Introduction

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 ease communication, enhance faith sharing and deepen relationship. However, social media can also inhibit relationships and limit transparency.

God demonstrated love and perfect relationship in the incarnate Jesus Christ. Jesus lived among and with people in the world, meeting them face-to-face. As ministers in the church – lay and clergy – being among and with those we serve is vital to living out our faith. The Baptismal Covenant reminds us to do this respecting the dignity of all human beings, seeking to serve others in Christ.

Social media is most appropriate for organizational communication. Pastoral care, constructive criticism, relationship-building and other interactions of a deeper level are best left to other means of communicating, namely (in order of preference) face-to-face interaction, telephone calls and email. Finally, it is important to remember that not all people use or have access to social media. Using social media as the only means of communication, therefore, can become exclusivist.

The following recommended best practices apply commonly accepted principles of healthy boundaries and safe church to the virtual world of digital networking and communication. Education among clergy, lay leaders and parishioners/young people is essential to upholding what follows.

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These guidelines were developed by the Episcopal Diocese of Kentucky with sincere gratitude for the work and generosity of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut and the Connecticut Conference of United Church of Christ for developing and sharing Internet Safety Guidelines, upon which these guidelines are based.

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Overview

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 Communications

- All communication sent digitally (email, social networking sites, notes or posts, etc.) is NOT CONFIDENTIAL.
Embracing Christ, Engaging the World

- 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.

Best Practices for Digital Communication and Contact

Use of Email, Facebook Messaging or Texting (Includes Twitter)

1. Email, Facebook messaging, or texting 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.
2. Email, Facebook messaging, or texting are rarely the best communication method for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation.
3. If an email, Facebook message, or text message is longer than a couple of sentences, then the matter might more properly be addressed via live conversation.
4. Humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted in an email, Facebook message, or text message.
5. All email, Facebook message, or text users should take a moment to consider the ramifications of their message before clicking on the “send” or “reply to all” button.

Publishing/Posting Content Online (ex: webpages, Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo)

1. Congregations must inform participants when they are being videoed because church buildings are not considered public space.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Photos that are published on church sponsored sites should only include name for minor children or youth.

Video Chats (ex: Skype, Facetime)

1. Adults should refrain from initiating or participating in video chats with youth.
2. In the case that a video chat is necessary, a second adult should be present.

Best Practices for Social Media Interactions between Children/Youth and Clergy/Adults who Minister to Children/Youth

1. Adults who minister to children and youth are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile. Individual personal profiles are to be used to interact with real friends, family and peers.
2. Adults should take extreme caution submitting “friend” or group requests to minors or youth. Adults should always make parent/guardians aware of “friend” or group request by 1) also inviting the parent/guardian as “friend” or group member or 2) contacting parent/guardian to inform them of request. Remember, youth may not be able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults.
3. 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 maintaining consistency among the group.

4. 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 that the youth have access to.

5. Adults who want to connect via a social networking website with youth to whom they minister and want to avoid using their private profile are strongly encouraged to set up a group account that 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/profiles is to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries with youth and real family, friends and colleagues.

6. 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 appropriate authorities. 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 appropriate authorities.

Behavioral Covenant Recommendations for digital communications and content (Considerations for Behavioral Covenants to be written by individual congregations/organizations)

1. Covenants should be accessible for review by all users.

2. Covenants should acknowledge that materials posted on Church Sponsored sites (and/or group pages) are NOT CONFIDENTIAL.

3. Covenants should acknowledge that content deemed inappropriate will be removed from the site or group page.

4. Covenants for communities of faith should address the following issues:
   a. Appropriate language
   b. 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.
   c. 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.
   d. 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)
   e. Appropriate and inappropriate behavior of members (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, sexual acts, etc.) and the consequence for inappropriate behavior
   f. Compliance with mandated reporting laws regarding suspected abuse.