

# SAFE SANCTUARIES

Northern IL Conference Training



**Presenter: Rev. Sherry Steele, Minister of Faith Formation,  
Plainfield United Methodist Church**

# Agenda:

**What is Safe Sanctuaries?**

**What to watch out for**

**Best Practices for Children**

**Special Considerations for Youth**

**Caring for those with Special Needs**

**Online Ministries Best Practices**

**Social Media**



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*Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child . . . welcomes me” (Matthew 18:5). Children are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God. Jesus also said, “As for whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and be drowned in the bottom of the lake” (Matthew 18:6). Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state that “children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation and abuse” (§ 162C).*

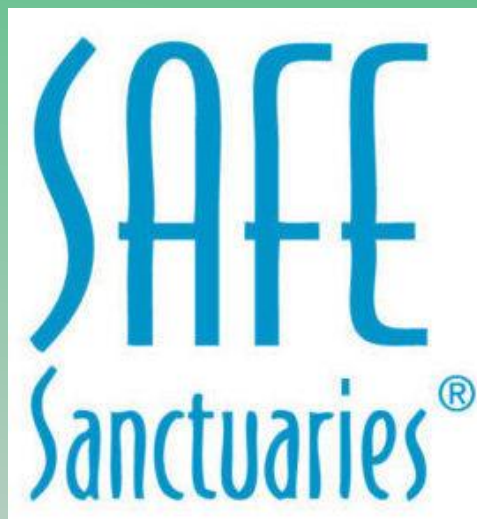
*Tragically, churches are not always safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation, including online, and ritual abuse occur in congregations of all sizes and geographical locations. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural, and racial ethnic lines. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation within churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma.*

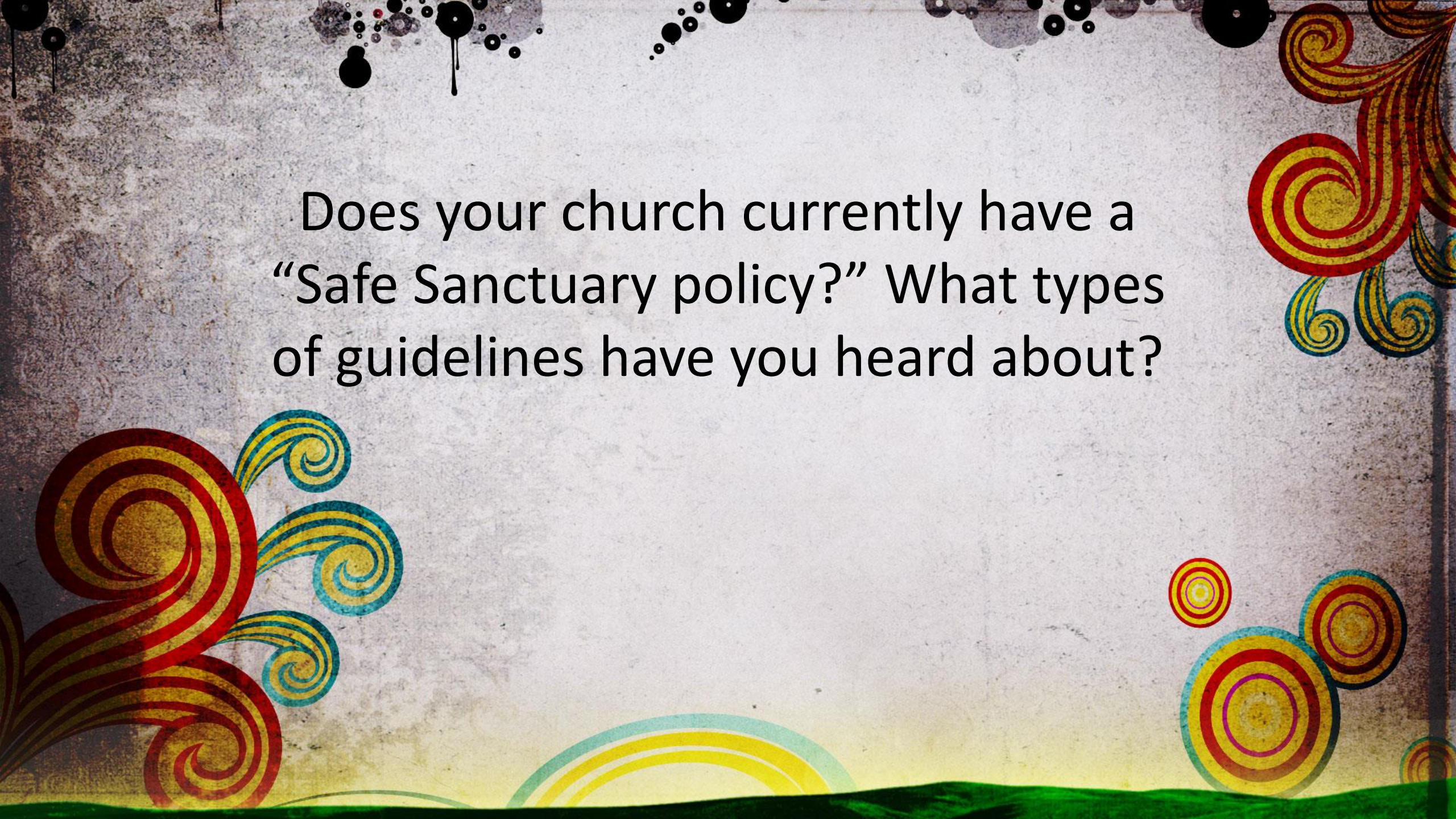
*Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child, the family, the local church, and its leaders. Churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.*

- 1. “Ritual abuse” refers to abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites.*
- 2. God calls us to make our congregations safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong.*

*(From the Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church – 2016, Resolution #3084).*

**“Safe Sanctuaries is an overt expression in making congregations safe places where children, youth, and elders may experience the abiding love of God and fellowship within the community of faith. Safe Sanctuaries provides local church leaders with standards to develop, implement, and monitor their own abuse prevention and risk reduction strategies.”**





Does your church currently have a “Safe Sanctuary policy?” What types of guidelines have you heard about?

## Key Resources:

[umcnic.org/safesanctuaries](http://umcnic.org/safesanctuaries)

[umcdiscipleship.org/equipping-leaders/safe-sanctuaries](http://umcdiscipleship.org/equipping-leaders/safe-sanctuaries)

*Safe Sanctuaries Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*  
(Anniversary Edition) By Joy Thornburg Melton

*Santuarios seguros Prevención del abuso infantil y juvenil en la iglesia*  
By Joy Thornburg Melton

*Safe Sanctuaries for Children and Youth DVD Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church* By  
Joy Thornburg Melton

*Safe Sanctuaries in a Virtual World* By Joy Thornberg Melton, Michelle Foster

*Safe Sanctuaries - Older Adults The Church Responds to Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of  
Older Adults* By J. Melton

## Child and Youth - Abuse Statistics

- In 2017, an estimated 674,000 children were victims of abuse and neglect nationwide, according to Child Maltreatment 2017, a 2019 publication of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. The greatest percentage of children suffered from neglect (74.9 percent) and physical abuse (18.3 percent).
- Most abuse victims—more than 90 percent—know their perpetrators: they may be parents or relatives, a coach, friend, teacher, caregiver, or another person in authority.
  - Some studies indicate that about 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys are victims of child sexual abuse. Other studies put those numbers higher.
  - A report of abuse is made about every 10 seconds.





## What to Watch Out For:

Sexual misconduct and abuse

Types of abuse, including neglect and emotional abuse

Signs and symptoms of abuse

Why many victims do not report abuse

Know about bullying and hazing

Recognize the signs of abuse to the elderly and those with special needs

## Mandated Reporters for Abuse

A mandatory (or mandated) reporter is a person who is required by state law to report suspected child abuse or maltreatment. Most state laws have a general clause stipulating that anyone who knows or suspects abuse should file a report. In some states, any person who has reason to believe that a child has been abused, abandoned, or neglected is required to report.

People who are often designated as mandatory reporters include:

- Clergy members
- Teachers, principals, and other school professionals
- Social workers
- Health practitioners
- Counselors, therapists, and other mental health professionals
- Childcare providers
- Law enforcement officers



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## Child Predators and “Grooming”

In the early stages of **grooming**, the predator may:

- Befriend the child to gain trust
- Show a common interest in sports, music, movies, or video games
- Spend a lot of time with children and youth who are not his or her own.
- Test boundaries through inappropriate jokes, wrestling, backrubs, or tickling.
- Give gifts, money, special privileges, or rewards to the child
- Recognize and fill a child or youth’s need for affection and attention

**WHERE’S THE LINE?**

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## **\*\*BOUNDARIES\*\***

*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”—Philippians 2:4 (ESV)*

**“People who work with children, youth, and vulnerable adults must respect the boundaries of others. By promoting close relationships, congregations can help vulnerable populations feel supported and loved. But that same closeness between a child or youth and an adult can also provide an opportunity for abuse. Specific policies may differ from group to group, but every organization must balance the need to keep people safe with the need to nurture and care for them. Therefore, transparency and accountability are vital for those serving in positions of leadership.”**

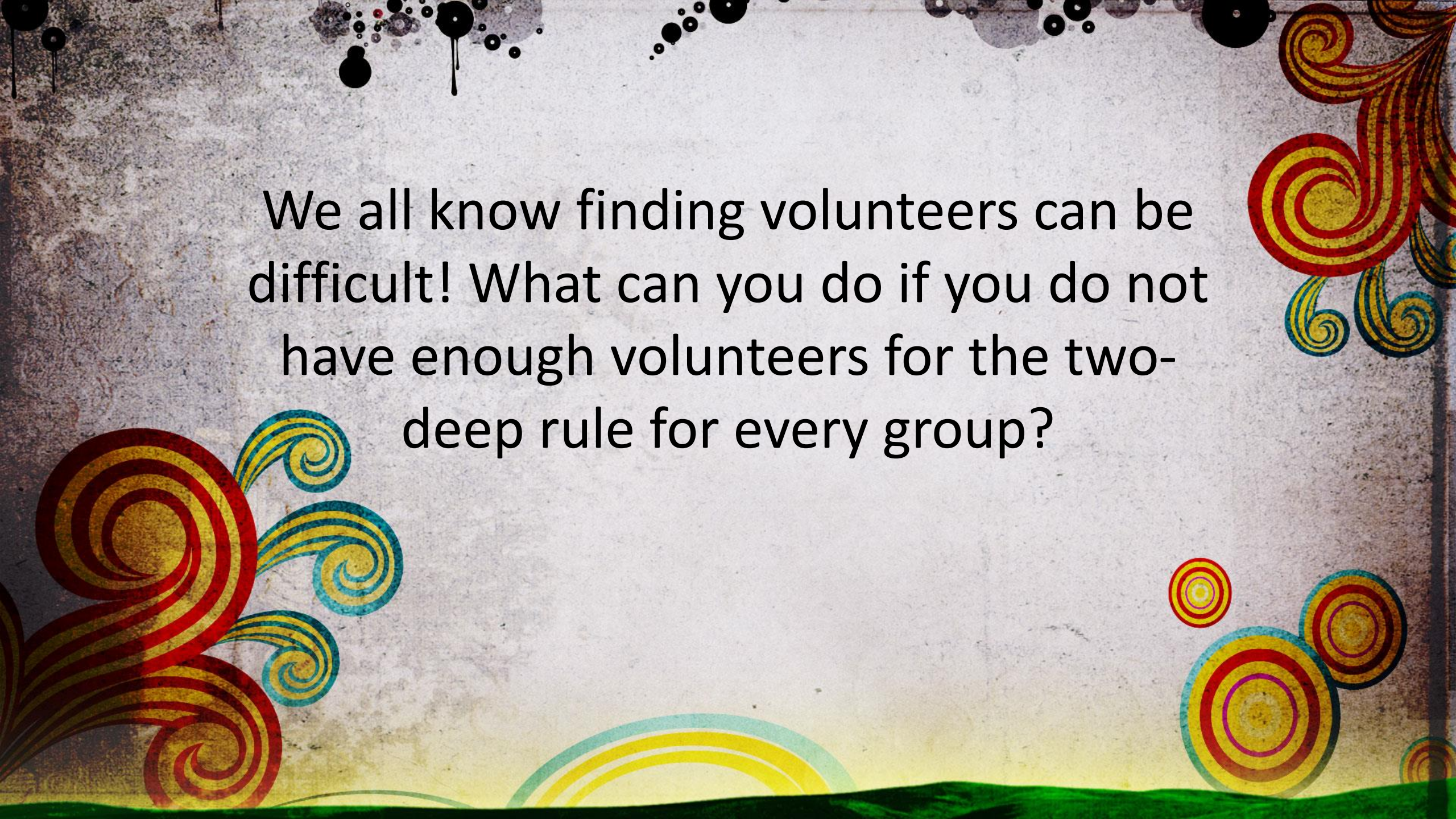
## Best Practices

- All workers should be at least five years older than the children or youth for whom they are responsible.
- All volunteers should submit to a background check. Additional requirements for new volunteers, such as supplying references or a waiting period may be appropriate. If the volunteer will be responsible for driving children or youth, they will need to also submit to a DMV check, as well as present a valid driver's license and proof of personal auto liability insurance coverage to the church.
- All leaders and volunteers in the ministry area should wear lanyards, name tags (with first and last name), or other identifiers.
- There should be two unrelated, non-cohabitating adults present in all settings. It is never appropriate to be alone with a child at any age (other than your own).

## Best Practices

- Establish bathroom/diaper policies that work for your church.
- Your church should establish and post expectations and guidelines regarding check-in, identification, and pick-up policies.
- Workers should use responsible behaviors. They should not smoke, or use or be under the influence of alcohol or drugs while volunteering.



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We all know finding volunteers can be difficult! What can you do if you do not have enough volunteers for the two-deep rule for every group?

## Appropriate Permissions and Forms

- An information sheet/medical release form should be kept on file in the event of special needs or an emergency. This is particularly important for events when the parents may not be on-site.
- A form submitted by the parents should indicate the names of adults designated to pick up their child.
- An emergency contact form should indicate how and where the parents may be reached at all times, including cell phone numbers.
- If you will be taking photos of children for your website or other materials, you should have a signed photo release.



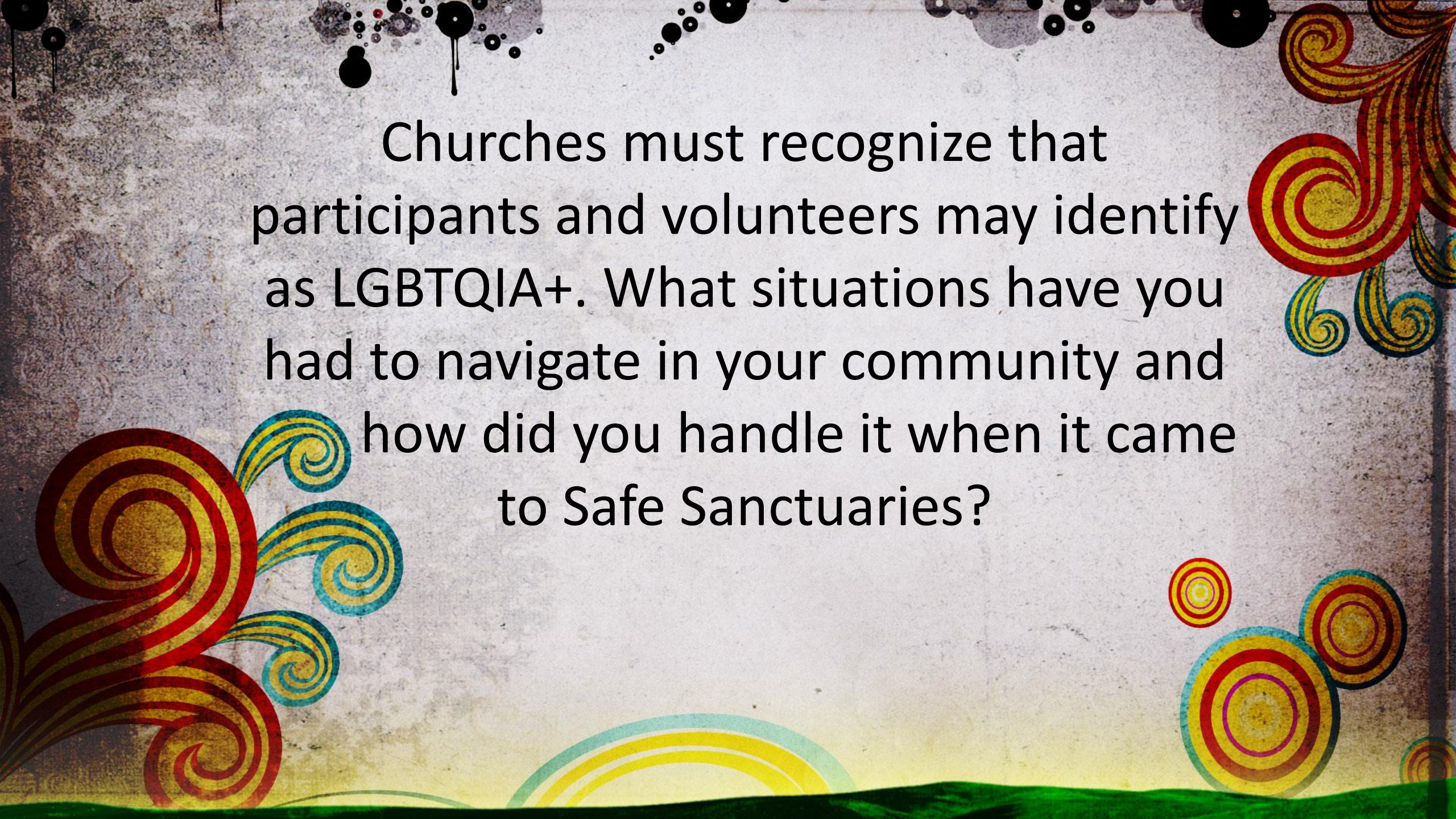


## Best Practices for Youth Ministry

- The Two-Deep Rule meets the “Rule of Three”
- Private meetings with youth should be avoided. If necessary, secure parental permission and meet in a public place where others are present. If you are meeting with a youth during a regular group meeting time, stay visible and inform other adults.
- Adults should not be alone in a car with an individual youth (other than their own child). When providing rides, The rule of three applies.
- Adults should not be in the church/location alone with a youth (before or after an event even). Have another adult present or wait outside.
- Communication to/with youth should include the parents or have permission given.

## Overnight Travel with Youth

- Best practices still apply
- Youth and adults should sleep in separate rooms, but be nearby
- Sleeping rooms must be separated by gender\*
- Assign roommates based on similar age and maturity
- Rule of three is still the best practice
- Balance of privacy and oversight

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Churches must recognize that participants and volunteers may identify as LGBTQIA+. What situations have you had to navigate in your community and how did you handle it when it came to Safe Sanctuaries?

# Physical Contact with Children and Youth

Initiating Touch

Sending the right message

Good, Bad and confusing touch

Disciplining children and youth

## Children and Youth with Special Needs

- Each child/youth and circumstance is unique!
- Conversation between you, your pastor or ministry director, and the parents/guardians is key.
- Age may be less of a consideration than abilities – take note of special pickup/drop-off, bathroom, and participation requirements.
- Physical contact boundaries are especially important.
- If you are leading/teaching/caring for people with special needs, you should have specialized training under the leadership of a trained staff member.

## Online Ministries Best Practices

What are the concerns?

- Inappropriate phone calls, text messages, or digital interaction
- “Zoombombing” and hacking of software or technology
- Inappropriate social media content
- Private meetings or chats between an adult leader and a young person
- Grooming behaviors
- Crossing of boundaries, whether purposeful or inadvertent

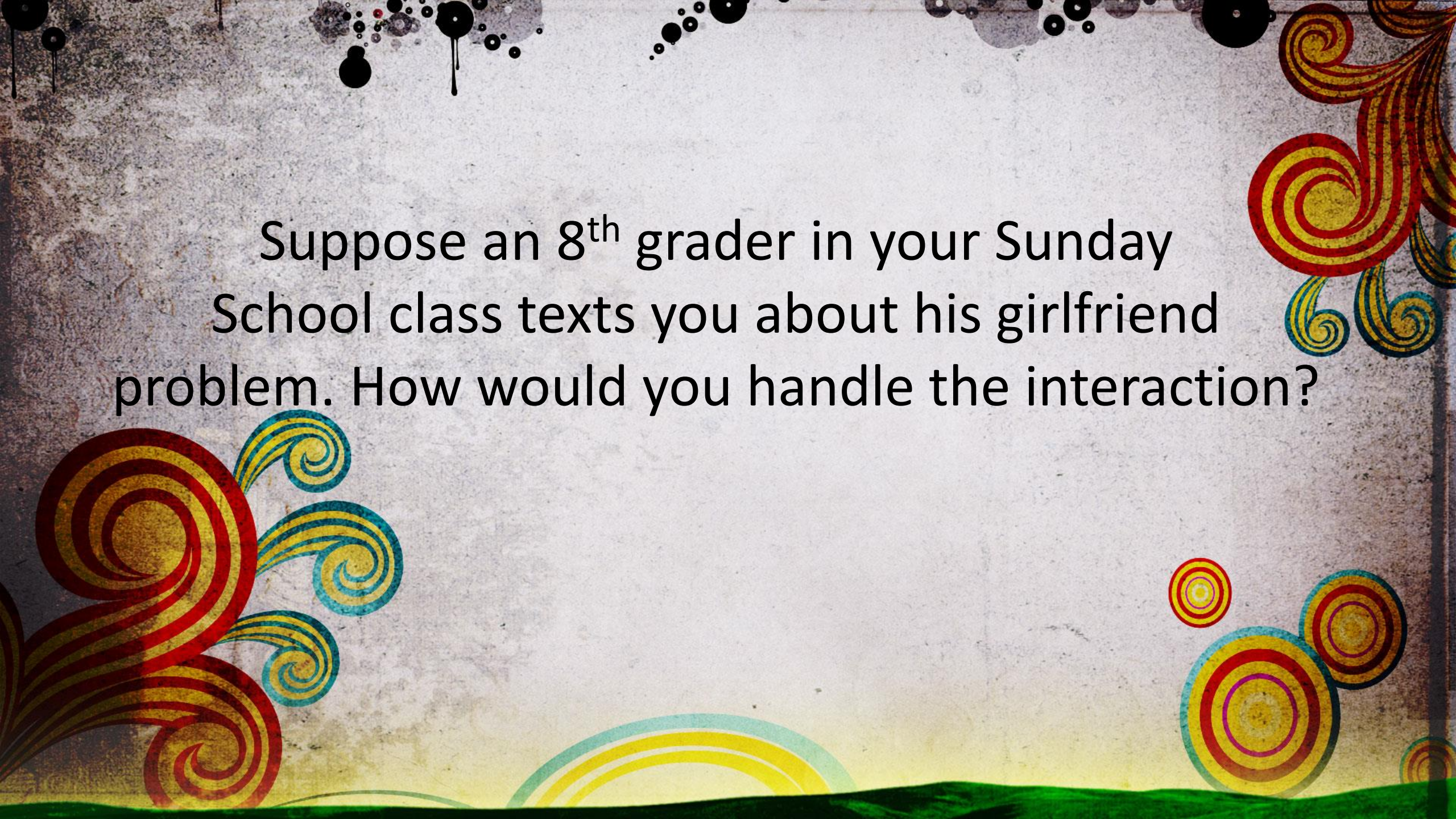
## Basic precautions

- Just like for in-person gatherings and interactions, volunteers should submit to a background check. The two-deep rule or Rule of three still applies.
- Volunteers should continue to be sure their language and behavior are in keeping with our values. Beware of your surroundings if you are zooming in from your home.
- Transparency is key! Parents should always know the type of interaction volunteers are having with their kids. If there are ever any concerns, or even “questionable” interactions, they should be documented and reported to a supervisor/pastor.
- Beware of the time of day, frequency, and reasons for digital contact.

- Leaders should not use electronic communication to post or discuss sensitive topics, including those of a sexual nature. Remember that it is more difficult to determine context and tone in the virtual space.
- A staff member or volunteer should avoid one-on-one interaction with any child or youth, including text messages, online chats, or via other technology means unless parental permission is given.
- Leaders should watch out for and report behaviors or statements from other leaders that violate church policies or suggest abusive conduct.
- Parents should be included on online correspondence and invitations to remote activities for children and youth



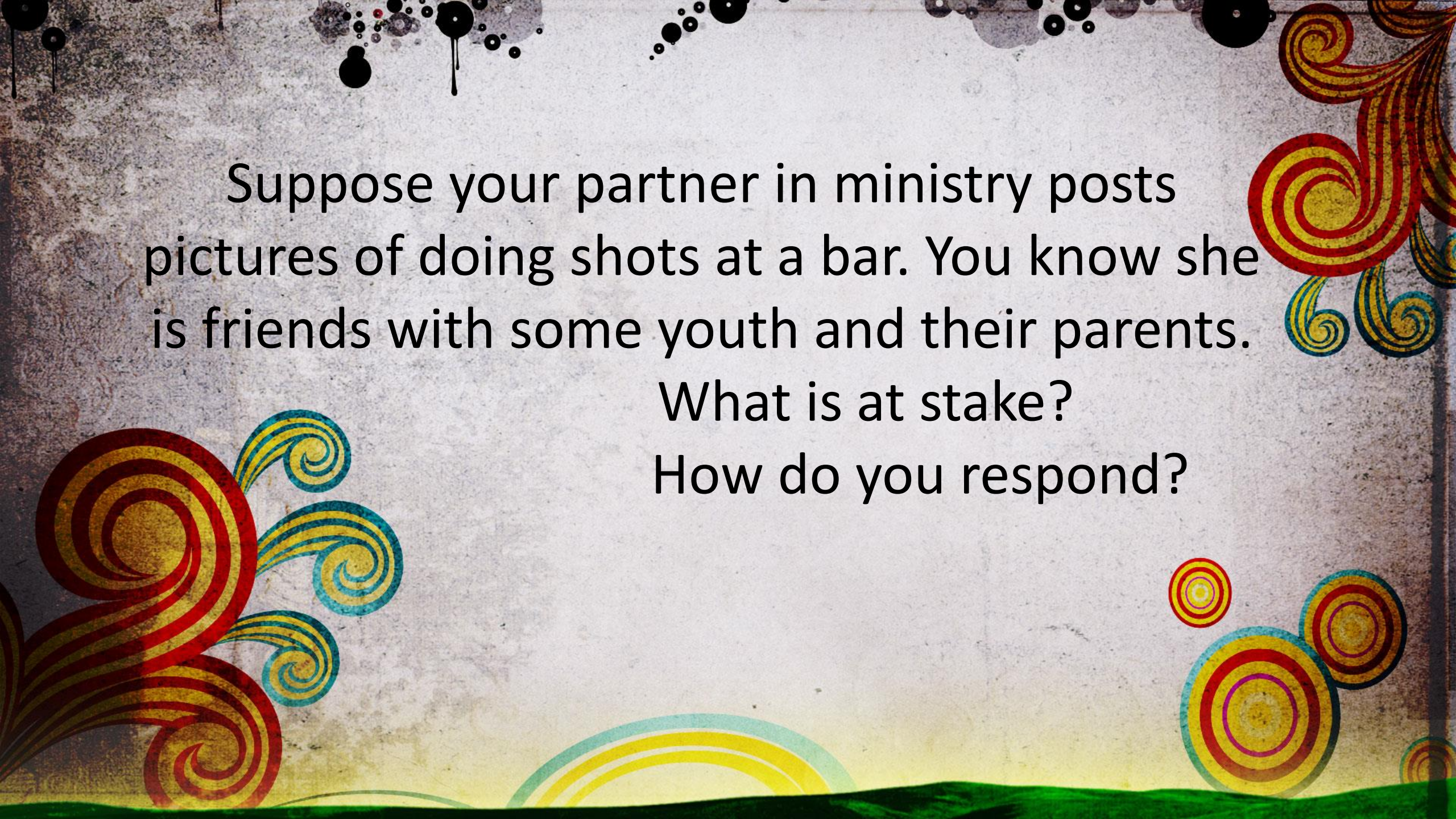
- If a leader receives inappropriate communication from a young person, they should tell their supervisor immediately and save all correspondence.
- Leaders should not take photos or post images or video of the online sessions without parental permission.
- In mentoring situations, where the in-person conversations would typically be one-on-one in an open area, the adult must find ways to encourage transparency in the virtual environment. Including another adult in the mentoring is a possible solution in this case.
- Other leaders in the organization should be encouraged to attend or drop in on virtual sessions taking place with children and youth.

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Suppose an 8<sup>th</sup> grader in your Sunday School class texts you about his girlfriend problem. How would you handle the interaction?

## Social Media

- All communication through social media should be public. Private groups, such as one for a church youth group, should be monitored and can be closed but not “hidden.”
- Have two administrators who continually monitor your organization’s social media. Set up a notification system so administrators can approve or report the post as soon as possible. It only takes a second for a person to take a screen shot of an inappropriate comment or post and share it with the public.
- Block users who post inappropriate content.
- When you post, even on your own social media pages, you are a representative of the church. Consider your privacy levels and who you are “friends” with online.

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Suppose your partner in ministry posts pictures of doing shots at a bar. You know she is friends with some youth and their parents.

What is at stake?

How do you respond?

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Questions?

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# Thank you!

**Rev. Sherry Steele**

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