

Can youth groups meet in homes?



Dr Sam Richards is head of children's, youth and intergenerational discipleship for the United Reformed Church. She was part of the UK Christian Youth Work Consortium and Churches Together in England team responding to the National Youth Agency September 2023 guidance entitled Youth Work in Private Dwellings: Safety first – no compromises.



Pizza, hot drinks and cookies round the kitchen table, or a BBQ in the drizzle in the back garden – staple experiences for many church youth groups enjoying a gathering at someone's home. How many of us currently involved in children's and youth work grew up through such small fellowship groups meeting in homes?

Yet youth groups meeting in such spaces are now threatened by the National Youth Agency (NYA) declaring this 'fundamentally unsafe', and advising that no youth work should take place in 'private dwellings'.

During the pandemic, the NYA did an excellent job of campaigning to ensure vulnerable young people still had access to support, publishing regularly updated advice for youth work as the government restrictions changed. This included reminding everyone that youth work in private dwellings was illegal (as was any type of gathering in homes at the time). However, after the pandemic, this piece of advice was not updated despite being no longer true. When challenged about this, the NYA conducted a consultation and published a report stating that youth work should no longer happen in homes for safeguarding reasons.

Although 'fundamentally unsafe' was the headline of this report, they do, in fact, go on to say that it is possible to put appropriate safeguarding measures in place. In response to the NYA report, the UK Christian Youth Work Consortium and Churches Together in England gathered a team to respond with a guidance document for church youth groups². As a team, we argue that the NYA position is an overreaction, given that no such recommendations have been made in safeguarding reviews to ban youth work in homes. Safeguarding here, as in any context, is very important – but so is continuing to offer homes as a space for young people.

“Safeguarding here, as in any context, is very important – but so is continuing to offer homes as a space for young people.”

So why are we fighting for homes as a venue for small group Christian youth work? At the most basic level, not every community has good accessible facilities to host small groups of young people. The church may not have a hall, or it may be fully booked at times when young people are available; there may be no budget to hire a space; or there may be no Sunday evening bus service to enable them to get there and home again safely. Homes may be the only spaces that make youth work accessible to young people.

A home is a very different type of space to a multipurpose meeting space. It is more informal, relaxed and personal. People invited into this space respond to this by being more informal, relaxed and personal in their interactions with each other. Our purpose in gathering in small groups in church life is not to have formal meetings around a boardroom table, but rather to deepen our relationships with one another so that we can support and encourage one another in our everyday discipleship. Building trust and connection is important as we explore God's word and respond to God's call together. In other words, enabling community is core to the purpose of small groups in the life of the local church. Young people particularly appreciate an informal, relaxed space in which to be together and deepen friendships, and meeting in homes is one way we might provide this. Laughter rings out, tears are shed, thoughts and feelings are shared, perspectives are challenged, and memories are made in this environment.

Homes are personal because they are someone's, or a family's, personal space. Homes are a place of hospitality – offered by the hosts and received by the guests. Such hospitality has always been an important dimension of Christian spirituality. Jesus was dependent on the hospitality of others, having no home of his own. The Gospels are full of encounters with Jesus that involve events and meals in people's homes. Jesus himself often spoke about hospitality as an outworking of faith, a response to the loving invitation we have received from God to the heavenly banquet. The epistles are full of encouragements to meet together in homes and to offer generous hospitality. As we open up our homes to others, we open up our hearts to the work of the Spirit.

Many small youth groups meet in people's homes. This might be the home of one of the leaders, or even the minister. The members may take turns to host the group at their homes, enabling the young people to offer hospitality. In any setting, normal good practice applies: the leaders should be safely recruited (and not all live in the home being used); the potential risks present in the space should be assessed and measures put in place to minimise these; parents and carers must know where and when the group is meeting; codes of conduct should be in place; and everyone should know how to respond to any safeguarding concerns. If you don't already have a policy about youth work in home settings, work together with your safeguarding officer to put one in place.

The personal nature of homes is their greatest asset, as discussed above, but also the reason they are more complex settings. There are types of spaces that should be out of bounds to the group (such as bedrooms); other people may be in the home who are not part of the group; potential disruption to neighbours needs to be considered; homes are not set up with fire exits clearly signposted! Being invited to a home for a small group may encourage young people to see this home as a safe place that they could go at other times, so boundaries need to be clearly communicated.

Meeting in homes has the potential for us to create a holy space where God graciously meets with us through a deepening of relationships. The environment can create a setting where people feel comfortable to open up and grow in their faith. Because of this it is vital that the young people's openness is not being exploited in any way by those in a position of power. But it is equally vital that we continue to offer these valuable spaces to our young people. Jesus promised that when two or three meet together in his name, he will be there, in the midst of that meeting. Meeting in homes can be a powerful context for young people to know Jesus, and this is why we must work hard to protect that space so that it safely enables them to grow in their faith.

For guidelines, see:

Guidance for URC local church activities in private dwellings – United Reformed Church: <https://bit.ly/4oFjx76>

Guidelines for Children's and Youth Ministry in personal homes: <https://bit.ly/48KAdo5>

New guidance for youth work in private dwellings demands 'no compromises' around safety of young people – National Youth Agency: <https://bit.ly/48KOJw0>

For further reading, see:

Home-grown Youth Work – Keeping Young People Safer in Private Dwellings, David Howell, Grove Books.

¹1564_NYA-Private-Dwellings-Report-P3-2.pdf

²Youth-work-in-private-dwellings-DIGITAL.pdf