

the Deacon's Bench

ON THE WEB

www.brotherhoodmutual.com



Summer 2010 | For America's Churches and Related Ministries from Brotherhood Mutual and Its Agents



Teens who Text

Creating cyberboundaries
for youth ministry

Churches can help teens learn to use technology responsibly by crafting policies that help prevent misconduct.

Writer and speaker David R. Smith says he'll never forget the Sunday when one of the guys in his youth ministry took an inappropriate photo of a teenage girl during worship.

"He immediately sent it to two of his buddies, who sent it to their friends, who sent it to... you get the picture (no pun intended),"¹ writes Smith, director of content development at TheSource4YM.com, a website offering youth ministry resources.

"What followed was a lot of headache and heartache," Smith said.

Is your ministry prepared to respond to a similar incident? What if a student were to accuse your youth pastor of sending an inappropriate message?

How Could Texting Affect Your Ministry?

Text messaging is the primary way that teens reach their friends. It surpasses email, instant messaging, and voice calling as the tool kids from 12 to 18 use to communicate.

With texting has come “sexting,” sending racy photos or messages on mobile phones. Even if the kids who attend youth group haven’t done it themselves, they’ve likely seen images shared by classmates

“It happens a lot, my friends do it all the time, it’s not a big deal,”² one high school girl explained during a recent focus group conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Youth leaders can encourage students to use their cell phones, MySpace, and Facebook pages responsibly instead of caving in to peer pressure. Not only that, but youth leaders can also protect themselves and their church from some serious legal ramifications by creating written policies about how they’ll interact with students electronically.



Half of teens send 50 or more text messages a day. That's 1,500 texts a month. One third send more.

“It’s the communication to individuals that gets tricky.”

— Shane Farmer, Willow Creek Community Church

As with other situations that pose risk to a ministry, your church should talk about issues like inappropriate text messaging and establish written policies and guidelines designed to prevent it from happening. At the very least, you need to know how to respond if it does.

Protect Yourself

Teens like the privacy texting provides, but this privacy can pose problems for youth ministers. It could lead to misunderstandings if parents learn that a youth leader has been texting their teen—even innocently—without their knowledge. An inappropriate relationship could develop online between a leader and a student in the youth group, with no outward signs for others to detect.

- **Meet the parents.** As a youth leader, introduce yourself to the parents of each youth group member. Ask if they mind if their child receives texts or e-mails from you. Better yet, have them sign a form giving you express permission to communicate electronically. Sample youth texting/electronic communication forms are available at BrotherhoodMutual.com.
- **Text in bulk.** Sending most texts or e-mails to the whole group is the safest route to follow. “Accountability is built in by sheer volume,” says Shane Farmer, who directs the high school program at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. “It’s the communication to individuals that gets tricky.”
- **Censor yourself.** If you find yourself typing something you wouldn’t want your spouse, head pastor, or a student’s parents to read, promptly hit “delete.” Otherwise, you may regret it.

▪ **Aim for the real deal.** Use texting and technology as a bridge to draw teens into face-to-face conversation, not as a substitute for it, urges Jonathan McKee, author of several youth ministry books and founder of TheSource4YM.com

▪ **Address improper conduct.** If you receive an inappropriate message from one of your students, take immediate action to protect your personal and professional reputation. Document what happened and report it to your supervisor. Your church may wish to consult an attorney and its insurance agent about the situation, since the activity may need to be reported to authorities. Then, talk with the teen and the teen's parents.

Protect Your Ministry

Nearly one in five of all sexual misconduct claims Brotherhood Mutual receives involve either a youth pastor or youth volunteer. Even if the allegations aren't proven, the rumors

and news reports can damage a person's and a ministry's reputation—forever.

Recently, a 24-year-old youth leader in Florida was fired from his job and charged with sending sexually explicit messages after the texts he'd sent a 14-year-old in his group came to light. Creating policies about texting and online communication can help ministries address this type of behavior and try to prevent it. Here are some recommendations.

- **Know the law:** Learn your state's criminal laws about possessing or sending improper pictures and sexually explicit messages. Understand what's legal and what's not.
- **Define expectations:** Develop a written policy for all staff and volunteers that lays out your ministry's parameters for texting and electronic communication. Carefully explain the policy, using a mandatory class or educational

Online Responsibility 101

Young people need online responsibility training, youth leaders say. While 75 percent of teens realize that sending or posting suggestive content can have serious negative consequences, many do it anyway³, according to a survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Using a cell phone or computer is like learning to drive a car, says Jack Crabtree, who has worked with young people and youth leaders for more than 35 years with Long Island Youth for Christ.

"It's a necessary life skill, but without training (like driver's ed) and supervision (like a probationary license) we are putting inexperienced 'drivers' on a dangerous highway," Crabtree says.

Have a talk. Remind students that peers, employers, college recruiters, and others will judge them based on what they have shared with the world through blogs, Facebook posts, MySpace pages and other public forms of expression.



Explain the law. Teens in several states have been convicted of possessing or distributing child pornography—felonies—because of images authorities have found on their computers or cell phones.

Promote purity. Teach teens that God cares about how we present ourselves at all times. "Sexual purity encompasses many aspects of teens' lives, including their cell phone use,"⁴ Smith writes.

materials. As with all employee training, it's good to verify attendance with an attendance log and have participants sign a form agreeing to abide by the policy. You can find a sample policy at BrotherhoodMutual.com.

▪ **Curtail cell phones:** The policy should outline when young people can and can't use cell phones. It's recommended that youth ministries generally ban cell phone use during official youth functions, although some may object to such a broad restriction. A ban provides two benefits: avoiding the distractions that come with cell phones and protecting the church from a charge of negligent supervision (if a teen were to sext friends from a youth retreat, for example). Teens hate being pried away from their cell phones, but they're used to following similar rules at school.

Some parents may object to students not being allowed to have active cell phones during youth activities, especially those involving travel or overnight stays. Youth pastors say that you can allay many parents' fears sharing the policy and providing cell phone numbers of event supervisors.

The Beauty of Boundaries

Youth leaders can boost their status among teens by texting, provided they apply boundaries that protect themselves and their ministry. Just as a youth minister would avoid counseling someone of the opposite gender in a private place, leaders need parameters that protect them from accusations about their behavior online. If your ministry hasn't considered the legal implications of online technology, the time has come to develop some policies to protect your church and its people. 🏰

Face-to-Face is Best



An advanced computer technician, Kent Nighswander has a penchant for technology. He maintains a Facebook page for the church youth group, and he sends texts, e-mails, and instant messages to colleagues. But, he doesn't text his wife and he doesn't text the students in his youth group.

"I don't use texting as a primary means to communicate with anybody," says Nighswander.

A Youth minister at Community Christian Center in Hicksville, Ohio, Nighswander and his wife, Ashley, work with about 25 junior and senior high students. Like many youth leaders, they ban cell phone use during youth meetings.

"Technology can facilitate face-to-face conversation, but it should never replace it," he says. "You can be distracted by technology."

References:

¹ David R. Smith. "Teens Using Cell Phones for X-Rated Purposes." TheSource4YM.com. Dec. 12, 2008. www.thesource4ym.com/youthculturewindow/article.asp?id=59. Retrieved May 14, 2010.

² Lenhart, Amanda. Teens and Sexting. Pew Internet & American Life Project. December 12, 2009. www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009Teens-and-Sexting.aspx?r=1, Retrieved May, 12, 2010.

³ Sex and Tech. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Dec. 10, 2008. www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/ Retrieved May 10, 2010.

⁴ Smith, referenced above.



Technology and Teenagers

There can be some tricky turns when cyberspace intersects with youth ministry. Some recent national surveys contain eye-opening information every youth pastor should know. Consider visiting these resources for information about online responsibility, issues to discuss, and sample policies for your ministry.

Websites:

Brotherhood Mutual

www.brotherhoodmutual.com

The Source for Youth Ministry

www.thesource4ym.com

Articles:

Parenting Education: Sexting

www.loveourchildrenusa.org/parent_sexting.php

Internet Safety 101

www.internetsafety101.org/sexting.htm

Studies:

Sex and Tech

www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech

Teens and Sexting

www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Teens-and-Sexting



6400 Brotherhood Way
 P.O. Box 2227
 Fort Wayne, IN 46801-2227

Presorted Standard
 U.S. Postage
 PAID
 Fort Wayne, IN
 Permit No. 760



On the Web
 Encourage kids to take a CyberPurity Challenge. Search for it at www.BrotherhoodMutual.com

the Deacon's Bench

In this issue



cover



p3



p4

The Deacon's Bench is a quarterly newsletter created for churches and related ministries. It's published by the Corporate Communications Department of Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company.

Writer: Laura Brown
 Design: Tim Baron and Zach Figgins
 Senior Editor: Ken Ross
 Managing Editor: Lisa Grote

The Deacon's Bench, Vol. 22, Issue 2
 Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company
 6400 Brotherhood Way, P.O. Box 2227,
 Fort Wayne, IN 46801-2227, 800.333.3735

TEENS WHO TEXT
 Does your ministry have cyberboundaries?

ONLINE RESPONSIBILITY 101
 Kids aren't born knowing how to use technology wisely.

STARING DOWN TECHNOLOGY
 There's still a place for talking face-to-face.