



Keeping Churches Safe Online

Advances in technology provide churches new ways to reach their community with the gospel message. Streaming of Sabbath services, prayer meeting, Sabbath School, and other programs has become common for many congregations, and comes with the potential for liability. Understanding and following the laws that apply to streaming church services online is essential for congregations looking to use these emerging technologies.

Copyright

Copyright law protects intellectual property and other “original works of authorship,” including musical, artistic, or literary works. Simply stated, any unauthorized publication or use of copyrighted material is a violation of international law.

For churches, one of the most frequent violations of copyright law involves using pictures or videos found on the internet. Images and videos found on your search engine or social media are not “free” for use in sermon presentations or publications such as the church newsletter. Copyrighted material may be used if the proper licensing is obtained from the copyright owner.

Many websites offer stock photos and videos, some for free and others for a fee. Use of these images or videos

comes with a limited use license, but the standard license may not include the right to use the copyrighted material in an online broadcast.

Music is another common copyright violation for churches. Under the Religious Service Exemption, churches in the United States may legally perform copyrighted music in a church setting. Still, this exemption does not extend to church services streamed or broadcast over the internet. Special licensing from the music publisher must be obtained to broadcast copyrighted music.

Music licensing services such as Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) provides permission for churches to store, print, and project copyrighted lyrics, but their basic license does not cover online streaming of copyrighted music.



Privacy Laws

Privacy laws in the United States give individuals a “reasonable expectation of privacy.” When in private, that expectation is greater than when in a public place, such as a church. However, individuals should still expect some level of privacy when it comes to streaming church services.

Individuals in attendance of services broadcast online should be made aware that the service is being streamed, and they may be captured by the camera. Notification may be given in a bulletin announcement or on a sign posted in the building.

Care should also be given when mentioning individuals by name during prayer requests. Disclosing someone’s personal struggles on the internet without their permission can be a violation of their reasonable expectation of privacy.

Child Protection Online

Protecting children involved in church activities is not only essential for in-person events. Sexual harassment, abuse, and bullying can happen in any venue. All online church programs that involve children and youth need precautions to protect young people from potential abuse.

Sabbath School programs, Pathfinder meetings, and youth groups that meet online should follow the same child protection policies recommended on page 175 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual. These recommendations include the two-adult policy and open-door policy.

The two-adult policy states that two adults should be present at all times when working with children and youth. This avoids situations where a single adult is left alone with minors. In a virtual setting, this means having two adults in every video conferencing room

to monitor activities. There should not be any private meetings or one-on-one online contact between adults and minors.

The open-door policy discourages meeting with young people behind closed doors to allow transparency in what is happening. Online meetings with minors should also be “transparent.” Include parents in all electronic communication and inform parents that they are expected to attend or monitor all online sessions with their child.

The *North American Division Working Policy* also calls for proper screening and regular training for volunteers who work with young people. These recommendations also apply to volunteers working with children and youth in an online setting. The six-month waiting period for newly baptized or recently transferred members also applies when working with young people online.

Signed consent forms (also called permission forms or waivers) may seem like they only apply to in-person events and activities. A good consent form informs parents about the types of activities and asks them to give permission for their child to participate. Consent forms for online events may be just as beneficial in this regard as for in-person events.

Adventist Risk Management, Inc. (ARM) has developed an example [template](#) of an online consent form. It is recommended that churches and schools work with their local legal counsel to ensure they meet all jurisdictional laws.

Learn more about protecting our young people with [Starting Your Child Protection Plan](#) from Adventist Risk Management, Inc.



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