Be safe in cyberspace

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I T'S UP TO THE PARENTS to tell us," said a teenager to a room full of United Methodists when asked, "How do you learn about staying safe in cyberspace?" The teen continued, "If bad stuff gets posted [on my social-networking site], it could lead to drama."

Do you sometimes feel like you're in a 21st century Land of Oz? Young people feel at home as they exchange information on Facebook or MySpace, send text messages to their friends, or download music to their I-Pods. Words like *IM-ing*, *poking*, and *blogging* are common terms for them, yet keeping up with the language in our evolving digital world is challenging for many adults. We can't run or hide from cyberspace, so let's face it. Let's talk about safe technology use in our ministries with children and youth, which is the next step in developing and maintaining Safe Sanctuaries.

In October, approximately 150 United Methodist clergy and staff from conferences, districts, and local churches gathered in Nashville to learn more about this hot topic. "CyberSAFEty in Ministry" was sponsored by the General Board of Discipleship. Speakers included a school-system director of information technology, an investigator from an Internet Crimes Against Children police unit, and a group known as Teen Angels – children and youth who teach others about Internet safety. A goal of the gathering was to help church leaders update their congregation's child-abuse prevention policies and procedures, implemented as the Safe Sanctuaries program.

Church policies should include a section on "Acceptable Use of Technology." There should be no expectation of privacy when using church equipment. Make sure the policy includes this statement: "Usage of church equipment such as computers, printers, and cell phones may be suspended if used inappropriately." Each church must determine the parameters and rules for appropriate usage. (See "Recommended Sites" for guidelines.)

Possession and distribution of pornography has become an estimated $57 billion business each year. The problem of child pornography is intensified by the swift exchange of inappropriate images on the Internet and digital alteration of photos. The average age for which a child is exposed to porn is 11. Some congregations are "confronting the elephant in the pew" by designating a worship service to address pornography addiction. An easy step to combat inappropriate matter on church property is to use an Internet filter. (For a review of filters, visit *http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com*.)
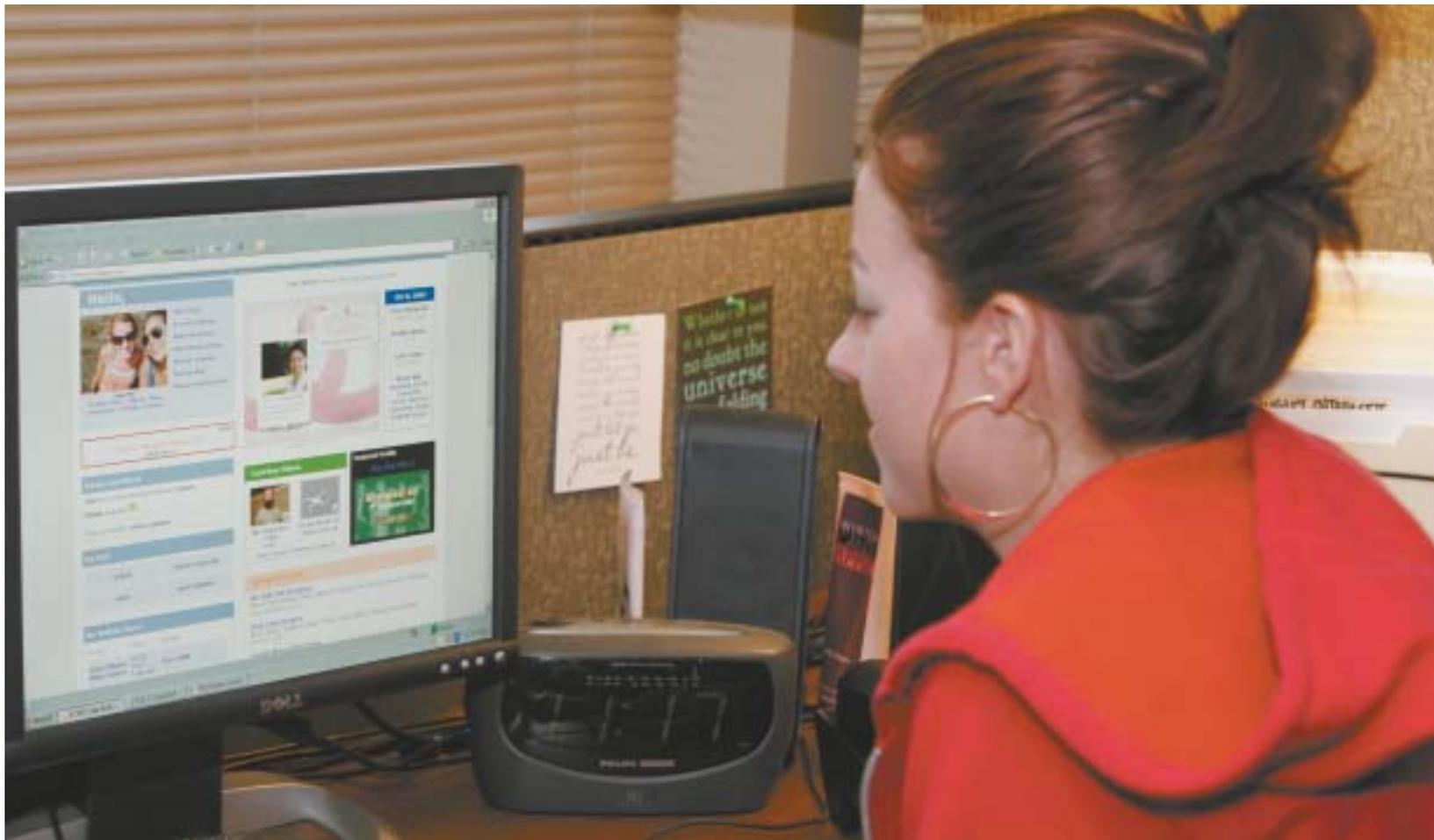
Include the children and teens at your church when addressing cyber-safety. Ask them to show you their favorite Web sites and social networking pages. Together, identify the benefits and the hazards of each site. Confirm that the passwords they use are not words that can be found in the dictionary. The most effective passwords incorporate lowercase and uppercase letters, numbers, and symbols. Names, school identification, jersey numbers, and memorable dates do not make secure passwords. An example of a good password which John Wesley may have used is *DatGyC*! These are the first letters of the phrase, "Do all the good you can."

Helping to protect young people from online predators is one more way that our churches can be in ministry to and with children and youth. ∎

UMNS photo illustration by Ronny Perry

Online social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook offer a new avenue for communication and ministry, but also for abuse.