

**Called  
to Right  
Relationship**

**Suggested  
Practices and  
Guidelines  
for Use of  
Social Networking  
and Other  
Forms of  
Digital  
Communication**





# Suggested Practices and Guidelines for Use of Social Networking and Other Forms of Digital Communication

Adapted from the Diocese of Connecticut and Province III recommendations

- This document is not a legal standard, but a suggestion for best practice in congregational and diocesan ministry.
- The Diocese of California’s Communications Working Group Head is available to provide training and workshops on using electronic communication management tools.
- All communication sent digitally (email, social networking sites, notes or posts, etc.) is NOT CONFIDENTIAL and may be shared or reposted to others.
- 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.
- Electronic interactions are just as “real life” as phone calls and meetings with people. Social media provides opportunity to bear witness to the wholeness of our beings. This means that in the way that our explicitly faith-based postings can share with the unchurched that we are people of faith, our non-church postings can show the same people that we do things other than church. Although we need to think about our electronic interactions as always public and consider how we are portraying ourselves, developing relationships, and living our faith through them, we also do not want to start living a “stained glass masquerade.”
- Electronic interactions and the suggested rules governing them are stricter regarding minors and those in relationships of pastoral care due to issues of power imbalance. This also reflects the standards governing our “in real life” interactions.

**General Information about Digital Communication**

**Practices  
and  
Guidelines  
for  
Interactions  
with  
Children  
and Youth**

**Social networking sites — relationships and “friending”**

- Adults who minister to children and youth are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile. Separate personal profiles may be used to interact with real friends, family, and peers, but it is preferable to use one account with managed privacy settings and lists. We are whole people, and splitting ourselves online is like splitting ourselves in-person. We use discernment before sharing things personally, and this can (and should) be done electronically.
- 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.
- Sites such as Twitter, blogs, and Instagram have two settings for privacy: public and private. Private requires approval for followers, but it is not the default setting. Adults in ministry should be aware of who their followers are, whether there are minors among their followers, and should monitor their postings accordingly.
- If an adult chooses to accept friend requests from minors or youth who are associated with their community of faith, at least one other unrelated adult leader or supervisor must have full access to all aspects of that adult’s profile and correspondence that are viewable by youth in order to consult on appropriateness and privacy settings.
- Adults who accept friend requests from minors (as well as clergy who accept friend requests from parishioners) are strongly advised to manage their posts and online sharing with lists or other restriction devices. The Communications Working Group Head is able to advise and provide workshops and training on these issues.
- Adults who want to connect via a social networking website with youth to whom they minister are strongly encouraged to set up a “closed” parish youth group (see next section).
- 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 the police or local child welfare authorities. (See the *Policy for the Protection of Children and Youth* for contact information.)

- Material on a young person's personal Facebook page is not the responsibility of the church or church leaders to monitor or critique. This should be made clear to parents and guardians. Should a young person post something that is inappropriate which is viewed by a youth minister or adult connected with the church, this may be a pastoral issue best dealt with in off-line conversations.

### **Groups on social networking sites**

- Online social networking groups (such as a parish youth group, confirmation group, pilgrimage or event group) should have at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth administrators.
- Invitations to youth to join the group should ideally be made by youth administrators, unless a youth previously asked an adult administrator to invite him/her to join the group. However, it is sometimes necessary for adult administrators to invite youth to ensure full and timely inclusion of youth group members.
- Behavioral covenants should be created to govern what content is appropriate and inappropriate for an online youth group. These covenants should be created in conversation with youth.
- 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 by an adult administrator.
- 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 the police or local child welfare authorities.
- 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. It is good practice to have another group to which “graduated” youth can migrate so that they do not lose touch with their church community.

**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. 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.
- 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 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 accept friend requests from parishioners are strongly advised to use lists or another device to manage who can see which posts and updates. The Communications Working Group Head for the Diocese of California is available to provide training on how to use and manage privacy and restriction settings online.

- Clergy and other adults who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church sponsored digital communications groups to maintain contact with youth members.

### **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 should be created through consultation and conversation with group members, whether youth or adults.
- Covenants for communities of faith should address the following issues:
  - Appropriate language and content, and that the covenant has been reached through a determining of group norms.
  - 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 Digital  
Communications and  
Content**

### **Recommendations for video chats, blogs, or video blogs**

- Adults should refrain from initiating video chats with youth unless there are at least two youth present on the chat along with the adult. Ideally a second unrelated adult is recommended.

- 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. Messaging clients such as iChat/Messages, Trillian, Adium and others integrate a variety of messaging services so that messages can be logged. It is the adult youth minister's responsibility to ensure that chats are on the record. The Communications Working Group Head is available to provide training on setting up these applications to record transcripts.
- 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 *Image Release* forms ([available here](#)) 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.
- There are further considerations when using photos and videos of minors for ministry purposes. Respect the dignity of every person depicted in an image. It is strongly discouraged to attach student names with their image (ie: captions, tagging on facebook).

### **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.
- 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.
- Parents should provide consent via a release form for adults, clergy, or youth ministers to text or email youth directly. It is preferable not to text or email individually whenever possible; best practice is to include at least one other adult or multiple youth in the text message or email.
- Adults working with youth should use good judgment when they text youth. A good practice is to text youth or respond to youth texts, except in case of emergency, only during “normal” hours (9 a.m. to 9 p.m.).