

# **Social Media Guidelines**

For Leaders and Faith Communities of  
The Desert Southwest Conference

Approved - August 2014

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# SCOPE & SUMMARY

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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 are to encourage the frequent, intentional, and appropriate use of the various forms of social media by pastors and faith communities.

## Social Media Defined

Social media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to advance interactive communication—both public and private uses—as to include instant messaging, texting, emailing, and video chat.

We recognize that social media is always evolving and changing; therefore, this living document will be revisited annually as new outlets of social media emerge and others fade. Listed at the end of this document are definitions of various social media outlets that are currently and commonly used worldwide. This list is not exhaustive and the inclusion of a platform should not be understood as an endorsement or recommendation of its use.

## Stewardship and Boundaries

While Social Media can be a great tool, 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.”

Use care in your language, as meaning and tone are often lost in translation. Knowing this, it is important that we take the time to carefully craft words, especially when dealing with potentially sensitive topics. If you would hesitate to say something in person, it is probably best not to say it via social media. Remember the Wesleyan commitment to care for others. Be inclusive and abide in love through your use of social media. After all, “the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

While Social Media can be a great equalizer, it is important to remember that power imbalances which exist in the offline world do impact our digital connections. If you are a pastor, staff member, or even a Bishop offline, you continue to carry to represent these roles online. Consider how your words, follows, and friendings translate and how you will work to protect vulnerable populations and honor the ministry of colleagues whose connections may overlap with yours.

## Top Ten Best Practices of Social Media

1. When using social media, observe Wesley's General Rules and the great Commandments:
  - a. Do no harm
  - b. Do good
  - c. Attend to the ordinances of God
  - d. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength, soul
  - e. Love your neighbor as yourself
2. Claim, maintain, and monitor your faith community's social media profiles and websites. Take care to keep them current.
3. If you are not sure about appropriate use of social media, ask for help. If you're not sure about a post, do not post it.
4. Be respectful, collegial, and intentional of other's privacy including the announcing of prayer concerns and where location services are concerned.
5. Be professional and maintain the integrity of pastoral leadership through social media.
6. Protect the safety of congregants, minors, vulnerable adults, and yourself.
7. Be friendly and fair—allow others to friend you instead of vice versa.
8. When posting photos, allow others to identify themselves.
9. Take care to adhere to Safe Sanctuary guidelines, adapting them to social media practices.
10. Remember your Christian witness and allow your use of social media to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

# BEST PRACTICES

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## Maintenance of faith community & personal websites

It is strongly recommended that every faith community and pastor have an intentional, managed presence on the internet and in social media. This includes creating a site or a page (depending on the outlet) and updating it frequently. Keep your personal and faith community's capacity in mind though.

**An old or outdated page is worse than not having a page at all.**

Social media is considered by many as a means of contact and communication. Example: If you have Facebook and never check it, someone who has contacted you there may interpret your inattentiveness to your page as you are choosing not to respond to them. This is much like having voicemail on your phone but never checking the messages.

It may be important to your faith community to share timely information that is easily accessible, but remember, out of date information does more harm than no information. Make sure that you share the faith community's physical address, telephone number and worship times prominently (and accurately).

## Collegiality

With social media, the line between public and private communication is thin, blurry, and often non-existent. It is not good to speak ill of anyone through social media, even if you presume that the comment is private. Just like communicating within a particular community of faith, it is never a good idea to make disparaging comments about fellow clergy or their ministry in social media. When it comes to the use of social media, support your colleagues and be respectful of other clergy and other opinions. Once you say something on the Internet, it remains accessible forever—even if you delete it.

When commenting on current events from social issues to church politics, clergy should strive to maintain our prophetic voice, while at the same time maintaining our ordained covenant to uphold The United Methodist Church and its social practices, leadership, polity and ministry.

It is recommended that professional staff and pastoral leadership reflect seriously on how the online connections they've nurtured with members of a faith community they are leaving can make ministry more difficult for those who follow them. While some may choose to defriend former parishioners upon leaving a faith community, Social Media platforms like Facebook offer some flexibility and alternatives for those wishing to limit their social presence with a select group of people.

Please be aware that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has very specific guidelines relative to political commentary offered by faith communities and/or clergy. Clergy and church representatives are encouraged to maintain a healthy balance between a prophetic voice and keeping the faith community's tax exempt status intact as violations of IRS regulations can result in a revocation of a faith community's tax exempt status. To find out more about IRS regulations and the faith community's tax exempt status see: <http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Charitable-Organizations/Exemption-Requirements-Section-501%28c%29%283%29-Organizations>.

## **Discretion, Location Sharing, and Confidentiality**

Discretion refers to the quality of being judicious in one's conduct or speech. This definition of discretion serves as a framework regarding the information that is shared on social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and many others. Such discretion is referred to but not limited to frequent posts of your location and/or 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 should be done at the discretion of the individual who will be held accountable for what is shared if confidentiality is broken. Because of this and other concerns, social media is not an appropriate medium through which to counsel parishioners. Move counseling conversations to an appropriate venue.

Social Media such as Facebook, Foursquare, Yelp, Whatsapp, etc. that allow one to "check in" at one's current location should be used with discretion. Checking in refers to making one's location known via a social media outlet. 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.

Social location platforms can be a wonderful tool to raise awareness about your faith community's location and offerings, including worship and other events, but please do so with care so we do no harm. They can also be a tangible way to show that the work of a faith community, and its clergy, extends far beyond the walls of the church building.

## **Remember that you are a public figure**

We sometimes like to wear our "church member or clergy" hats Sundays, and then our "average person on the street" hats the rest of the week. When posting on Facebook, tweeting, or updating a blog, it is important to realize that most people do not see that differentiation. Whether you attend a church, work with a particular ministry area, or preach at one on Sunday, you bear an equal responsibility to be Christ to the world.

Make sure that everything you post or share, whether they are words, images or videos, are worthy of this calling and higher standard. You are never going to be perfect but social media is one of many avenues to practice our faith and the Wesleyan walk toward perfection.

While some informality in substance and style may be appropriate to the particular Social Media platform that you are communicating through, please remember that your posts may leave a poor impression if they contain regular misspellings or grammatical errors.

## **Remember that you are not the voice of The United Methodist Church**

Be careful to clarify and distinguish your beliefs, particularly on charged social or political issues, from the official positions of The United Methodist Church when they differ. We have a responsibility to recognize the connectional voice as captured by The Book of Discipline even when we feel God is calling for a prophetic witness against it. Work to host and participate in online conversations that express Christian generosity and respect for diverse points of view. Learn to listen, think, and ground your responses in our Christian and Wesleyan roots.

## Create Social Media Accounts on Major Platforms for your Faith Community

Creating accounts on major social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is a great way to share information with people about upcoming events at your church. It can also be an avenue to invite people—both members and those curious. Be careful not to reveal personal information about members or visitors, especially prayer concerns or photos, without their permission. Leave it up to members to add photos of their own children if they want them included on the page or associated with the event or seek permission from them in advance. Be sure to encourage parents and others to review the current privacy policies of the social media channel that their images will be posted on.

The use of hashtags (i.e. #dscumc, a reference to the DSC Conference), by adding them to the end of a tweet or Facebook post, is a great way to facilitate conversation and connection. Hashtags allow people to choose whether or not they would like to participate in a conversation or reveal their involvement in an event or subject matter. Hashtags, when used on Twitter (and to a lesser degree on Facebook), can be searched and allows users to see what others are saying about a topic, person, event, etc.

Social location applications create entries for every public place, including churches. Make every effort you can to “claim” and customize your entry on each platform to ensure it reflects your faith community. Examples of websites that do this include Google Maps, Google+ (increasingly integrated with their maps and search functions) Facebook.com, foursquare.com, patch.com, whatsapp.com, yelp.com, etc.

## 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. It is not appropriate to share someone else’s concerns or joys without their consent. To post a prayer concern without their prior permission is a violation of clergy ethics although not a violation of HIPAA guidelines, as churches are not “covered entities.”

## 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.

A social media account, email address, or website (particularly one on a popular Content Management System [CMS] like WordPress) that is protected by a weak password is also an attractive target to spammers and hackers. Websites running on outdated software also offer a tempting target for the same. Thankfully, most modern CMS platforms work to make the updating process relatively painless.

Please consider that the popularity of a particular platform does not mean that it is always an advisable choice for a ministry area. For example, Snapchat is a very popular app which allows photos, videos and texts to disappear after a short time so no one can see them. While its ubiquity would make it an attractive tool for youth workers seeking to “be where they are,” the difficulties users would find honoring safe sanctuary principles should cause us to question its use.

## Being “Friend”ly

Advice for clergy and church staff: 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 faith community to friend you on Facebook instead of hand selecting members of your faith community or organization, in the case of extension ministries, as “friends.” This applies across all social media platforms.

## Copyright, Fair Use, Public Domain, Etc.

The internet in general, and Social Media in particular, can feel like the Wild West when it comes to copyright. The reality, however, is that copyright laws function in much the same way online as they do offline. As the internet matures, copyright holders are also seeing a corresponding explosion in the tools available to them for protecting their works.

The following page from the Stanford University Library site does a great job of summarizing the issue and making practical suggestions. The author suggests that we start with the assumption that found content is protected and offers advice on seeking appropriate permission.

<http://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/website-permissions/websites/>

Two others pages to focus on define the rules surrounding works that may, or may not, be in the public domain and what qualifies as fair use. In summary, some content is available for such use but it isn’t nearly as broad a category as you might expect.

<http://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/public-domain/>

<http://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/fair-use/>

### **Useable content can be found online to support the communications work of your ministry.**

When individuals or organizations post their work with a Creative Commons license, you can typically use that content assuming you follow the rules of the particular license. Visit their site to learn more about the different licenses available.

<http://creativecommons.org>

For a general search, one can find content using an advanced Google search and narrowing the results with the appropriate “Usage Rights” selected. The following link provides a helpful list of places where one can find Creative Commons resources as well.

[http://www.google.com/advanced\\_search](http://www.google.com/advanced_search)

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)

<http://www.sitepoint.com/30-creative-commons-sources/>

# SAFE SANCTUARIES GUIDELINES

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## Social Media, Technology and the Internet

Under the auspices of the 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 Books of Discipline, all United Methodist faith communities are charged to create and employ church policies and procedures for the protection of children (birth -11 years), youth (12 -18 years) and vulnerable adults (18+ years old with any mental, physical, situational or age-related condition that renders them vulnerable to the decisions and care of others). These Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures are meant to reduce the risk of abuse to such persons within the community and the Church.

Given the increased use of technology and social media in the life of the church and its individual members, faith communities and conferences have a responsibility to define social media policies that uphold the covenant to create Safe Sanctuaries for children, youth, and vulnerable adults. To this end, the faith communities and pastors of the Desert Southwest Conference affirm the following:

### **We will utilize technology, the Internet, and all social media tools to promote Christian community and the building up of authentic relationships.**

- Facebook is a wonderful tool to use in Preschool, Children's, and Youth Ministry. It is highly recommended that ministry groups establish their own "page" in order to communicate with community members, participants when appropriate, as well as their parents/legal guardians.
- Blogs allow adults and youth alike a place to express ideas, thoughts and opinions, and to allow others the opportunity to engage them through response.
- YouTube and other video websites have proved useful for sharing video clips from any number of faith community-related events, sharing original video produced to promote an upcoming event or idea, or sharing video produced by another individual or group that might be used by your ministry for conversation, worship, or reflection.
- Texting and Tweeting have proven effective means of communication for getting a message out quickly to one individual or to an entire group.
- Skype, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Oovoo, Zoom.us, AdobeConnect, etc. are video conferencing programs that make balancing work/personal/volunteer time much more manageable and eliminate the added stress of traffic, cancelled flights, and inclement weather when meeting with a ministry group. Seeing what is being discussed is far more effective and meaningful than verbally describing things through phone conferencing but both are a great cost advantage.

### **We will protect the privacy and identity of all persons under 18 years of age and all vulnerable adults in online writings, postings, and discussions.**

- Adult employees and staff must not post photos or video that identifies children, youth, or vulnerable adults on any online site or printed publication without written consent from a parent or legal guardian.
- All Facebook groups associated with Preschools, Children's or Youth Ministry areas should be designated as "closed" groups, requiring all those who wish to gain access to be approved by the group's administrator(s).

- All faith community-related Facebook groups and pages must have at least two administrators. If an administrator is no longer associated with the ministry, that individual’s administrative status must be revoked.
- Photos of minors may only be published or posted after a photo release has been signed by their parent/guardian. Photos used in other mediums, such as church newsletters, websites, blogs, twitpics, etc., must not include any identifying information of minors.
- Photos may only be posted to the Facebook page by page administrators. Adults (staff, volunteers, parents, etc.) should not identify minors in photographs posted online or in print. Individuals (including minors) are welcome to identify (i.e. “tag”) themselves.
- When checking in on Foursquare, Facebook, or any location tagging social media, only “check in” for yourself. Never check in minors. Be sensitive to tagging or revealing other participants’ location without their expressed permission.
- In the case of clergy/professional staff and parishioner online connections, Friend Requests, Follow Requests, Circle Requests, etc. should be initiated by the parishioner, especially if the parishioner is a minor or vulnerable adult. This same principle should apply in connectational ministry settings like camps and retreats.

**We will maintain appropriate relational boundaries with minors.**

- No adult shall initiate Facebook contact with or “friend” a minor or vulnerable adult. When accepting the “friend” requests of minors, care should be taken to respect the ministry and discipleship work of the local faith community to which they belong. Any conversations on Social Media with minors or vulnerable adults shall occur in open channels, or with multiple parties present in the conversation thread.
- When emailing, texting, tweeting, or Facebook messaging a minor, adults should copy another adult (ideally a parent or guardian) on the message, or post it in a public venue (i.e. a Facebook wall as opposed to a private message). This will allow adults to maintain the “two adults present” Safe Sanctuaries standard when using social media. Platforms promising discrete conversations and secrecy (Snapchat, Facebook Poke, etc.) should be avoided.
- Social media, even though it offers convenient and private channels, is not an appropriate medium for counseling—especially with minors. Begin or transition a pastoral conversation into an appropriate Safe Sanctuary model (i.e. office with windows, two adult rule abiding settings, etc.).

**As an organization that is committed to the dignity and respect of all persons, our social media should do the same.**

- Likewise, our social media should be used for the uplifting and edification of all persons and should never engage in the creation, viewing or distribution of illegal material or anything that degrades another human being or any of God’s gifts.

**We shall not engage in, encourage or condone cyber-bullying.**

- Every children’s ministry, youth ministry group, and adult volunteer training sessions should include in its teaching and ministry Code of Conduct a session on the types and consequences of cyber-bullying, including how to identify it and how to report it.
- To learn more about cyber-bullying, visit: <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org>.

**We shall educate young people and their families in the effective use of social media and technology to live out their Christian witness in what they write, post, share, and view.**

- We all must understand, and teach to minors and vulnerable adults, that once something is posted on the web, sent via email, or sent via text, it is impossible to fully recover or erase it. There should be no expectation of privacy or reasonable expectation that the information stops with the person for whom it was intended. The promises of privacy offered by apps like Snapchat are illusionary.
- A good rule of thumb: If you don't want it posted on the church sign, website, or bulletin, do not text it or post it via social media.
- Stay current and review the latest data use or privacy policy on the social media platforms that you use. Include the policy link of the social media channel used for publicity in your photo release form.
  - Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/policy.php>
  - Twitter: <https://twitter.com/privacy>
  - Instagram: <http://instagram.com/about/legal/privacy/#>
  - SnapChat: <https://www.snapchat.com/privacy/>
  - Youtube (Google): <https://www.google.com/intl/en/policies/privacy/>
  - Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/privacy>
  - Pinterest: <http://about.pinterest.com/en/privacy-policy>

# SOCIAL MEDIA OUTLETS DEFINED

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## Blog

A Blog (short for web log) is a type of website or part of a website, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. Most blogs are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments and it is this interactivity that distinguishes them from other static websites. Examples include: [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com), [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com), etc.

As blogging software continues to mature, many now offer a reasonable, practical, and cost effective platform for faith communities who are looking for manageable solutions for their websites. Generally speaking, simplicity of use accompanies some rigidity in what a particular platform offers while more complexity typically also brings a corresponding flexibility.

## Facebook

Facebook is a social networking service, website, and mobile application. Users may create a personal profile, add other users as friends, and exchange messages, including automatic notifications when they update their profile. Facebook users must register before using the site. Users may join common-interest groups organized by workplace, school, or other characteristics. Facebook allows any users who declare themselves to be at least 13 years old to become registered users of the website. [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

Facebook also includes two other useful tools for faith communities. The Groups feature provides an avenue for correspondence and collaboration around a specific goal or project without requiring users to be “friends.”

The Pages platform should be of particular interest to faith communities looking to establish a social presence on the internet. A Facebook Page offers faith communities a nimble, and relatively easy to maintain, vehicle to create a social presence to reflect the character and values of your faith community. The presence of Pages in the results of the major search engines emphasizes the importance of this avenue.

## Flickr/Instagram/Vine

Flickr and Instagram allow you to upload photos or videos onto the web. Vine allows you to do the same with short, six-second clips of video. They can be easily shared with others directly by sending a link via a social network or email, or by searching for content on particular themes or topics. Flickr is a popular platform with mobile and desktop users while Instagram is heavily used as a mobile platform. Vine is owned by Twitter, although it works on a variety of other platforms as well. A variety of competitors exist. [www.Flickr.com](http://www.Flickr.com) | [www.instagram.com](http://www.instagram.com) | [vine.com](http://vine.com)

## Google+

Google+ is a social network operated by Google, Inc. with integrations across a number of Google products, including Maps, Places, and Search. Its focus is on targeted sharing within subsets of your social group, which are called “Circles.” Circles are small groups of people that you can share with, each with names like friends, family, classmates, and co-workers.

Google+ is treated by many as a second-rate Facebook, but there may be some danger in overlooking the advantage of using it to establish and nurture some foothold given Google’s dominance in the area of search. The integration of this network with their Google Places alone makes some attention to Google’s network a must. [plus.google.com](http://plus.google.com)

## Snapchat

Snapchat is a popular application on smart phones, which allows users to send photos, text via captions, and videos to friends. Unsurprisingly, the app is used widely by youth and young adults. Messages are temporarily stored in the SnapChat servers and devices of recipients. Once all recipients have viewed a Snap, the message is automatically deleted from the servers and the recipient’s devices. Additionally, Chats are deleted from both recipients and senders after both devices have seen the message and swiped out of the chat screen unless the sender or recipient taps to save it. Some users have the option of replaying the message additional times before it is deleted from their device and if it is added to a Story it will be viewable for 24 hours. Stories are often posted on Facebook for others to see. Several reports of security holes, including the ability to capture snaps with a screenshot have called into question the promise of the permanent deletion.

Snapchat could have some utility based on one’s ministry setting, but its use in youth ministry is suspect given the conflicting values of privacy and accountability. [www.snapchat.com](http://www.snapchat.com)

## Pinterest

Pinterest is a fast growing social network which functions like an online pin board for ideas and images. The ability to use an existing Facebook or Twitter account to sign in to the service has helped new users to join in. Users on the site can upload original content, repin, like, or comment on the content of others.

On the network, one can find boards for a large variety of items. Some organizations are using the platform to share ideas and visuals of their work. Ministry professionals might use it to gather concepts or inspiration for worship design or Sunday school lessons. “Secret” boards are also available. These boards will not show up in any feeds, categories, or search results. They are only visible to the subscriber and people invited to view them. Secret boards are located at the bottom of the user’s profile. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

## Tumblr

Tumblr is a website and micro blogging platform that allows users to post text, images, videos, links, quotes, and audio to their tumblelog, a short-form blog. Users can follow other users, or choose to make their tumblelog private. Its use of tagging and avoidance of clear, personal relationships places the

platform somewhere in-between Twitter and Facebook in regards to utility and features. Tumblr was recently purchased by search engine giant Yahoo. [www.tumblr.com](http://www.tumblr.com)

## Twitter

Twitter is an online social networking and micro blogging service (web service that allows the subscriber to broadcast short messages to other subscribers of the service) that enables its users to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters, informally known as “tweets.” [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)

## YouTube/Vimeo

YouTube is a video sharing website that allows you to upload and access videos from your computer or mobile device. Vimeo, like YouTube, is a video sharing website that also allows you to upload and access videos from your computer or mobile device. Where YouTube offers more integration with other Google services, Vimeo offers a cleaner, easily customizable, interface. [www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) | [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

## WhatsApp

WhatsApp Messenger is a cross-platform mobile messaging app which allows you to exchange messages without having to pay for SMS (Short Messaging Service). In addition to basic messaging WhatsApp users can create groups, send each other unlimited images, video and audio media messages, and their location using integrated mapping features.

Popular in Mexico and a free option for unlimited texting.

On February 19, 2014, Facebook announced it is acquiring WhatsApp for US\$19 billion. Facebook will pay \$4 billion in cash, \$12 billion in Facebook shares and \$3 billion in restricted stock units to be granted to WhatsApp founders and employees that will vest over four years.