

Guidelines for the Responsible Use of Social Media for Virginia Conference Clergy and Religious Professionals

Preface:

With the quick rise of social media in human society; businesses, sports organizations and other entities have begun creating guidelines for the responsible use of social media by their constituents. The reason for these guidelines is to assist their members in the appropriate use of social networks in an effort to prevent people within the organization from being abusive or abused through social media. The church is no different. The Internet and rise of social media offers the church both positive and negative elements of human community and interaction.

Throughout human history new forms of communication continuously develop as each one rises and falls from one time to the next. The question becomes “how does the Christian community adapt new communication tools to the mission of the church?”

The following are guidelines, not rules or regulations, created in an effort to inform the Christian community about appropriate behavior online. These guidelines are not about limiting what we can do through social media, rather the question is as a member of the reign of God, what is the best use of social media for Christian community and outreach? Christians are called to remember that in all interactions we are members of the body of Christ, and what is done in the physical and virtual world has an impact on the mission of God in the world.

Clergy and laity are accountable to one another and have a shared responsibility for living the gospel in all relationships, including those online. While the reality of human sinfulness is always a part of human life, guidelines can help us remember the grace with which God has touched human life and transformed human behavior to reflect the presence of Christ.

Guidelines:

- Discern what the purpose of the social media is for you.
- Is social media a tool for ministry or your private domain?
- Think before you post something always remembering that social media is a public forum.
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness as a pastor or Christian at risk.
- Remember the Internet is instant communication, anything can be forwarded and saved.
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary or libelous.
- Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colorful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions and derogatory remarks or characterizations.

- Post only what you want the world to see. It is not like posting something to your Web site or blog and then realizing that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, basically once you post something it may be available, even after it is removed from the site.
- Do not discuss pastoral concerns or coworkers or publicly criticize The United Methodist Church or conference personnel or colleagues.
- Know and follow the Book of Discipline and biblical understandings of community.
- Be cognizant of your association with the United Methodist Church in online social networks.
- If you are United Methodist clergy or laity, ensure your profile and related content is consistent with how you wish to present yourself as a member of the Christian community. Social media communication with previous parishioners and “friending” on Facebook or other social media.
- For clergy, if a “friend” is not a member of your current congregation, remember you are friends, not their pastor. Observe appropriate boundaries and exercise care to ensure you are not a hindrance for the pastor currently appointed to that congregation and the ministry needs of that congregation.
- Remember that people classified as “friends” have the ability to download and share your information with others.
- Be discerning on who you friend. Do not initiate one-on-one “friending” with minors and, if a minor initiates such “friending” with you, carefully weigh the advisability and potential risks of such an online relationship.
- Make sure privacy settings are set to allow only the online content you want visible to show up on your profile. When considering social media for yourself or a social media strategy for the congregation, ask:
 - What does social media mean for a faith community?
 - What is appropriate for the wall of the church?
 - Who is allowed to post on the wall of the church?
 - What does the local church community want on social media?
- Regularly monitor your use of social media to ensure that an inordinate amount of time and energy is not spent interacting on social media to the detriment of your effectiveness as a clergy person or religious professional.

Security:

- Due to security risks, be cautious when installing the external applications that work with the social networking site. Examples of these sites are calendar programs and games.

- Run updated malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer.
- Be careful not to fall for “phishing” scams that arrive via e-mail or on your wall, providing a link for you to click, leading to a fake log-in page.
- Visit your profile’s security and privacy settings. At a minimum, all privacy settings set to “only friends”. “Friends of friends” and “Networks and Friends” open your content to a large group of unknown people. Your privacy and that of your family may be at risk. People you do not know may be looking at you, your home, your kids, your grandkids, - your lives.

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