

BEST PRACTICES

for Safe Youth Ministry in a Pandemic Environment

This is an update to the guidelines issued on May 27, 2020 by the diocese for parish ministries with middle and high school youth. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us with any questions or concerns. We ask you to continue to [pray](#) for all those affected by this pandemic.



The Catholic Church has an all-embracing respect for the life, value, and dignity of every person. We have a responsibility to assure that ministry activities and environments are safe and conducive to growth and transformational encounters with Christ for all those we serve. Attention to this responsibility is an expression of our commitment to a consistent ethic of life.

GENERAL

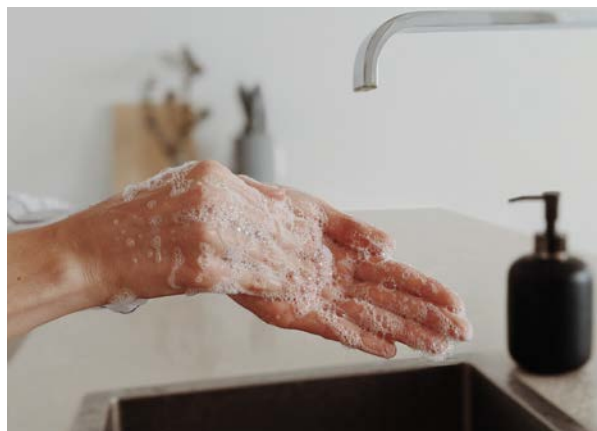
- Work closely with your pastor and parish staff to follow best safety practices. Take small, incremental steps to reopen ministry.
- Postpone larger gatherings (following state, local, and diocesan guidelines for maximum number of participants) and/or consider alternative ministry approaches that place safety first for teens and families.
- Remind both youth and adults to stay home if they are sick, have a temperature of 100 degrees or higher, or if they have underlying health issues that could place them at greater risk.
- If anyone has someone in their household that is considered high risk, they should not participate in the gathering / event in the spirit of caring for the other.
- Everyone must bring their own masks / cloth face covering. The youth minister should have individually wrapped masks available for those that do not have one. Masks must be worn unless it is unsafe to do so.
- The State of Ohio and the diocese continue to update guidelines regarding school building usage and safety. Youth ministry programs must follow the facility protocols as determined by the diocese.
- In all circumstances, appropriate physical distancing, increased cleaning and sanitation protocols, and the regulations put forth by public health authorities must be observed.
- Any young person or adult who has a temperature of 100 degrees or higher must immediately go home. This individual may not return until they are fever free for 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing medication. If the individual has been exposed to COVID-19, follow the procedure for reporting exposure. Encourage him or her to self-quarantine for 14 days prior to returning to any in-person youth ministry activities.
- Regularly check for updates on the [diocesan website](#), your county health department website, the [CDC](#), and the [Ohio Department of Health](#) websites.

REGISTRATION

- Obtain [parent/guardian consent form](#) for virtual and in-person activities, both onsite and offsite. It is recommended that registration forms include clear COVID language with detailed safety precautions being taken.
- Use online forms for event registration and [medical/liability waivers](#) to prevent contact of multiple users with paper. Online RSVP will also help to anticipate number of participants so that you can plan accordingly.
- Keep final attendance records for activities in case contact tracing becomes necessary.

DROP OFF/PICKUP

- Make plans for arrival and departures so that there is no congregating. There should be no socializing in parking lots by cars before, during, or after event in order to prevent contact between others.
- Determine specific entrance / exit / cross-traffic procedures and establish a routine that prevents a large number of participants to gather in any one area.
- Perform the health screening protocol upon arrival to the site. Check for signs of fever and other symptoms (cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, etc.)
- Everyone must wash their hands upon arrival and prior to departure.



ENVIRONMENT

- Outside gatherings are preferred with physical distancing.
- Maintain physical distancing of six feet between participants. Mark floors / ground with visual spacers (tape, paint, signs.)
- Hand-washing stations should be strategically placed at arrival and departure areas (or readily available). If water is unavailable, hand sanitizer must be provided.
- Display signage throughout areas to support directional flow, proper hygiene protocol, physical distancing, and emotional support phone numbers, etc.
- Restrooms are to be sanitized before and after gathering. Limit number of persons in the restrooms at one time based on facility size and current social distancing guidelines.
- Comply with the sanitation measures that have been set by parish staff and local agencies before, during, and after ministry activities.
- Determine the non-essential areas for your gathering and isolate these areas with signage, tape, and barriers (ex. basketball or volleyball courts, playground, pavilions, game rooms, ninja rope courses, gaga pits, etc.)

BEFORE EVENT

- Be clear about expectations for all adults. Discourage volunteers who are most vulnerable to participate due to the level of risk. Invite parents or other parishioners to serve as mentors, chaperones or small group coordinators.
- Respect the choice of adult team members and volunteers to participate or not in an event. This may determine what activities you are able to plan.
- Keep in mind the difference between a chaperone / parent volunteer and a youth minister / trained core team member when assigning responsibilities / roles during an event.
- Meet with core team / volunteers prior to your event to establish clear procedures and role-play possible situations that may occur. Be prepared.

- Arrange seating areas, tables, and chairs at safe distance prior to arrival of participants (small groups, pairs, tri-ads, depending on session plan).
- If handouts are to be distributed, consider placing the handouts on the tables / chairs prior to the event.
- Encourage people to take the handouts home or place them in a recycle bin near the exit area upon leaving.
- Ongoing evaluation is essential.



DURING EVENT

- At events where more than one small community has gathered, keep participants in the same small group with the same adults to minimize interaction with multiple people.
- Gather in groups of no more than 10 participants in one area. This can be one adult per 9 teens, depending on the activity.
- It is best practice to have at least two adults present at any gathering, in case of an emergency or two that requires the attention of an adult.
- No sharing of common objects. Ask participants to bring their own bible, pens, and journal. Designate an area with individual bags / bins for participants to place their keys, cell phone, personal items in order to prevent contact with other people's belongings.
- Icebreakers and community building activities should be non-contact. Everyone should refrain from practices that involve the sharing / passing of a common object.
- No touch rules: no high fives, hugs, or other close contact occurring before, during, and after all gatherings / events.
- Prayer and worship experiences should follow the [guidelines](#) set forth by Diocesan Office of Worship.

HOSPITALITY

- If provided, food and beverages should be in individual packaging that is easily picked up by individual and disposed of properly. When retrieving food, avoid touching items and putting them back.
- No common food bowls, buffet lines / self-serve stations, including coffee / drink stations. No sharing of food / snacks / drinks with others.
- If participants are asked to bring their own food / snacks, it should be clearly identified with the individual's name. Keep in separate bins / areas to avoid contact with each other's food.
- Individuals should bring their own water bottles. It is recommended that water fountains only be used to fill personal water bottles and not used to directly drink from.
- Core team / participants should use gloves and masks if working with food.



Additional requirements for charter bus / motor coach transportation

- ## TRANSPORTATION
- Participants should travel to gatherings alone or with a member of their immediate household.
 - Even though it is not recommended, sometimes it may be necessary to transport someone outside of your household. In this case, it would be the responsibility of the parent to make / approve arrangements for travel. Consider putting a physical barrier between the vehicle's driver and the passenger area. Passengers should sit in the back seat to create physical distance. Consider the travel time and number of people in close quarters that a car / van can safely accommodate. If possible, use larger vehicles or a greater number of vehicles in order to allow passengers to maintain greater physical distance.
 - If participants are being dropped off at central meeting location and transported to an event with others, perform an initial health screening of participants at the drop off location before switching vehicles. If not possible, perform the initial health screening upon arrival to site.
 - Clean and sanitize the vehicle before and after transporting.
- Traveling by bus or motor coach is highly discouraged at this time. Consider the travel time, number of participants to be transported, and the cost of providing group transportation.
 - Keep in mind that distancing and safety standards with regards to seating must be implemented in line with state standards. The possibility of contracting the virus is greatly increased in this type of environment.
 - Reduce the number of available seats in order to increase physical distance between passengers. Mark restricted seats using signage, decals, colored string, tape, etc. Leave several front rows of seating unavailable to maintain social distance for the driver / operator.
 - If the same vehicle will be used multiple times, assign seats to passengers so that they occupy the same space each time. Clean and disinfect the vehicle between each use.
 - If possible, seek vehicles with clear, impermeable barriers between operators and rest of the cabin. Options include plexiglass, or flexible plastic sheeting. This equipment must be used only according to manufacturer and vehicle safety guidelines.

COMMUNICATION

- Parishes need comprehensive communication plans to reach their people and the larger community. Leverage local media outlets, text messaging, websites, and email. Provide clear information on the steps the parish is taking to keep young people safe.
- The rules of crisis communication are to say it fast (as soon as you receive the information), often, transparently, and creatively. Provide common talking points for all leaders.
- Give people what they need, when they need it. They need facts, not speculation. They need clear instructions on how to protect their safety. People need positive stories, clarity on action plans, and a hopeful vision for the future.
- Focus on keeping listeners safe and healthy. Then repeat, repeat, repeat and repeat again. Frame the information positively.
- Communicate with greater frequency throughout this time of uncertainty. Remember the 3x3 strategy. When you really want something to be understood, share it 3 times and in 3 different ways.
- Choose candor over charisma. Trust is never more important than in a crisis. Be honest about where things stand. Maintain transparency to build loyalty and lead more effectively. Involve your stakeholders in decision-making.



PASTORAL CARE

- Encourage participants to talk about how they are feeling. Be authentic. Encourage them to ask questions and make time to talk and listen. Be calm. Be careful not only about what you say, but how you say it. Be a reassuring source of comfort.
- Listen for underlying fears or concerns about COVID-19. Let them know that fear is a normal and acceptable reaction. Ask questions to find out what a concerned participant knows. Provide accurate information. Correct any false information they may have.
- Upper middle and high school age young people are able to discuss these issues in more depth. Refer them to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts.
- Be attentive to the multiple losses that our young people and their families have experienced (deaths, sickness, job loss, disappointments, school closing, etc.).
- Recognize stressors and extreme fears, anxieties, and health issues. Be prepared to know how to refer young person and family to professional help as needed.
- Additional mental health and anxiety resources are available at nfcym.org/covid19.

REPORTING

- Work with your pastor regarding protocols to follow if any person is exposed to the COVID-19 virus. Reporting the exposure to the local health department is mandatory.
- Follow the guidelines from [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov), the [Ohio Department of Health](https://www.ohio.gov), your county health commissioner, and third-party health care providers.
- Parishes may want to identify a person who will serve in the role of “pandemic ministry safety coordinator” to assist with pandemic-related adjustments to provide a safe environment for ministry.

