GUIDELINES FOR THE RESPONSIBLE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR MISSOURI CONFERENCE CLERGY

Preface

Social media is changing the way we work, communicate the Gospel, witness and even worship. We believe social media has the potential to build stronger, more successful faith relationships. And it's a way for you to take part in, literally, global conversations and action related to faith. The question becomes how does the Christian community adapt new communication tools to the mission of the church that ensures safety and exemplifies Christian discipleship?

The following are guidelines, not rules or regulations, created in an effort to educate the Christian community about appropriate behavior online. These guidelines are not about limiting what we can do through social media. Rather, we hope these guidelines help you better answer: as a member of the Reign of God, what is the best use of social media for Christian community and outreach?

Social Media Guidelines

Discern what the purpose of the social media is for you.
- Is social media a tool for ministry or your private domain? If private only, what are your plans for keeping it private?
- Figure out how you want to use social media by developing a set of guidelines for your personal usage (e.g., I choose to post about faith, family and fun).
- You can have different boundary plans for each communication medium (e.g., If I get a FB message on Messenger about "church business," I kindly state my boundary and ask that the person email me. Or I keep my Instagram account private and only accept friend requests from friends and family.)
- The key is communicating your personal guidelines and usage to your local church.

Assess and manage your online reputation.
- As a pastor, you are a public figure.
- In an online world, your potential public is amplified.
- Alienating someone or a group online is potentially limiting the ability to minister to a congregation.
- Your online persona is connected to your real life reputation.
- Do you have any "clean up" necessary on your social media accounts? (Are there any old photos that you wouldn't want your congregation to have access to?)
- Do you need to establish new ground rules moving forward (e.g., permissions, security, privacy measures)?

Think before you post something, always remembering that social media is a public forum and nothing ever truly disappears once posted.
- 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 to literally millions and saved.

- Refrain from 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. 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 conference personnel or colleagues.
- Be wary of posting too much information related to prayer concerns (for yourself, family or others).
- Know what is overtly inappropriate (e.g., profanity, sexual jokes or innuendo, offensive, prejudicial/racist comments/ language, "underwear" selfies, etc.).
- Know what is subtly inappropriate (e.g., too many selfies, jokes at your family or friends' expense).
- Language is key: tongue-in-cheek comments are often misinterpreted (i.e., there is no sarcasm font available).
- Be aware of your emotional state when communicating and resist oversharing. Remember the appropriate places to vent for professionals is within a small group of trusted 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.

Think through your social media communication with previous parishioners.
- For clergy, if a "friend" is not a member of your current congregation, remember you are friends, not their pastor. Observe appropriate professional 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 potential risks of such an online relationship. It is highly recommended that online "friendships" (following/friending) with minors happen with parent/guardian permission and that you are friends/follow the parent/guardian as well so they can witness any online engagement between both parties. Consider the potential risks of personal messaging with minors on social media platforms.

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 Facebook wall of the church?
- What does the local church community want on social media?
- Who is allowed to post on the wall of the church?
- Who has permission to post on behalf of the church?
- Who monitors social media?
- How do you deal with negativity on your social media accounts (e.g., negative "reviews", trolling, obscenities or insults in comments, etc.)?

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 clergyperson 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, some which can post on your behalf.
- 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 email or on your wall. Examples include a link for you to click, leading to a fake login page, or tagging you in a post inviting you to click a link for a too-good-to-be-true sale.
- Make sure privacy settings are set to allow only the online content you want visible to show up on your profile.
- Remember that using location check-in constantly on social media allows people to track your movements.
- Visit your profile's security and privacy settings on a regular basis (social media networks change their privacy settings often, sometimes without notifying users). At a minimum, consider making all privacy settings 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 family and your lives.
- Consider making sure your privacy settings require you to review tags before they post with your name in them. This allows you to better manage the appropriateness of social media content with your name attached.
- Check the privacy of your post before you hit the submit button. Next to the post button, there's a dropdown with options. Consider who should see your post.

Social Media Mistakes
- Deleting does not always make the problem go away. Own your mistake and ask for forgiveness. Model for your congregation when you have miss-stepped. Be quick with your correction and upfront when it was needed. If you choose to modify an earlier post—make it clear that you have done so.
- Social media bad behavior by church staff and lay leadership needs to be addressed promptly.

Managing your online reputation is your responsibility. Keep in mind that failure to abide by healthy professional boundaries and appropriateness could put your ministry career at risk. Guidelines will evolve as new social networking tools emerge. If you are ever hesitant or unsure about your social media engagement or usage, please contact Rev. Karen Hayden, Director of Leadership Excellence.

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