



Social Media Best Practices for Clergy

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Online presence of clergy

It is recommended that clergy maintain an internet presence by having an active social media profile, a blog, or at minimum a bio and contact information on your church's website. We encourage clergy to take advantage of all the positive benefits of social media while remaining aware of potential areas of concern. We implore clergy to use collegiality and discretion, to be respectful of privacy, and to be safe when using social media. Use these guidelines for online engagement.

Ask yourself: What can church members and the community learn about me online?

Stewardship and Boundaries

While Social Media is a gift, our Wesleyan theology reminds us that even good things must be consumed and used in moderation. When using social media, please remain attentive to the stewardship of your time and the time of others. Always maintain appropriate boundaries with others and take care to watch for the proverbial "slippery slope." It is important to use care in your language, as meaning and tone are often lost in translation. Knowing this, take the time to carefully craft your words, especially when dealing with potentially sensitive topics. If you would hesitate to say something in person, it is best not to say it via social media. Remember the Wesleyan commitment to care for others. When using social media, ask yourself the General Rules: Does this do harm? Does this do good? Does this help others to attend to the ordinances of God? Does this reflect love of God, neighbor and self?

Ask yourself: What is the purpose of this post?

Collegiality

With social media, the line between public and private communication is thin, blurry or even nonexistent. It is never a good idea to make disparaging comments about fellow clergy, their ministry or congregants, whether in social media or elsewhere. Instead, be intentional about supporting your colleagues, respecting other clergy and other opinions. Once you say something on the internet it remains accessible forever—even if you delete it. Furthermore, there is little evidence to show that people are convinced to change their mind or behavior as the result of a Facebook debate. The opposite is much more likely true.

Ask yourself: What if this were printed in Sunday's bulletin?

Discretion and Confidentiality

Be judicious in your online conduct and speech. Use discretion by refraining from sharing confidential information from meetings or personal interactions with others that could cast The United Methodist Church or any other relationships in a bad light. Content that is shared over social media networks must be done solely by the individual who will be held accountable for what is shared if confidentiality is broken. Because of this and other concerns, social media is never an appropriate medium through which to counsel parishioners - even in private messages, text messages and emails. Move counseling conversations to an appropriate venue.

Ask yourself: Is this the appropriate venue for this conversation?

Location Sharing

Social media that allow one to “check in” at one’s current location should be used with discretion. Never check-in (i.e. disclose the location of) anyone who has not expressed their permission to be checked in. Additionally, when posting on Facebook, Twitter, etc., be discreet in tagging persons who are in the same location as you are; rather, use hashtags as a means of facilitating conversation. Remember that when you check-in others, especially ailing parishioners, you may be breaking HIPPA laws and creating other confidentially issues.

Using social location platforms is a tool to raise awareness about your church’s location, including worship and other events. It also serves as an accountability tool for when clergy are not in their office (i.e. holding drop by office hours at local coffee shop).

Ask yourself: What message does this “check-in” convey?

Remember that you are a public figure

We sometimes like to wear our “clergy” or “church” hats and then our “average-person-on-the-street” hats. When posting on Facebook, tweeting or updating a blog, it is important to realize that most people do not see that distinction. You are their pastor or a pastor in the community, and they hold you to a higher standard. Make sure that everything you post or share, whether it is words or photos, is worthy of this calling and higher standard. Everything you post (or text or email) is public.

Ask yourself: Would you like to see this post as a quote attributed to you in the local newspaper or on TV? Would you like your current Facebook profile picture to be used to identify you in a news story or blog post?

Always “tweet sweet”

How we say things matters as much as what we say. 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 we are to be winsome in our demeanor so as to hope

people see the love of Christ in us, that axiom goes for social media as well as face-to-face interaction. We have a responsibility to honoring our First General Rule, “do no harm”. This is especially important in the world of social media.

Ask yourself: How might this post be interpreted or misinterpreted?

Remember that 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 is smarter to say nothing at all especially if you are 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 are contacted by the media regarding a current event topic, please refer to conference media protocols.

Ask yourself: Am I authorized to speak to the media on this topic?

Respect Privacy

Please be respectful of your own privacy and the people you serve. Also, help the people you serve be sensitive to the privacy of others. Social Media is an excellent way to share the good moments and the sad moments in our lives, but as leaders, we are called to be especially mindful of how people respond to hearing news in such a non-personal manner. Also, it is not appropriate to share someone else’s concerns or joys without their consent. To post a prayer concern without her or his prior permission is a violation of clergy ethics and HIPPA guidelines. Consider adding a box to your prayer concerns card: “Do we have your permission to share this concern on Social Media or via email?” For more information on HIPPA guidelines, please visit: <http://www.hhs.gov/>

Ask yourself: Do we have permission to share this prayer request publicly?

Be Accurate

Review content you are posting for factual and grammatical errors. You may consider using Google, local and national news websites, and Snopes.com to check “news” before you share it with others.

Ask yourself: Am I absolutely sure this is true?

Be Safe

Be careful when posting or following links that are shared with you while on Facebook, Twitter or that come through email that lead you to external websites. These are often phishing ploys to get information about you or your friends. Protect yourself and your friends by being careful about what you click on or post on a wall.

Ask yourself: Am I absolutely sure this is legitimate?

Follow Trusted Con Confianza guidelines

Always maintain appropriate professional boundaries, respecting the power differential between you and every parishioner. This power distinction carries over to many in your community as well. Always keep especially in mind your commitment to protect the most vulnerable, as taught in the Rio Texas Trusted con Confianza training. Those guidelines are posted [here](#).

Be “Friend”ly

Clergy are encouraged to be open to “friending” members of their congregation—preferably accepting an invitation, rather than initiating a friend request. Once you start friending church members, you have to be willing to friend them all. In this case, you do not get to pick your friends. It would be advisable to make an open invitation for your congregation to friend you on Facebook instead of hand selecting members of your congregation (or organization, in the case of extension ministries) as “friends.” This applies across all social media platforms.

Ask yourself: Am I going to accept friend requests from members of my congregation?

Leaving Well

United Methodist clergy serve among a people for a season and, eventually, will move on to another place of ministry. We agree to go where we are sent as well as “leave when we leave.” Our covenant of ordination holds us to a high standard of being in ministry with our current congregation while allowing pastors who follow us to be fully present and pastor to their congregations and community. With the advent of social media, this has become more difficult, but there are several ways to achieve this. We will highlight two.

One way to live into your new appointment is to delete and unfollow all the church and community friends on your social media accounts at the time of your move. This means they will no longer be part of your social media life, and you change churches without any further attachments. This clears the air for your successor and relieves you of the temptation of responding to the life events of former parishioners. Be aware that this might be difficult emotionally for you, and others’ feelings may be hurt, but it is the cleanest break. It also best reflects the expectations of itinerating clergy. It would be important to apply this across the board, not deleting almost everyone from your current church community and keeping tabs on a few.

A second option is to look at the fine grain options social media networks offer for privacy. For example, with Facebook you can assign privacy restrictions and hide former parishioners and community members from your timeline. They can still contact you, but they aren’t a part of your day-to-day life. With either option, you would need to commit to staying out of the lives of people for whom you have been pastor or friend, to allow your successor to build a pastoral relationship with them.

You will also want to remove yourself from any Facebook groups created for your church, as well as removing any content creation/administration rights you have to your church's Facebook page. Practice this same responsible leadership for other social media sites, following the appropriate tools for that platform, including Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest. The same applies to other platforms used for connecting and groups in various social media sites. Have your church change all passwords and administration.

Ask yourself: Do my online interactions reflect my current ministry setting?

*Adapted excerpts from "Social Media Guidelines for Clergy & Congregational Leaders" by
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