

Note: The information in this document comes from the Board of Ministry and Cabinet. It will be presented the afternoon of June 7 during the Boundaries Training portion of Clergy Session.

Guidelines for Effective Use of Digital Communication and Social Media Tools

Modern forms of communication encompass a wide array of devices and services that may be used both to communicate interpersonally and as methods of broadcast communication. Tools such as email, texting, blogging and social media services offer novel ways to connect with one another. Of course, the proliferation of tools also increases the opportunity for misuse. This document is intended to provide guidelines for the safe and effective use of digital communication. It is not intended to comprehensively deal with every possible use of digital communication and social media tools. As with all communication, thoughtfulness, kindness, and a desire to share the love of God with others should inform our efforts as we use digital communication tools.

It is important to keep in mind that if a pastor participates in social media activity, any statements, images, or material the pastor posts may be viewed as being on behalf of local church, The East Ohio Conference or The United Methodist Church – especially if the pastor mentions or lists that he/she is the pastor of a local church. Your identity matters. The way in which you comment or share on social media sites will impact your ministry and possibly the ministry of the local church you are serving.

To protect the ministry of Church, while recognizing the rights of individuals, and to ensure compliance with applicable laws, please keep the following general considerations in mind. In his day, John Wesley asked the members of his Society to think about their words and actions in daily life. He crafted a rule of life for his Society that was based on three principles: do no harm; do good; attend to the ordinances of God. These principles can be applied to the use of digital communications tools by churches, pastors, and conference leaders.

Do No Harm:

Take care that in your use of digital communication tools you avoid causing harm to yourself or others.

One of the benefits of social media is that it provides the opportunity to share views, thoughts, joys, and concerns about all areas of life. Our social media contributions can be very effective tools for ministry if we apply caution before we post. We will be careful that our posts are not “doing harm” by insulting or damaging the reputation of others. We will make sure our posts are respectful and in good taste. And we will remember that everything we post—status updates, comments, tweets, blogs—becomes public immediately after we click “send” (even if we’re using a limited-access setting). We can’t take it back once it’s out there, so we will use discernment with everything we post.

- Care should be taken to abide by all policies of the Annual Conference, including the Sexual Ethics Policy.
- Speaking or writing about colleagues, parishioners, and others in ways that undermine their integrity or personhood is never acceptable in any forum.
- Harassment, discrimination, racist, and hate speech should never be indulged in digital communication. Sexual harassment violates the policy of the Annual Conference and is a chargeable offense for clergy and laity in the Book of Discipline.
- Viewing and/or sharing pornographic images or videos violates the policy of the Annual Conference and is a chargeable offense for clergy in the Book of Discipline.
- Disclosing confidential information is a violation of trust; and, for those who are licensed or ordained, it is a violation of ordination vows, and a chargeable offense in the Book of Discipline.
- Posting photographs or videos of others without their consent is unacceptable; doing so with minors violates the principles of Safe Sanctuaries and may be a violation of the law.
- Engaging on social media with children under 18 years of age also violates the principles of Safe Sanctuaries and may be a violation of the law.
- Respect other people's content and intellectual property rights. Do not claim authorship of something that is not yours. If you are using another party's content, make certain they are credited for it in your post and they approve of you utilizing their content. Do not use the copyrights, trademarks, publicity rights, or similar rights of others, without the necessary permissions of the rights holder(s).

To Think About

- Is the post "doing harm" to the reputation of the church, Christ, or another person or organization?
- Can the post be interpreted as harmful, offensive rude, or distasteful? If I'm posting photos, do I have the permission of the people pictured?
- If using the post as an outlet to vent, what's the most productive and least harmful way to seek resolution or reconciliation? Is there a less public, more respectful way to do so?
- Do I have permission to use this content, trademark, copyright, or intellectual property?

Do Good:

Digital communication tools offer tremendous opportunity to connect with parishioners and members of the community who are not involved with your church.

Social media can serve as an effective method of church networking and communicating. It has the potential to have an encouraging influence on our congregations and communities and to serve as a powerful tool for delivering the Gospel message to a large audience that extends beyond our contact list. It's also a great way to share news about our church and

ministry—and to invite others to join us in worship and service. Additionally, it can be a useful tool for obtaining feedback and ideas from our audience and can be used to gain insight for sermons, Bible study topics, worship times, and needs of the community. The “good” and positive uses of social media are endless.

- Post about what God is doing in your ministry context, advertise ministry events, use digital communication tools and social media to share the Gospel.
- For pastors who are using social media, be mindful of accepting friend requests from parishioners especially those who are under the age of 18: don’t play favorites; and maintain appropriate boundaries.

To Think About

- Can the post be described as “good”?
- Will it help the kingdom and fellow believers? How will it be perceived by non-believers? How will the post be received by people with different cultural or faith backgrounds?
- Are we communicating effectively by asking questions in addition to providing information?

Attend to the Ordinances of God:

Digital communication and social media tools offer us an opportunity to spread the Gospel message in previously unimagined ways.

Social media is a great way to find meaningful devotional materials, thought-provoking blogs, inspiring worship videos and media resources, and current articles and tools for our ministry. Users have reported that their social media usage helps keep them informed and enthusiastic about their ministry on a daily basis. While it can definitely help us “stay in love with God,” it also can be very distracting. We will make sure our use of social media does not occupy so much of our time that we are no longer fully participating in meaningful devotion, worship, Bible study, and conversations with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Social media can serve as a tool to aid, promote, and conduct discussions, studies, and devotional times but should not be our primary source of interaction with the world.

- Streaming worship services are a great way to give potential visitors a taste of what your faith community is like.

To Think About

- How is social media helping me to stay in love with God? How is it hindering me?
- How am I helping others stay in love with God by my social media contributions?
- How am I engaging in meaningful interactions that don’t involve social media? When is personal dialogue more beneficial?