

## **Electronic Social Media Guidelines**

Presbytery of St. Augustine

Committee on Ministry

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Social media has been a part of our lives for a long time - as individuals, in church, and in society. The church newsletter - long printed on paper but now more often emailed or posted on a website - is a form of social media. At this point, 25 years after the creation of the “the Web” and 10 years after the rollout of Facebook, use of electronic social media continues to increase, including Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, LinkedIn, blogging, posting to websites, texting, email, electronic newsletters, and many others.

Social media is a great way to share ideas. It connects people, encourages dialogue, and builds community. It can be a valuable means of sharing a life of discipleship and giving witness to the Good News. It is an aid in pastoral care, in letting people know about current and upcoming events, and in crisis communication. It helps many church professionals avoid isolation by staying in touch with friends and colleagues from around the world.

The church must engage in social media, but it has to engage in a way that is safe and responsible. Therefore, the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of St. Augustine recommends the following guidelines for consideration by our presbytery’s pastors and other church leaders, congregations, and other Christian communities and groups:

1. Choose the appropriate form(s) of electronic social media based on the purpose of the communication and the audience to be reached. Remember to communicate in alternate ways (e.g., postal mail or a phone call) with individuals who do not or cannot receive electronic communications. In addition, be aware that once something is shared by electronic means, control of re-transmission to other persons and groups is out of the hands of the original communicator. For example, surveys have confirmed that many non-Facebook users who live with an account holder look at posts or pictures on the user’s account.
2. The content of electronic social media should honor Jesus Christ and the mission of Christ’s church. Be thoughtful, truthful and respectful toward your audience. If you have made a mistake, correct it at the earliest opportunity. Be sensitive to the possibility that linking to other websites and social media might bring with it words or images that are offensive or disturbing to your audience.
3. For ordained teaching and ruling elders, the content and tone of the communication should be consistent with his or her ordination vows, whether the social media is used on a personal basis or as a spokesperson for a congregation or other group.
4. All communications and use of social media should be guided by principles of healthy boundaries and safe church. Avoid “over-sharing.” Consider carefully whether personal conflicts should be shared online or by a group email. Apply appropriate privacy settings when using media such as Facebook.
5. Do not share confidential or sensitive information, such as health concerns of others.

6. Use caution and obtain appropriate consent when sharing images of youth and children. Always protect names and identifying information regarding children and youth, and follow all laws relating to the protection of minors, including the Federal Trade Commission's Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule.
7. Electronic social media shared with children and youth should be shared with their parents or guardians. If the parents/guardians don't Tweet or use Facebook (for example), share the communication with them another way. While electronic social media ministry with youth has potential for being positive, the possibility of inappropriate communications is also present. Guidelines for relating to children, youth, youth, and vulnerable adults in other contexts should be applied carefully to electronic social media.
8. Consider wisely who should be appointed as the authorized spokesperson for a congregation, community or church group. Consider appointing a separate small group of conscientious individuals with good judgment to monitor the use of social media.
9. When a church professional leaves his or her community, changes to his/her social media contacts and communications may be required to comply with other guidelines relating to leaving a ministry setting.
10. Ensure that all content complies with copyright, fair use, and any other pertinent laws.

Use social media for the glory of God and never to do harm. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up ... So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved." 1 Corinthians 10:23, 31-33.

In summary, electronic social media is a powerful tool for community and connecting. It builds and encourages a web of relationships that can be nurturing, bless others, and share the Good News. But it has potential for harm, whether that harm comes from use of the social media or avoidance of "in person" relationships.

These guidelines are not meant to cover everything, especially in light of the rapidly evolving world of electronic social media. Rather, the Committee on Ministry shares them in order to raise awareness as to issues raised by the use of such media. Church communities should consult professionals - including legal professionals - with regard to the use of electronic social media.

If you have suggestions relating to these guidelines or other ideas about the use of social media by our presbytery, congregations, communities and church professionals, please contact the Moderator/Co-Moderator of the Committee on Ministry or the Stated Clerk at any time.