous resources that can be shared. Additionally, the website Cyber Safe BC has developed a [list of online safety resources](#) that would be helpful to both youth and their parents.

Last Updated: Friday, August 28, 2020