



Young Clergy Task Force on  
Social Media

# Proposed: Social Media Guidelines for Clergy & Congregations

The North Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church

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# Executive Summary

## Top Ten Best Practices of Social Media

- When using social media, observe Wesley's General Rules and the great Commandments:
  - Do no harm
  - Do good
  - Attend to the ordinances of God
  - Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength, soul
  - Love your neighbor as yourself
- Claim, maintain and monitor your congregation's social media profiles and websites. Take care to keep them current.
- 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.
- Be respectful, collegial, and intentional of other's privacy including the announcing of prayer concerns and where location services are concerned.
- Be professional and maintain the integrity of the office of clergy through social media.
- Protect the safety of congregants, minors, vulnerable adults, and yourself.
- Be friendly and fair - allow others to friend you instead of vice versa.
- When posting photos, allow others to identify themselves.
- Take care to adhere to Safe Sanctuary guidelines, adapting them to social media practices.
- Remember your Christian witness and allow your use of social media to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## 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." 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".

# 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 & practices are to encourage the frequent, intentional, and appropriate use of the various forms of social media by pastors and local churches.

## **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.

# Best Practices

## Maintenance of church & personal websites

It is strongly recommended that every church and pastor have an intentional presence on the internet and in social media. This includes creating a site or a page (depending on the outlet) and updating it frequently. 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 is important to have timely information shared that is easily accessible; out of date information does more harm than no information. Make sure that you share the church's physical address, telephone number and worship times prominently (and accurately).

## Collegiality

With social media, the line between public & 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 the comment is private. Just like communicating within the church, 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. Please be aware that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has very specific guidelines relative to political commentary offered by churches and/or clergy. Clergy and church representatives are encouraged to maintain a healthy balance between a prophetic voice and keeping the church's tax exempt status intact as violations of IRS regulations can result in a revocation of a church's tax exempt status. To find out more about IRS regulations and the church's tax exempt status see: <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p1828.pdf>

## 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, MySpace, Twitter, and many others. Such discretion is referred to but not limited to

frequently posting 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 Foursquare, Yelp, Gowalla, Loopt, 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; rather, use hashtags (see below for more information) as a means of facilitating conversation.

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

### **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 differentiation. You are their pastor or the 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.

### **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. If you are contacted by the media regarding a current event topic, please contact Rev. Dr. Jamie Jenkins, Executive Assistant to the Bishop, in the Conference Information Office for assistance.

### **Create Social Media Accounts on Major Platforms for your Church**

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 is also a great way to invite people—both members and those curious. Be careful not to reveal personal information about church members or visitors, especially prayer concerns or photos, without their permission. Leave it up to church

members to add photos of their own children if they want them included on the page or associated with the event.

The use of hashtags (i.e. #NGAC11 (meaning, North Georgia Annual Conference 2011)), 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, can be searched and allow 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 church's entry on each platform to ensure it reflects your congregation. Examples of websites that do this include Google's maps.google.com, Facebook.com, foursquare.com, gowalla.com, patch.com, loopt.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. Also, 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 and HIPPA guidelines. For more information on HIPPA guidelines, please visit: <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/understanding/summary/index.html>

### **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.

### **Being "Friend"ly**

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.

# Safe Sanctuaries: Social Media, Technology and the Internet

Under the auspices of the 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008 United Methodist Books of Discipline, all United Methodist local churches are charged to create and employ church policies and procedures for the protection of children (birth -11 years), youth (twelve -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, churches 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 churches and pastors of the North Georgia 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 group members, 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 church-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.

**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 identify children, youth or vulnerable adults on any online site or printed publication without written consent from a parent or legal guardian.
- All Facebook groups and pages associated with Preschools, Children's or Youth Ministry areas will be designated as "closed" groups, requiring all those who wish to gain access to be approved by the page administrators.
- All church-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" yourself. Never check in minors. Be sensitive to tagging or revealing other participants' location without their expressed permission. Rather, create a hashtag to facilitate conversation. (See the *Best Practices* section of this document for more information on the use of hashtags.)
- In the case of clergy 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.

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

No adult shall initiate Facebook contact with or "friend" a minor or vulnerable adult. An adult accepting the "friend" requests of minors is up to the discretion of the adult in charge of the ministry area, in consultation with the pastor. Regardless of the decision that is reached, this

practice should be uniformly practiced by all adult staff and volunteers. Any conversations with minors or vulnerable adults shall occur in open channels.

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.

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 approved Safe Sanctuary model (i.e. office with windows, two adult rule abiding settings, etc.).

### **We shall not engage in the creation, viewing or distribution of pornography.**

Engaging in the above stated behavior is a violation of civil laws and clergy ethics and can lead to incarceration and the revocation of clergy credentials.

### **We shall not engage in, encourage or condone cyberbullying.**

Every children’s ministry and 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 cyberbullying, visit: <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org> or various other websites.

### **We shall educate young people in the effective ways of using 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 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.

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.

# Social Media Outlets Defined

**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.

**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)

**Flickr** allows you to upload your photos onto the web. These can be easily shared with others directly by sending them a link, or by searching for content on particular themes or topics. [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

**Google +** is a social network operated by Google, Inc. with integrations across a number of Google products, including Buzz and Profiles. 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. [plus.google.com](http://plus.google.com)

**MySpace** (now called "My\_\_\_\_\_") was the most popular social networking site as recently as 2008. Since then, it has regularly lost subscribers while Facebook has grown in popularity. In response, MySpace has recently redefined itself as a social entertainment website, with more of a focus on music, movies, celebrities and TV, instead of a social networking website. [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)

**Instant Messenger** (chat, text, video chat) allows you to chat through texting on various social media networks or through computer/web-generated functions such as iChat, Yahoo messenger, AIM, and various others. Video chatting is also available through such mediums. Web cameras are required for video chatting in order that those who are logged into the conversation are able to see each other face-to-face. Examples include [www.aim.com](http://www.aim.com), [messenger.yahoo.com](http://messenger.yahoo.com), [www.apple.com/macosx/apps/all.html#ichat](http://www.apple.com/macosx/apps/all.html#ichat)

**Tumblr** is a website and microblogging 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. [www.tumblr.com](http://www.tumblr.com)

**Twitter** is an online social networking and microblogging 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)

**Vimeo**, like YouTube, is a video sharing website that allows you to upload and access videos from your computer or mobile device. [www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com)

**YouTube** is a video sharing website that allows you to upload and access videos from your computer or mobile device. [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)