

# Digital Communication & Social Media:

*Good Use Guidelines for  
Clergy & Congregations*



Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

*These guidelines and examples for clergy and congregational leaders in their use of digital/electronic communications technology and social media should not be construed as advice with respect to any specific situation. Clergy and congregations should consult their legal counsel and advisors regarding particular issues and situations.*

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## **Good use guidelines for social and other digital communications media**

Commonly accepted principles of healthy boundaries and safe church practices apply to all interactions, in person and online, and include:

- Disparity of power precludes mutuality in friendship.
- Adults have more power than children and youth.
- Clergy have more power than people with whom they have a pastoral relationship.
- Mechanisms should be in place to allow transparency and accountability in interactions with children, youth and adults who may be vulnerable.
- Secret deals between adults and children or young people are never permissible.

### **Some general considerations:**

- Healthy boundaries and safe church practices must be adhered to online as well as in face-to-face interactions. Online interactions need to be as transparent as those conducted in person.
- Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse, neglect, harassment, bullying or exploitation of children, youth, elders and vulnerable adults apply in the online world as they do in the physical world.
- In social media networks, “friend” can mean anyone with whom you are willing to communicate through that medium. In-person friendship can mean much more in terms of intimacy, self-disclosure, mutuality and expectations for relationship. Mindfulness of and respect for such distinctions help maintain healthy boundaries.
- Confidentiality cannot be assumed in communication via social media and other digital/electronic means (including but not limited to e-mail, text messages, tweets, chats and messages via apps and social networking platforms). All such communication should be considered public in that it can be shared with and forwarded to others (intentionally or unintentionally) or reposted elsewhere. Content can have a long afterlife on the Internet even when specific posts have been deleted.
- Community environment and experience can be enhanced by establishing and communicating guidelines around respectful and appropriate use of social media and electronic communication devices during worship and church meetings and activities. (*One example: Please mute all devices during the service, but feel free to tweet the best of this morning’s sermon.*)
- Social media are dynamic and are most effectively used in organizational, leadership and ministry contexts where there is a commitment to regular monitoring and timely response.

**Some guidelines & recommended practices for online interactions in ministry with youth:**  
(See also “Some additional guidelines...” on page 4.)

1. Adults who work with youth should maintain appropriately stringent privacy settings on any and all social media networks. Individual personal profiles are best for interacting with actual friends, family members, colleagues and peers; limited profile access or separate groups are more appropriate options for interacting with youth.
2. Adults should not submit “friend” requests to youth. Youth may submit “friend” requests to adults, and adults should discern the level of contact that is appropriate to maintain with all youth prior to responding to such requests. Adults should articulate their policy regarding “friend” requests from youth, and then practice that policy consistently.
3. If an adult chooses to accept “friend” requests from youth who are associated with their community of faith, it is recommended that other adult leaders have the same access to that adult’s profile and correspondence.
4. Adults interacting with youth via social media networks are encouraged to set up a closed group to which other adults have administrative access. Youth who submit “friend” requests to an adult can then be invited to join this group rather than be admitted as a “friend” on the adult’s personal account. This is one way to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries.
5. Closed (but not “hidden”) online groups are recommended to insure membership is limited to those involved with the youth ministry.
6. Online groups should have at least two unrelated adult administrators.
7. Establish and clearly communicate norms for behavior and appropriate content for online youth groups, and moderate accordingly. Any content that details inappropriate behavior during a church-sponsored event or activity should be addressed by the clergy, adult youth leaders and parents.
8. Any material on any site (whether affiliated with the church or not) that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused, neglected or exploited should be immediately reported to the clergy and/or the Department of Children and Families (DCF). If the material is on a church-affiliated site, that material should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with the DCF and/or police.
9. Adult leaders of youth groups and youth members who depart or are no longer eligible because they have aged out of a program should be removed immediately from church-sponsored or organized online communication with youth groups via social networking sites, list serves, etc.

10. Some adults who work with youth secure signed release forms from parents or guardians before texting or e-mailing youth directly. Others inform parents or guardians in advance if they will be using e-mail or text messaging to communicate directly with youth, allowing parents or guardians an opt-out mechanism or an option of being copied on e-mails or texts sent to youth. A good practice is to include at least one other adult in text message or e-mail correspondence with youth, when appropriate. Platforms with no archive feature are not appropriate for communication between adult leaders and youth.

11. Model and maintain healthy practices and boundaries when responding to youth via online and electronic means by doing it during appropriate hours (for example, not during school hours or late at night).

**Some guidelines & recommended practices for online interactions in ministry with people of all ages:**

1. In social media networks, clergy and other leaders should maintain appropriate privacy settings and should articulate and practice a consistent online policy and presence with members of their congregations or ministry groups. Clergy and other leaders may accept “friend” requests from members of the congregation or ministry group, but it is recommended that they not initiate those requests. Some choose to create separate personal and professional social networking accounts to maintain appropriate boundaries with members of their congregations or ministry groups; others choose limited profile access with members; still others use only their church’s or ministry’s public social media pages or accounts for social networking interaction with the congregation or ministry group.

2. Clergy and other leaders should consider the content and nature of their online postings and presence, especially if their voice might be considered the voice of the church and their content understood to be church policy. Use disclaimers when appropriate and clearly identify personal opinion as such.

3. Clergy and other leaders who have moved to another congregation or ministry setting should set and observe boundaries and limit correspondence with members of the former congregation or group, via any media, to information necessary to the transition. Maintain online connections in a way that is consistent with appropriate in-person leave-taking practices. When and where it isn’t appropriate to sever social network connections, consider limited profile access or other boundary-setting practices.

4. Participants in video streams, chats or meetings should consider what will be shown in the video, such as their surroundings, state of dress, etc.

5. It is helpful to establish policies and guidelines for those administering church or ministry group social media accounts and online communication platforms. Don't delegate administration to people who aren't equipped to represent the church or group. Administrators of church or ministry group accounts and platforms should always consider voice and audience and post accordingly.

**Some e-mail considerations:**

1. E-mail can be an appropriate and effective means for communicating basic factual information but not matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or extensive enough that they might better be addressed by phone or in person.
2. Consider the ramifications of clicking "Send" or "Reply All" before doing so. It is also courteous, before sending, to take a moment to re-read message content and to check address fields for accuracy and subject lines for clarity. Obtain permission, when appropriate, before forwarding other people's message content.
3. When sending group e-mails (particularly to large groups and groups whose recipients do not know one another), respect and protect recipients' privacy by placing their addresses in the "blind" BCC field (not the TO field, where they will be displayed and accessible to all).
4. Those who feel they are drowning in e-mail may like to adopt and propagate some of the tips found at [www.emailcharter.org](http://www.emailcharter.org).

**Some additional guidelines related to publishing and posting online content:**

1. Common sense and common courtesy are two good guides.
2. Always cite sources and make sure content comes from credible ones before sharing or posting. Respect copyright and the intellectual/creative property of others and seek permission before using.
3. Make announcements and post signs when services or activities are being recorded for broadcast via the Web or other media.
4. Secure signed release forms from parents or guardians of minors participating in church activities that may be photographed or videoed for Web posting, broadcast or other online distribution.
5. Establish and practice a policy for identifying minors in photos published on church-sponsored sites and social networks; some choose to not include any names; others only first names. In all cases, do not post contact information for minors.

**Sample release form:**



## Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

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**SIGNATURE:**

**DATE:**

**Contact phone number and/or e-mail address** (for verification or reference purposes only):

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**Print full name of subject:**

As the parent/legal guardian of the individual named above, I hereby give the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts [and/or: Fill in name of any affiliated organizations or projects, if applicable] permission to use photo and/or video images of her/him in all forms and media for advertising, editorial and promotional usage.

**PRINT PARENT'S/GUARDIAN'S NAME:**

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