



Using Social Media and Other Forms of Digital Communication for Ministry or as Ministers

The amount of information available online continues to expand. While most online communication once took place through e-mail or instant messaging services, now more and more content is being shared publically and is widely visible. Sites like Twitter, Facebook, and blogs can provide considerable benefits for churches. These social networking services come with certain risks. Understanding how these websites work and should be used is helpful in avoiding the pitfalls of social media.

Congregations are encouraged to develop specific guidelines and policies relating to their use of social media both within and outside of the congregation. With gratitude for the work and generosity of the Office of Pastoral Response of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut for developing these guidelines and the Connecticut Conference of United Church of Christ, upon which the guidelines are based, the following suggested practices and guidelines for use of social networking websites and other forms of digital communication are offered as a resource to that end.

Suggested Practices & Guidelines for Use of Social Networking Websites & Other Forms of Digital Communication

As an ever increasing number of people use and prefer digital communication over other forms, it is essential that the church be present in this mission field. Social networking sites, on-the-spot communication devices and email can enhance communication, faith sharing and deepen relationship. The following recommended practices and guidelines apply commonly accepted principles of healthy boundaries and safe church to the virtual world of digital networking and communication.

Commonly Accepted Principles of Healthy Boundaries and Safe Church

- ✦ Adults have more power than children and youth.
- ✦ Clergy have more power than people with whom they have a pastoral relationship.
- ✦ The mutuality of friendship cannot exist when there is a disparity of power.
- ✦ Two unrelated adults must be able to maintain visual contact with each other any time they engage in ministry with children or youth.
- ✦ Windows in doors allow transparency of interactions with children, youth and adults who may be vulnerable.

General Information about Digital Communications

- ✘ All communication sent digitally (email, social networking sites, notes or posts, etc.) is NOT CONFIDENTIAL and may be shared or reposted to others.
- ✘ Interactions in the virtual world need to be transparent, as a window in the door provides transparency in the physical world.
- ✘ In the virtual world healthy boundaries and safe church practices must be adhered to as they are in the physical world.
- ✘ In the virtual world, “friend” can mean anyone with whom you are willing to communicate through that medium. In the physical world, friend can mean much more in terms of intimacy, self-disclosure, mutuality and expectations for relationship.
- ✘ Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse/neglect/exploitation of children, youth, elders and vulnerable populations apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.

Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Interactions with Children and Youth:

Social Networking Sites-Relationships

1. Adults who minister to children and youth are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile. Individual personal profiles are to be used to interact with real friends, family and peers. Adults should not submit “friend” requests to minors or youth. Youth may not be able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults. Youth may ask to be “friends”, and adults should discern the level of contact they want to maintain with youth prior to responding to these requests.
2. If an adult chooses to accept friend requests from minors or youth who are associated with their community of faith, other adult leaders must have full access to all aspects of that adult’s profile and correspondence.
3. Adults who want to connect via a social networking website with youth to whom they minister are strongly encouraged to set up a closed group account that youth may join. Youth requesting to “friend” an adult can then be invited to join this group rather than be accepted as a friend on an adult’s personal profile account. The purpose of these two separate accounts/profiles is to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries with youth and real family, friends and colleagues.
4. Any material on any site (whether affiliated with the church or not) that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to the clergy and/or the Department of Children and Families (DCF). If the material is on a church affiliated site, that material should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with DCF and/or police. The Mass. DCF hotline is 1-800-792-5200.

Social Networking Sites-Groups

1. Closed groups, but not “hidden” groups, should be used for youth groups (J2A, Rite 13, administrators, confirmation, pilgrimage, mission trips, etc.).
2. Groups should have at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth.
3. Invitations to youth to join the group should be made by youth administrators, unless a youth previously asked an adult administrator to invite him/her to join the group.
4. Behavioral covenants should be created to govern what content is appropriate and inappropriate for an online youth group.
5. Any material on any site (whether affiliated with the church or not) that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to the clergy and/or DCF. If the material is on a church affiliated site, that material should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with DCF and/or police.
6. Inappropriate material that does not raise suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should immediately be removed from the site.
7. Any content that details inappropriate behavior (outside of the bounds of the established behavioral covenant) during a church sponsored event or activity should be addressed by adult youth leaders and parents.
8. Social networking groups for youth should be open to parents of current members.
9. Parents should be informed that the content of youth pages or groups that are not sponsored by the church are NOT within the purview of adult youth leaders.
10. Adult leaders of youth groups and former youth members who, due to departure, removal from position, or are no longer eligible because they “aged-out” of a program should be immediately removed from digital communication with youth groups via social networking sites, list serves, etc.

Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Interactions with Adults:

Social Networking Sites-Relationships

1. Clergy are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile to shield both adult and youth members from viewing content that may be inappropriate.
2. Individual personal profiles of clergy are to be used to interact with real friends, family and peers. Clergy should not submit “friend” requests to parishioners and others to whom they minister. The disparity of power may not give the other person the ability to decline such request.
3. Clergy who want to connect via a social networking website with parishioners are strongly encouraged to set up a group account that all parishioners may join. The purpose of having a personal profile and parish group is to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries with parishioners and real family, friends and colleagues.

4. Clergy should consider the impact of declining a “friend” request from parishioners. These encounters may create a tension in “real world” relationships. Clergy can direct “friend” requests from parishioners to the parish’s group page.
5. Clergy who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church sponsored digital communications groups to maintain contact with youth members.
6. When a cleric’s ministry at a parish or other ministry setting ends, the cleric should remove parishioners as “friends” or contacts in all forms of digital communications.

Recommendations for digital communications and content:

Behavioral Covenants

1. Covenants should acknowledge that materials posted on Church Sponsored sites (and/or group pages) are NOT CONFIDENTIAL.
2. Covenants should acknowledge that content deemed inappropriate will be removed from the site or group page.
3. Covenants for communities of faith should address the following issues:
 - Appropriate language
 - Eligibility of membership to join a social networking group. Things to consider include whether you have to be a member of a parish or youth group and whether there are age requirements/restrictions for participation for youth groups.
 - Loss of eligibility of membership and removal from the social networking group. Consider how and when members will be removed from the group due to moving away, leaving the faith community, becoming too old for youth group, clergy leaving to minister to another parish or exclusion from ministry positions for other reasons
 - Who, how and when may photos be tagged (members identified by name; for example, individuals may tag themselves in photos but should not tag others)
 - Appropriate and inappropriate behavior of members (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, sexual acts, etc.) and the consequence for inappropriate behavior.
 - Compliance with mandated reporting laws regarding suspected abuse.

Recommendations for Video Chats, Blogs or Video Blogs

1. Adults should refrain from initiating video chats with youth.
2. Participants in a video chat or blog should consider what will be shown in the video such as their surroundings, their clothing/state of dress, etc.
3. All transcripts of on-line text chats, video chats, blogs or video blogs should be saved when possible.
4. All clergy and adults engaged in ministry with youth should consider the content and nature of any post that will be read by or visible to youth. Your voice is often considered the voice of the church.

Recommendations for Publishing/Posting Content Online

1. Congregations must inform participants when they are being videoed because church buildings are not considered public space.
2. Any faith community that distributes video of its worship services or activities on the web or via other broadcast media MUST post signs that indicate the service will be broadcast.
3. All communities of faith should take care to secure signed Media Release forms from adults and guardians of minor children who will or may participate in activities that may be photographed or videoed for distribution.
4. Photos that are published on church sponsored sites should not include name or contact information for minor children or youth.

Recommendations for Use of Email or Texting (Includes Twitter)

1. Email can be an appropriate and effective means of communicating basic factual information such as the time of an event, agenda for a meeting, text of a document, etc.
2. Email is not an appropriate communication method for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation.
3. If an email message is longer than a couple of sentences, then the matter might more properly be addressed via live conversation.
4. Humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted in an email.
5. All email users should take a moment to consider the ramifications of their message before clicking on the “send” or “reply to all” button.

Additional resources for congregations to develop specific guidelines and practices for social networking include:

www.churchsafety.com

provides general information about setting up a church website.

www.justinwise.net/social-media

includes the Ultimate List of Social Media Policies for Churches and Ministries and denominational templates.

Social Networking for Youth

Social networking sites, chat rooms, virtual worlds, and blogs are how teens and tweens socialize online. It is important for adults to teach them how to navigate these spaces safely. Those who minister with our children in the church setting also should know about safe networking skills and sites for children and youth. Among the pitfalls that come with online socializing are sharing too much information or posting comments, photos, or videos that can damage a reputation or hurt someone’s feelings.

Bullying and boundaries are also to be considered in the area of social networking. The best safe church practices should always be considered and utilized when there is communication via social networking sites or discussion of its use.

Those who minister with our youth need to be especially open and aware of the opportunity to discuss the topics of social networking and bullying. There are many resources for parents and adult leaders that can make a significant impact on keeping our youth safe.

Some suggestions include:

- ✚ Remind them that online actions have consequences
- ✚ Limit what they share
- ✚ Encourage online manners
- ✚ Encourage limiting access to profiles
- ✚ Encourage parents to talk with their kids about what they are doing online
- ✚ Let youth know about the church's practices and guidelines for social media and how it affects them

It is important to remember that best safe church practices should always be considered and utilized when there is communication via social media sites or discussion of its use.

Additional resources:

www.onguardonline.gov (Kids and Socializing Online).

www.internetsafety.org

If you have questions that have not been addressed in this document, or if you'd like to talk about a more specific issue, please contact our Diocesan Safe Church Officer – the Rev. Tanya R. Wallace – at 413.532.8917 or allsaintschurchrector@gmail.com.