

Social Media Principles for the Church

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Social Media and the Church

Social media is a useful and necessary means of developing relationships and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The purpose of the following guidelines and practices encourage the frequent, intentional, and appropriate use of the various forms of social media.

Use of Guidelines

These guidelines are intended for clergy, church staff members, church volunteers and ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. These guidelines are offered to be included as is – or adapted for context – in staff and volunteer handbooks in the churches and related ministries of the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Purpose of Guidelines

This policy provides parameters in order to guide clergy, church staff and, employees when social media tools are used on behalf of **the United Methodist Church** or when **the United Methodist Church** becomes part of a social media dialogue.

Social media includes all online platforms that facilitate activities such as professional or social networking, posting commentary or opinions and sharing pictures, audio, video, print or other content. Social media includes Church and personal email, websites, all type of online communities (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, chat rooms, message boards) and blogs.

Responsible Use of Social Media

In all we do, we reflect the love of Christ to and for the world. In the world of social media, this applies to the content of our posting to various social media sites. Clergy and lay staff are held to a high standard of behavior while online, in their professional and personal online presence. Churches should also adopt a social media policy as part of an employee manual. Some points to cover with church staff:

- Clergy and church staff should not create a church social media account (including any public or private group) without the knowledge of the church.
- Once a church social media account is created, there should always be more than one person, including at least one staff person and at least one lay person with full administrative rights.
- Clergy and church staff should utilize the same judicious wisdom when posting from both professional and personal social media sites. They should understand that all social media interaction reflects upon the church which employs them, and all postings should reflect their status as an employee of a United Methodist congregation.

Top Ten Best Practices of Social Media

1. When using social media, **observe Wesley's General Rules**:
 - Do no harm
 - Do good
 - Attend the ordinances of God
2. **Claim, maintain and monitor** your congregations' social media profiles and websites. Ensure the online profiles, websites and administrative responsibilities are kept current.
3. If you're not sure about appropriate use of social media, **ask for help**. If you're not sure about a post, do not post it. Political commentary, personal opinions on social issues, mixing personal and professional information, negative or vulgar language all becomes part of your reputation. Be aware of the potential impact on you, fellow staff and the church. Ask yourself: Is this post/information timely? Newsworthy? Most importantly: Does it reflect God's love?
4. **Be respectful, collegial, and intentional** of other's privacy including the announcing of prayer concerns and where location services are concerned. Ask yourself: Is this my news to tell? Do I have permission to share this information?
5. **Be professional and maintain the integrity** of the office of clergy, church staff, and church volunteers through social media. Remember that you are not authorized to speak on behalf of the United Methodist Church – or even your own local congregation.
6. **Protect the safety** of congregants, minors, vulnerable adults, and yourself. Do not share the addresses and locations of congregants and minors via social media, including tagging people in check-ins.

7. When in doubt, **be positive**. Whether someone has posted something mean, rude or distasteful, take the high road at all times. Consider reaching out to the individual privately to discuss the issue (in a tasteful manner) rather than replying in a public format. If someone posts negative, offensive, hurtful, etc. on a post, consider deleting or hiding the comment from the public.
8. It's important to **use care in your language**, as meaning and tone are often lost in translation. Take the time to carefully craft words, especially when dealing with potentially sensitive topics. In the world of social media, what is intended as playful might be read as flippant. Direct, brief wording can come across as dismissive, arrogant or mean. If you would hesitate to say something in person, don't say it on social media. Ask yourself: Does this do harm? Does this do good? Does this reflect love of God, neighbor and self?
9. **Be Accurate** when posting. Review content you are posting for factual and grammatical errors.
10. **Be Aware** of your social media presence. The pages and posts that you "like" and "follow" are also a representation of the church, whether it's on your individual personal social media account or the church's professional social media accounts. Be aware of who you "follow," what posts you "like" and the type of audience that you are reaching. Always remember that a public post is open to the world. If you wouldn't say something in public don't say it online. Do not EVER assume confidentiality when using social media!"

You are not authorized to speak for the United Methodist Church

To give your opinions, especially on hotly debated topics, can be construed as making a statement on behalf of the church. It's smarter to say nothing at all, especially if you're inclined to make a statement contrary to the UMC's policies or theologies which you have taken a vow to uphold. Even with a disclaimer, by virtue of your position in the community, what you say and do does reflect on your church as well as the denomination. If you're contacted by the media regarding a current event topic, please refer to conference media protocols. *In the event of a crisis, contact Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church's Center for Communication team (communications@arumc.org) prior to responding to ANY posting or comments relating to the crisis.*

Technical Overview

Digital Platforms for Different Messages

Every social platform for your church needs to be uniform – same profile picture, same name, and preferably the same handle. Each social network varies widely in its membership makeup, culture, look and feel. It's important to not only know who your audience is, it's important to use the right digital platform for each message, too.

facebook

Audience: Women in their 30s and 40s and an increasing contingent of older users (50+)

Facebook is a great news source outlet. Share inspirational stories of what the church is doing, remind members of upcoming events, Facebook Live is a popular medium that allows you to interact with members of the congregation in a new way. Also, keep up with how often you're posting. More than two or three times a day will cause your posts to fight with each other for attention. When posting, make sure the posts are scheduled far enough apart so that you're not posting three different things within a three-hour span.

twitter

Audience: Men in their 30s and 40s

Twitter is a great news outlet. Share the same things here as with other platforms. It's recommended that you keep it short even if you're not on Twitter. The longer the post, the less likely your followers are to read it.

Instagram

Audience: Youth, young moms and women in their 20s

More than 60% of users are between the ages of 18-29, making Instagram a natural fit for youth-oriented information.

Because Instagram is all about the image, this is a great place to share pictures from events, as well as graphics that promote future series or events. Instagram is the place to be creative. Use clear, high-quality lifestyle pictures for announcements instead of using flyers. Make captions short and sweet – only include the needed information. Instagram is less of a news source, and more of a creative space to show current and potential members what the church is doing to help others. Try to only post once, at the most twice, a day.

YouTube

It's easy to create a YouTube account for your church, and to create the privacy settings you think best (you may only want church members to be able to view videos). Videos can be a really great way to share personal stories, Sunday services, announcements, fun things your church is doing, etc.

Social Media Checklist

- Does your featured website link to an active web page?
- Is your name the same across all platforms? (if it's Example City UMC on Facebook, it needs to be Example City UMC on Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.)
- Is your profile picture clear, high quality and the same across all platforms?

Know what to share

- Daily scripture
- Links to resources (books, previous sermon series, devotionals)
- Photos from regular meeting times and special events
- Highlights of important causes and events within the community
- Responses to current events

Know what not to share

Social media is not the place for hotly debated social issues or self-promotion. If your church is going to be a positive presence on social media, be careful about the following:

- Anything that promotes a particular leader based on personality. This creates a culture around that person, rather than the church itself.
- Controversial statements about political beliefs. It's not wrong to care about these things, but social media is never the place to get into a controversial conversation about it.
- Photos of members of your church without their permission, particularly children.*

**The Conference Center for Communication can provide media release forms by request.*