

Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia

Suggested Practices & Guidelines for use of Social Networking Websites & Other Forms of Digital Communications

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 health 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 Communication:

- All communication sent digitally (email, social networking sites, notes or posts, etc) is NOT confidential and may be shared or re-posted 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 adults apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.

Recommended Practices & Guidelines for Interactions with Children & Youth

Relationships on Social Networking sites

- Adults who minister to children and youth are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile. Individual personal profiles may 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 site with youth to whom they minister are strongly encouraged to set up a closed group account that the 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 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 appropriate local authorities. If the material is on a church affiliated site, that materials should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with appropriate local authorities and/or police.

Groups on Social Networking Sites

- Closed groups, but not 'hidden' groups, should be used for youth groups (J2A, Rite 13, Confirmation, Pilgrimage, mission trips, etc)
- Groups should have at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth administrators
- 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.
- Norms 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 appropriate local authorities. If the material is on a church affiliated site, that materials should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with appropriate local authorities and/or police.
- Inappropriate material that does not raise suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately removed from the site.
- Any content that details inappropriate behavior (outside the bounds of the established norms) during a church sponsored 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.

Recommendations for Norms for Social Networking Site Groups

Norms should acknowledge that materials posted on church sponsored sites and/or group pages are NOT confidential. Norms should also acknowledge that content deemed inappropriate will be removed from the site or group page. The following issues should also be addressed:

- Appropriate language
- Eligibility of membership
- Loss of eligibility of membership
- Who, how and when may photos be tagged (e.g. members may tag themselves in a photo but may not tag others)
- Appropriate and inappropriate behavior of members
- Compliance with mandated reported laws regarding suspected abuse/neglect/exploitation

Recommended Practices & Guidelines for Interactions with Adults

- 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.
- 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 a request.
- Clergy who want to interact with parishioners via a social networking site may want to consider setting up a group account that all parishioners may join. The purpose of having a separate personal profile and a parish group is to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries with parishioners and real family, friends and colleagues.
- 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.
- Clergy who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church-sponsored digital communications groups to maintain contact with youth members.
- 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 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 online text chats, video chats, blogs or video blogs should be saved when possible.
- 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

- 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.
- 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)

- Email can be an appropriate 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 few sentences, then the matter might be more properly 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 the 'send' or 'reply all' button.

These guidelines are based on those developed by the Office of Pastoral Response of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut and the internet safety guidelines of the Connecticut Conference of United Church of Christ.