



Social Media

Suggested Guidelines

The use of social media is here to stay. Churches simply cannot ignore this communication tool. Social networking sites, on-the-spot communication devices and email can enhance communication, faith sharing and deepen relationships. The following recommended guidelines from the Safe Sanctuaries staff at Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church apply principles of healthy boundaries to the virtual world of digital networking and communication. They are intended to raise awareness of issues and open doors of conversations with ministry teams. We encourage all ministry teams to discern together the following guidelines, considering the nature of your ministry and being mindful that our calling is to meet children and youth where they are, model healthy boundaries, and love and care for them safely.

Adults engaged in ministry to youth and children should consider their relationship with the youth or child when interacting with them using digital media, and should conduct themselves in a manner that would be acceptable on church grounds.

Social Media Connections

In addition to participating on pages particular to ministries of the church, youth may wish to establish social media connections with church leaders and adult volunteers engaged in youth ministry. Adults who are willing to participate in these relationships should use the following guidelines when establishing these connections:

- Adults should not submit “friend” requests to children or youth. Minors may feel like they are not able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between them and adults. Exceptions to this rule should only be made in situations when the adult’s privacy settings make it difficult or impossible for the youth to find the adult’s page on the site. In these circumstances, it is acceptable for an adult to request a youth as a friend, if the youth has requested that they do so. In general, youth should be the ones requesting the online “friendship.”
- Due to the greater potential for misinterpretation, inappropriate discussions, and inadvertent exposure of youth to inappropriate content; personal pages should be maintained appropriately. Church leaders and adult volunteers should avoid relationships with children/youth via social networking sites, unless an actual relationship (ministry, family friendship, etc.) already exists between them.
- As additional social media sites gain popularity, it is recommended that churches apply these approaches to emerging methods of digital communication.

Boundaries

- All church leaders and adult volunteers engaged in ministry with children and youth are strongly encouraged to set strict privacy settings on any personal social networking profile, making every effort to prevent youth and children from being introduced to objectionable content.
- Privacy settings on personal pages and information should be thoroughly scrutinized on a regular basis to prevent this information from being available to minors. If a church leader or adult volunteer does not feel that they can set the proper privacy settings and/or regularly check their personal pages (two to three times per day) for inappropriate material that might have been posted by others, they are asked to completely restrict child/youth access to their pages.
- For the sake of their own privacy and the well-being of the child/youth participants, church leaders and adult volunteers should not add or invite children or youth to any groups, events, pages, chat rooms, etc. that are not solely dedicated to activities directly related to the children or youth ministries or ministry activities.
- Given the continuing evolution of privacy settings and capabilities on many social networking sites, church leaders and adult volunteers must be willing to continue to educate themselves on what settings are needed to support the above recommendations. Additionally, the child and youth ministry programs should establish education for adult volunteers who wish to use social media as part of their ministry efforts, with the understanding that changes may need to be made based on continuing evolution of these tools.

Communication

Social media is an excellent way to quickly share both good and sad moments in a person's life with a large number of people. However, as with all forms of communication, users should be respectful of the privacy of others. This is particularly the case with youth and children's ministry leaders. Leaders should be especially mindful of how information is presented in such a permanent medium, and should never share news about another person without their express prior consent.

- Use prudent judgment in the time you contact youth and children through social media, email or other forms of digital communication. The "home phone rule" is a basic rule of thumb that should be employed: Normally do not text or chat with youth at a time you would not normally call their home phone line, such as before 9 a.m. and after 9 p.m. Some exceptions follow, but even in these situations, adults should use good judgment in deciding when discussions should continue or be picked up at a more appropriate time to support and demonstrate good boundaries with their personal time.
- Exceptions to this rule are as follows:
 - In emergency situations or when children or youth reach out to a church leader or adult volunteer with issues that they feel that they need to discuss immediately.
 - During weekends, vacation times, and other times when children or youth may have parental permission to stay up later than normal, adult leaders may respond to youth-initiated communications outside of these hours, at their discretion.
- In all of the exception situations:
 - Church leaders and adult volunteers engaged in ministry with children and youth should consider the content and nature of any posts that will be seen or read by others. Your voice is often considered the voice of the church.

- One-on-one video or chat room interaction is generally not appropriate between adults and minors. Such communications should only be engaged in where no face-to-face communication is possible, such as where the youth is away for the summer in a foreign country but regularly communicates with the adult in person.
- When the content of received communications raises concerns or questions, it should be shared with a member of the pastoral team and law enforcement, when appropriate.
- Email is not an appropriate communication method for matters that are pastorally sensitive, emotionally charged, or that require extensive conversation. Although, email may be more appropriate where matters are deemed legally sensitive.
- Humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted, and should be used only where appropriate.
- All communication sent digitally (email, social media sites, notes or posts, etc.) may be shared or reposted to others. Adults should be mindful that comments sent to a youth may be shared by that youth in a number of ways and that misinterpretation of those comments may occur.
- Phone conversations and face-to-face meetings should be the preferred mode of communication when responding to emotionally driven communication or pastoral emergencies, and should be used when possible to provide the appropriate level of support.

Identity Protection

Churches should seek to protect the privacy and identity of all minors in the use of social media.

- All church leaders and adults leaders in youth and children's ministry should closely monitor the privacy settings of any posted youth images to ensure that they are not accessible to individuals who do not have permission to view them.
- All church leaders and adult volunteers engaged in ministry with minors must not post photos or video that identify children or youth on any online site or printed publication without the written consent from a parent or legal guardian.
- Even with the written consent from a parent or legal guardian, pictures should be posted to either a youth closed group or on personal pages where the privacy settings restrict viewing to only those associated with the youth ministry.
- Churches are strongly encouraged to respect the dignity of every person depicted in an image. Only pictures depicting youth in an appropriate light should be posted. "Appropriate" pictures may include goofy pictures that the youth's parents are comfortable being posted. If a picture would make the youth feel self-conscious, vulnerable, or would subject the youth to ridicule, the picture should not be posted.
- When checking in with any location tagging social media, only check in yourself. Never check in minors. Be sensitive to tagging or revealing other participants' locations.

Administration of Official Social Media Groups

Social media pages are easy to set up, but long-term administration of such pages must be taken into account to ensure safety and to lessen the burden on a sole volunteer. Some basic guidelines that should help include:

- Each church-related social media site, group or page should have a minimum of three unrelated administrators who are either church leaders or adult volunteers engaged in the ministry. Two of these three should be outside the pastor's family.

- Sites must be monitored frequently to allow for quick responses in the event urgent or crisis concerns are posted. Regular posts help foster the sense of community, and frequent monitoring can be part of that process.
- Administrators should review the access to their closed group account to remove:
 - Adult leaders who no longer actively participate.
 - Former youth members, and their parents, who no longer actively participate in the youth program.

Active participation in the youth group may include former youth:

- Having a sibling who remains in the youth group.
- Having a number of younger friends who participate in the youth group.
- Regular attendance as a counselor or participant on summer mission trips, but not participating on a weekly or monthly basis.

Active participation in the youth group may include for adults:

- Regular attendance as a counselor or participant on summer mission trips, but not participating on a weekly or monthly basis.
- An established mentor/mentee role with an older youth.
- Family relationships that essentially establish the adult in an older sibling or parental role with an active youth.
- Youth leaders who, but for their geographic distance from the church, would remain involved in the lives of the youth, provided that the youngest age the adult worked with have not matriculated out of the youth group

Inappropriate Posts

Any inappropriate material posted to a church-related social media site, group or page must be deleted and addressed. If the material fails to meet Safe Gatherings standards, the appropriate reporting measures should be employed immediately.

These are but a few guidelines based on popular usage of social media sites. As technology continues to evolve and usage patterns change, these guidelines may require adjustment. It is a good policy to have church leaders – particularly those who work with children and youth – review these guidelines each year to determine if a church should impose more protections or make changes to ensure the safety of minors and vulnerable adults.

Document last revised Oct. 10, 2017