



## Guidelines for Social Media and Digital Communication

The basic premise of these guidelines is to extend our safe church practices into digital communities, especially where pastoral relationships and children and youth are concerned.

There are good reasons to be concerned about using social media safely: What can make online community more dangerous than “in-person” community is that social media makes it much easier for church leaders to find themselves in compromised or compromising situations. But just as churches hold youth events with two trained adults in rooms with open doors and are sure to let others know who will be present and that the meeting is taking place, leaders using online communication can create similarly safe environments.

There are a few basic rules that should go without saying:

- No sexual content or profanity.
- No venting about personal issues or people.
- Never post anonymously.

**The following guidelines should be considered when using digital communication. Many are context specific, so each church should set church-specific policy. Leaders should articulate what works for them and regularly reevaluate that policy.**

### General Precautions

- Emails, texts, and social media may not be an appropriate means of communication for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged, or require extensive conversation.
- Adults should not get into isolated one-on-one conversations with children and youth through Facebook, emailing, texting, etc.
  - If such a conversation is necessary, the adult should alert their supervisor that the conversation is taking place, and be sure to document it.
- Youth leaders should carefully consider before texting youth, unless there is an emergency or need to communicate briefly about logistics.
- Snapchat and other anonymous or temporary messaging apps should not be used to communicate with youth because they are inherently one-on-one and cannot be documented.
- Clergy are instructed not to meet with a parishioner for more than six sessions about a particular pastoral issue. After three to six sessions, a parishioner/counselee should be referred to an appropriate professional. It is harder to quantify what constitutes one session if it takes place online, but clergy *should* consider online conversations as part of the total contact appropriate before recommending a professional counselor.

### Social Media Presence

- Leaders who work with children and youth are strongly encouraged to set stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile.
- Leaders should periodically “audit” their online presence to be sure youth and others searching for their leaders online don’t find anything inappropriate.
  - Remember that what is considered inappropriate is always audience and context specific. What seems above board to one person in one instance may seem inappropriate to a child or parent, or be taken out of context.



- Some church leaders have created separate accounts (on Facebook or other social platforms) for their work and personal life, but leaders should think carefully before adopting this technique. Consider:
  1. If a parishioner discovers a leader has a personal account, the parishioner may assume there are “questionable” aspects of the leader’s personal life the leader wants kept separate.
  2. Especially in the case of clergy, a separate professional account assumes that personal and professional lives can be cleanly separated when very often they cannot be.
  3. If a leader neglects to check the professional account regularly, he/she may overlook a pastoral concern raised on that account.
  4. However, this can be platform specific: Some people have separate professional and personal Twitter accounts because what is interesting/relevant to one community may not be interesting/relevant to another.

### **Friend Requests/Social Media Groups for Adult Ministry**

- Clergy should use discretion when submitting friend requests to or accepting friend requests from parishioners.
- Clergy and church staff should consider how online relationships will be maintained after either of the parties leaves the church.
- One possibility in lieu of accepting parishioners’ friend requests is that church leaders can invite the parishioner to join a closed Facebook group.
- Any staff or parishioners who are no longer part of the group or the church should be removed.

### **Friend Requests/Social Media Groups for Youth Ministry**

- Adults should not submit friend requests to children or youth, but may accept friend requests, with discretion.
- There should always be at least two trained adults as administrators, possibly more depending on the size of the group and level of activity.
- Group texts should always have two adults in the conversation.
- Anything that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused, neglected or exploited should be immediately reported to clergy and may require that Child Protective Services be called, per Virginia law.
- Group norms should be created and discussed to govern what is appropriate.

### **Photos on Social Media and the Website**

- A parish could set a norm that...
  - Any church event can be photographed and parishioners must specifically request to not have their picture used online.
  - The church must specifically request to use a photo of a parishioner.
 Whatever the norm is, it should be clearly stated and re-stated when needed.
- Youth should only be identified by their first name in photos.
- Photos of youth events should be posted after the event, not during, as live-posting increases the chances of abduction.
- On social media, members should only tag him- or herself in photos.
- Youth should not be tagged in photos and, if the youth tags him- or herself, the tag should be removed.

