Social Media Guidelines – 2021

Please refer to the Presbytery of Cincinnati's Social Media Policy for requirements in communication and social media. The below are best practices and guidance in the implementation of that policy. If there are questions, please contact the Office of the Presbytery, Presbytery Stated Clerk, or Executive Presbyter.

Commonly Accepted Principles of Healthy Boundaries and Safe Church

- Remember that anything you write can be copied and distributed, and mis-attributed as the opinion of an institution instead of just the individual.
- All clergy, adults engaged in ministry with youth or committees, Session members, and Presbytery staff should consider the content and nature of any post. Your voice is often considered the voice of the church and Presbytery.
- It is important to remember that you are holding out a public witness in your personal life, so please should be careful and prudent on your personal social networking communications. As appropriate, particularly when discussing ministry related issues, you should let it be known that private personal postings are your own opinions and not that of the congregation or Presbytery.
- Help protect staff and members from fraud.
- Make sure that church staff and volunteer leaders are using church computers appropriately.

<u>Power Bases</u>

- 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.

<u>General Information about Digital Communications</u>

- 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, and friend-of-a-friend may also have access to your communication, regardless of the presence of a shared ideology.
- Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse/neglect/exploitation of children, youth, elders and vulnerable adults 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

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 Child Protective Services (CPS) in the state in which the child resides. 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 CPS/police.

Groups on Social Networking Sites

- Groups should have at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth.
- Closed groups, but not "hidden" groups, should be used for youth groups.
- 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.
- Behavioral covenants should be created to govern what content is appropriate and inappropriate for an online youth group.
- 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 Child Protective Services. 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 CPS/police.
- 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.
- 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.
- Social networking groups for youth should be open to parents of current members.
- 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.
- 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-Relationship

- 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.
- Individual personal profiles of clergy should be used to interact with real friends, family and peers.
  - Clergy should consider whether to submit "friend" requests to congregants and others to whom they minister. The disparity of power may not give the other person the ability to decline such request.
- Clergy who want to connect via a social networking website with congregants are strongly encouraged to set up a group account that all congregants may join. The purpose of having a personal profile and church group is to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries with congregants and real family, friends and colleagues.
- Clergy should consider the impact of declining a "friend" request from congregants. These encounters may create a tension in "real world" relationships. Clergy can direct "friend" requests from congregants to the church's group page.
- Clergy who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church sponsored digital communications groups to maintain contact with youth members.
- When a pastor's ministry at a church or other ministry setting ends, the pastor should consider removing congregants as "friends" or contacts in all forms of digital communications.

Recommendations for Digital Communications and Content

Behavioral Covenants

- Covenants should acknowledge that materials posted on Church Sponsored sites (and/or group pages) are NOT CONFIDENTIAL.
- Covenants should acknowledge that content deemed inappropriate will be removed from the site or group page.
- 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 church 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 church 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, inappropriate content) and the consequence for inappropriate behavior.
  - Compliance with mandated reporting laws regarding suspected abuse.

Recommendations for Video Chats, Blogs or Video Blogs

- Adults should refrain from initiating video chats with youth.
- 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.
- All transcripts of on-line text chats, video chats, blogs or video blogs should be saved when possible.

Recommendations for Publishing/Posting Content Online

- Congregations must inform participants when they are being videoed because church buildings are not considered public space.
- 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.
- 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 outside a closed group.
- Photos that are published on church sponsored public sites should not include name or contact information for minor children or youth.

Recommendations for Use of Email or Texting (Includes Twitter)

- 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.
- Email is not an appropriate communication method for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation.
- If an email message is longer than a couple of sentences, then the matter might more properly be addressed via live conversation.
- Humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted in an email.
- All email users should take a moment to consider the ramifications of their message before clicking on the "send" or "reply to all" button.

Best Practices to use Social Media Successfully:

1. **Be responsive.** Set up notifications to be informed when someone posts to your page, and be prepared to respond quickly—within the hour if possible and certainly the same day—even during evenings or weekends. Get someone to cover for you if you expect to be unavailable. If you don't know the answer, it is better to say, "We will find out and get back to you" than to not answer at all.
2. **When controversial actions, events, or decisions are anticipated**, discuss with leadership what strategy and steps will be followed when someone posts or tweets about the issue in a critical way. Have church leadership decide who will respond to comments and when approval may be required.
3. **Dealing with negative comments.** While obvious spam posts can be deleted, comments should be allowed on blogs, Facebook pages, and other places. Do not automatically delete negative posts. Instead, respond kindly with accurate information. If the person wants to engage in a lengthy battle or appears to be promoting an agenda, just stop answering.
4. **Be responsible.** The fast pace and transparency of social media mean we will get things wrong sometimes. That is okay if you handle it gracefully, starting with acknowledging your error. If you make a mistake, admit it—be upfront and quick with your correction. What you write is ultimately your responsibility. Participation in social media on behalf of [CHURCH NAME] is not a right but a ministry, so please treat it seriously and with respect.
5. **Questions.** If the poster has specific questions about programs or policies, direct them to an email address for the person who can answer those questions, or to the private message function on your organization's Facebook page. Also, notify the person who you have identified as a point person for questions that this person will be contacting them and ask them to respond as quickly as they can to avoid any further public postings. Criticisms or questions are best answered in private, and every care should be taken to avoid a protracted comment battle.
6. **Page moderation.** On Facebook, in the administration portal, block users from posting comments with obscenities. You will find it under Settings and then Page Moderations.

7. **Display guidelines for comments on your page.** A good guideline for Facebook, YouTube and other social menu venues is to post something similar to this disclaimer in the bio or "about us" section: We welcome your thoughts in this space. We ask that you be respectful in what you post and in your comments about other members of the community here. If you'd like to know more about us, visit our web site at [WEBSITE HERE].
8. **Use proper hashtags.** Never use a hashtag without first being sure you know the origins and proper use. Search online through www.hashtagify.me or other means to see if and how it's already being used on social media.
9. **Post context for links.** If you want to share a news story on Twitter, Facebook, etc., add a sentence or two that tells what the story is about, so potential readers will know what they're going to visit when they click on the link. Avoid lengthy posts. For example, a good length for a Facebook post is two to three sentences.
10. **Avoid acronyms.** They are difficult for readers to figure out.
11. **Do not use first-person-singular language on a page you manage.** Use "we" to refer to a group of people or the church by name, but do not use "I." There is no entity represented by a single person.
12. **Update your status regularly and strategically.** Social media channels should be updated frequently. You can use a free timing tool like hootsuite.com to schedule posts in advance to various social media channels for days you won't be working. If you use a scheduling tool, be aware of events in the larger world. If a major national news event has just occurred, posting about something completely unrelated is usually seen as a blunder.
13. **Use analytics to plan.** Based on your social media goals, track and measure people reached and/or impressions and engagement rate. These numbers will help gauge success and improve what types of content to post in the future.

Best Practices for Using Social Media to Promote Events:

1. Do not create separate social media pages or accounts just for the event itself.
2. Pre-event planning:
    a. Meet with the social media manager and/or church leadership six months prior to the event and again one month before the event starts to discuss goals and messaging.
    b. Develop a web page early with information about the event. This is the place to refer people from Twitter, Facebook, etc.
    c. Choose a hashtag for the event that is short and unique and use it on all posts in all social media. Hashtags make social media searchable. Search online through hashtagify.me to be sure your hashtag is not being used by anyone else. Adding a year to your hashtag is one way to help make it specific. Avoid generic hashtags (#presbyterian, #church) in favor of tags like #BigTent14, #GA221, #PYT13, etc.
    d. Be responsive. As the event gets closer, be ready with answers to questions that people are likely to ask about the event.
    e. Plan social media posts around early-bird dates, registration deadlines, and start dates and times.
    f. Tag other churches or organizations that are involved with your event (when possible), so they can share your content and help you spread the word.
3. During the event:
    a. Don't "overpost" on Facebook. Group photos in albums, so you don't flood the Facebook feed for people who may not be interested.
    b. Post as soon as possible after a session ends. Very current content keeps followers engaged. Be sure to proofread carefully.

c. Use the names of people in photos as much as you can. Taking a photo of the badge of a person at a conference separate from their portrait is a good trick that helps you keep track of those involved. You may need their name later.
d. Tag photos of your Facebook friends to help spread the photos through social networks.
e. Live-tweet events, but not excessively. Pick up a few key points from each session and hashtag them with the event hashtag.
f. After the event: Continue to post a few items for a short time to wrap up any loose ends.

Best Practices for Personal Social Media Usage.
As staff of a church or the Presbytery, you are likely viewed by friends, family, and other followers as a representative of that institution.

1. Be transparent and honest about your identity, and you may want to say something like, "The views I express are not necessarily those of the [CHURCH NAME]."
2. Be accurate. Before posting, take a moment to Google a news story to be sure you have facts correct. Rely on mainstream, reputable news sources.
3. Be respectful. Long, drawn-out arguments on social media consume energy and cause emotions to flame. It is easy to become angry and post insults. This damages your reputation and the reputation of the [CHURCH NAME] and is best avoided.
4. Maintain confidentiality. Do not post confidential or inside information about the community members of [CHURCH NAME] or staff. In general, don't post anything about your work that you would not present at a conference.
5. Posting events, photos, videos. You may post about official [CHURCH NAME] events on your personal page, but the best practice for page administrators is to post on the organization's page first. You may share to your own personal page or create an entirely new post, but you should tag your organization's page when doing so. This will encourage more people to like and interact with your page.
6. Be aware of liability. You can be held legally liable for what you post on your personal site and on the sites of others. Individual bloggers have been held liable for commentary deemed to be copyrighted, defamatory, libelous, or obscene (as defined by the courts).
7. Protect your identity. Don't provide personal information (home address, telephone number, or email address). It is a good practice to create a separate, non-work email address that is used only with your social media site.