

Guidelines for Email, Social Media, & Other Forms of Digital Communication in the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth

1. Introduction

As an ever-increasing number of people use and prefer digital communication over other forms, it is essential that The Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth be present in this mission field. Basic email, social networking sites, and on-the-spot communication devices can enhance communication, facilitate faith sharing and deepen relationships.

The way the church communicates written words to its people and to the world has always been evolving. It is important to recognize that engaging in more-timely communication methods and using higher-tech tools has not really changed the challenges faced in communication. Since pen first hit parchment and a scribe handed a letter to a courier, it has been nearly impossible to retrieve or change written information once it has been sent. People have written words they wish they hadn't. What was intended to be private has been made public and remained public for a long time. What was an original work has been copied and shared without the creator's consent. Written words have failed to convey what spoken words, voice inflection, and body language together can. What someone writes can receive public scrutiny and public comment.

There have been many technical turns that have changed and improved writing technology. Each major technical advancement has increased the speed, ease and variety of ways in which people communicate. Advancements continue in the wireless and web-connected world of social networking and social media, which is constantly evolving. Despite the advances in and the expanding types of communication, the church must continue to constantly consider the content in its communication, and church personnel must constantly recognize that they are often considered the voice of the church.

There are other notable changes that our newer, higher-tech communication offers over previous communication methods. The speed is indeed faster; communication can happen almost instantaneously, seemingly in real time. Content is delivered and received outside the bounds of traditional media news cycles, like the daily newspaper, or the 6 o'clock news, or monthly newsletter distribution, or even an office memo. Contributors take charge of delivering their own message, instead of waiting for others to publish it for them. Transparency is more evident when contributors choose to stand toe-to-toe with and engage their audience.

This document will not tell you how many emails a week is right for your parish, which Facebook profile is right for your organization, or explain the right privacy settings on a profile, or identify elegant widgets for your wiki, or any such details. This document doesn't guide you into the best social media vehicles for you to broadcast your information or connect your people. As handy as that type of information might be, it's not in here.

The guidelines in this document form a set of safe practices and are intended to be helpful in navigating the ever-changing online communication landscape. These guidelines apply commonly-accepted principles of healthy boundaries and a safe church to the virtual world of digital networking and communication. These guidelines are intended to help organizations in our diocese face the challenges that have always been present in communication but that seem amplified by the speed and openness that current technologies offer.

2. Applicability

These guidelines form the norms for the diocese, and as such, apply to all churches, organizations, committees, and personnel. The definition of “church personnel” is found in the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth *Policies for Ethics and Integrity in Ministry*. Existing policies and behavior guidelines extend to activities in the online environment just as they do in the physical world. Church personnel are personally responsible for the information they present in the digital world.

3. Definitions

A. Digital communication is communication sent digitally. Forms of digital communication include email, text messages, instant messaging, blogs, posts to electronic forums and bulletin boards, information presented on social networking and social media sites.

B. The line between social networking and social media can be blurry; though distinctions exist, these distinctions are ignored in this document. Herein the term “social media” will be used to encompass social media, social networking, and social publishing; the term refers to a way to electronically bring people and information together to share and discuss. Examples of social media sites and services are Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, blogs, wikis, Google and Yahoo Groups, electronic bulletin boards.

C. Electronic accounts used to communicate on behalf of the church or an organization within the church are called church-affiliated accounts.

D. The term “recording” is used to encompass photography, audio recording, and video recording.

4. Copyright

A. If you use artwork, music, photographs, videos, poems, or text that you did not create, the creator’s copyright is enforceable.

B. Respect copyright laws. The Library of Congress’ Copyright Office website <http://www.copyright.gov/> will help you navigate issues of copyright.

C. Nothing in our diocese is exempt from copyright law because of our nonprofit status or religious affiliation.

5. Use of Service Mark

A. The service mark of the Diocese of Fort Worth must not be used without permission.

B. If a parish has a service mark, originators of digital content should seek permission from the vestry or organization’s designated authority to use it in any communications.

6. Safe Church Policies

Safe church policies are designed to increase awareness regarding misconduct and abuse of power, to outline steps toward preventing abuse, and to equip anyone in a position of leadership with effective ways of caring for the body of Christ. Safe church policies from the physical world

are reviewed below in section A; they form a basis for safe church policies in the digital world, presented in section B.

A. Commonly Accepted Principles of Healthy Boundaries and Safe Church

1. Adults have more power than children and youth.
2. Clergy have more power than people with whom they have a pastoral relationship.
3. The mutuality of friendship cannot exist when there is a disparity of power.
4. Two unrelated adults must be able to maintain visual contact with each other any time they engage in ministry with children or youth.
5. Windows in doors allow transparency of interactions with children, youth and adults who may be vulnerable.

B. General Information about Digital Communications in a Safe Church

1. All digital communication is NOT CONFIDENTIAL and may be shared with others.
2. Interactions in the virtual world need to be transparent, just as a window in the door provides transparency in the physical world.
3. In the virtual world healthy boundaries and safe church practices must be adhered to just as they are in the physical world.
4. In the physical world, “friend” can mean much in terms of intimacy, self disclosure, mutuality and expectations for relationship but in the virtual world, “friend” can mean anyone with whom you are willing to communicate through that medium. Be aware of the difference.
5. Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse/neglect/exploitation of children, youth, elders and vulnerable adults apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.

7. Ownership and Administration of Electronic Accounts

- A. Ownership of church-affiliated accounts should be registered with church email accounts, not personal accounts.
- B. Administration privileges on any church-affiliated accounts should be held by church staff and in church email accounts; additional non-church-owned email accounts may be used in addition to church accounts.
- C. Administration privileges on church-affiliated accounts should be held by at least two unrelated adults, ensuring transparency and oversight.
- D. Assignment of the responsibility of creation, administration, and use of church-affiliated accounts should be done by the Vestry or Rector or the head of the group’s organization; responsibilities should be detailed in organizational/governance structures.

8. Profiles and Identity

A. Remember your association and responsibility with the church in online environments at all times. If you identify yourself as a church employee, staff member, leader, or volunteer, ensure your profile and related content is consistent with how you should present yourself with colleagues, church members, parents, children, youth, and the public at large. Ensure your profile and related content are consistent with the image, purpose and mission of your church and the church organizations you are affiliated with. How you represent yourself online should be comparable to how you represent yourself in person.

B. When uploading digital pictures or avatars that represent yourself make sure you select a church-appropriate image. Also remember not to utilize protected images.

C. Be cautious how you setup your profile, biography, avatar, etc.; it should not conflict with the responsibility you have in and to the church. The same guidelines apply to the substantive content you share.

D. On public social media sites, avoid providing complete identifying personal information, such as full name, birthday, physical address, or phone numbers.

9. Use of Email and Messaging (Includes Texting and Twitter and mailing-list services)

A. Email or messaging is an appropriate and effective means of communicating basic factual information such as the time of an event, agenda for a meeting, text of a document, update to a website, etc.

B. Email or messaging is not an appropriate communication method for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation.

C. A short email signature for the originator of a message should be included in the email. The signature should at a minimum identify the originator's name and church or organization.

Additional recommendations include telephone and website.

D. Humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted and should be avoided.

E. Email or messaging should not be considered private correspondence. Do not put anything in an email that you would not want on a billboard on a major highway.

F. All email and message senders should take a moment to consider the ramifications of the content of their message before clicking on the "send" or "reply to all" or "post" button.

G. Protecting email addresses

1. When sending emails to a specified list of committee or commission members, it is preferable for the members to see each others' email addresses and to have the ability to respond to each member individually and to the group as a whole.

2. When planning to send an email to a broader distribution list, such as to a large group or entire parish, recognize that many recipients who have shared their email address with your organization may NOT want their email addresses to be visible to others. Individuals may not want their email address to become part of large mailing lists, and they may not want to receive a large number of copies of replies from fellow members of the distribution group. These guidelines are recommended:

a. prepare a courtesy draft and email it to the highest organizational authority (senior warden, priest, board director, etc.) for review, suggestions, and a go-ahead decision on how to address it.

b. avoid mass distribution of email lists and mass replies by entering the email addresses into the blind carbon copy (BCC) field.

c. use a no-reply mailing-list service that only shows the recipient's address.

10. Behavioral Covenants in Social Media Sites

1. Behavioral covenants should be posted on social media sites that have a discussion forum.
2. Covenants should be posted in such a way as to be accessible to all site viewers.
3. Covenants should acknowledge that materials posted on church-affiliated sites are not confidential.
4. Covenants should acknowledge that content deemed inappropriate will be removed from the site.
5. Covenants for communities of faith should address the following issues:
 - a. Appropriate language
 - b. Eligibility of membership to join a social media group. Things to consider include whether the applicant must be a member of a parish or group and whether there are age requirements/restrictions for participation for groups.
 - c. Loss of eligibility of membership and removal from the social media group. Consider how and when members will be removed from the group due to moving away, leaving the faith community, becoming too old for youth group, clergy and staff (including volunteer leaders) leaving to minister to another parish or exclusion from ministry positions for other reasons.
 - d. Who, how and when may photos or videos be tagged (members identified by name) For example, individuals may tag themselves but should not tag others.
 - e. Appropriate and inappropriate behavior of members (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, sexual acts, etc.) and the consequence for inappropriate dialogue or behavior.

11. Social Media Connecting Adults

1. Account administrators are strongly encouraged to set all available privacy settings on any social media profile or site to shield any members from viewing content that may be inappropriate.
2. Church personnel should use their personal profiles to interact with their personal friends, family, and peers, but in many cases a personal profile may not be the best method in which to engage parishioners or church group members. Church personnel should carefully consider whether to submit personal “friend” requests to parishioners and others to whom they minister and interact. The disparity of power may not give the other person the ability to decline such request. Consider also whether feelings might be hurt or whether favoritism might be perceived if one member is friended and another is not.
3. Clergy and church personnel who want to connect with parishioners or organization members via social media are strongly encouraged to set up social media groups in which all organization members may freely participate, rather than connecting with members via a personal account. The purpose of having a personal profile and a separate organization online group is to create a line of privacy in interactions with personal family, friends and colleagues and yet still engage members. For example, if a member can connect with a priest through his personal profile, the priest’s brother’s raunchy comments on the priest’s status updates may not be able to remain private. As another example, all of the choir members don’t need access to the director’s profile to

see the director's daughter's bikini-clad beach photos, but they do need to ask questions and discuss the music plans and practice schedules. In both of these examples, connecting members and church personnel to an organizational group blends the personal with the professional and allows everyone involved to stay in touch and share information, without the distractions that can be found in inter-personal connections.

4. Clergy and church personnel should consider the impact of declining a "friend" request from parishioners or organization members. These encounters may create a tension in "real world" relationships. Clergy and church personnel can direct "friend" requests from parishioners and organization members to the group site.
5. When and how church personnel should engage members in social media can be tricky in some situations. For example, should a priest (a) comment on a member's status if they are pouring out their broken heart, and thus seemingly begin pastoral care on a social media site, or (b) use private communication to engage the member. There are no concrete guidelines that can cover all situations, so in every engagement, consider that digital communication is often not the best communication method for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation.
6. Church personnel who work directly with members are encouraged to establish church-affiliated digital communications groups to maintain contact with members.
7. When the role of clergy or church personnel ends (for example, change of job, leaving a position, retirement, termination) they should gracefully disengage from digital communication that revolves around their former role. This separation is to allow new personnel to assume their leadership role. The separation may be as simple as removal from a social media group, but it may also extend to removing parishioners or group members as personal "friends" or contacts in all forms of digital communications. Account administrators may need to assist or to enforce this guideline.

12. Social Media Connecting Children and Youth

1. Adults who minister to children and youth are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social media profile to shield any members from viewing content that may be inappropriate.
2. Individual personal profiles should be used to interact with real friends, family and peers. Adults should not submit individual "friend" requests to children or youth with whom they interact on behalf of the church. Children or youth may not be able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults. Children or youth may ask to be "friends," and adults should discern the level of contact that is appropriate with that young person prior to responding to a request, and should consider also whether feelings might be hurt or whether favoritism might be perceived if one member is friended and another is not.
3. If an adult chooses to accept friend requests from children or youth who are associated with their community of faith, other unrelated adult leaders must have full access to all aspects of that adult's profile and social media correspondence.
4. Adults who want to connect via social media services to children or youth to whom they minister are strongly encouraged to set up a closed group structure that children or youth may join. Groups provide the transparency that is a goal of safe church practices.

a. Closed groups, but not public or hidden groups, should be used for child or youth groups (EYC, confirmation, pilgrimage, mission trips, etc.). Using a closed group should protect the privacy of the child or youth membership and should keep the details of the group dialogue away from non-members. Using a hidden group would protect privacy, but should not be used because no one can find out that the group exists.

Using a public group will not protect child or youth members' privacy.

b. Children or youth requesting to "friend" an adult can be invited to join this group rather than be accepted as a friend on an adult's personal profile account. The purpose of having a personal profile and a separate organization online group is to create a line of privacy in interactions with personal friends and yet still engage children/youth members.

c. Youth social media groups may employ child or youth administrators in addition to the unrelated adult administrators required on all accounts. If young administrators are employed, there must be at least 2, and there may be more. If young administrators are employed, invitations to children or youth to join the group should be made by a non-adult administrator, unless a child or youth previously asked an adult administrator to invite him to join the group.

5. When and how church personnel should engage members in social media can be tricky in some situations. For example, should a priest or adult leader (a) comment on a young member's status if they are pouring out their broken heart, and thus seemingly begin pastoral care on a social media site, or (b) use private communication to engage the member. There are no concrete guidelines that can cover all situations, so in every engagement, consider that digital communication is often not the best communication method for matters that are pastorally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation.

6. Social media groups for children or youth should be open to parents of current members.

7. Parents should be informed that the content of children/youth social media communications that are not sponsored and administered by the church are NOT within the purview of adult youth leaders OR the church.

8. Any content that details inappropriate behavior (outside of the bounds of the established behavioral covenant) during a church-sponsored event or activity should be addressed by adult youth leaders and parents together.

9. Any material on any site (whether affiliated with the church or not) that raises suspicion that a child or youth has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to the clergy and/or the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS, 1-800-252-5400, <https://www.txabusehotline.org>). 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 DFPS and/or police.

10. When the role of an adult leader ends in a child or youth group, the adult should gracefully disengage from social media that revolves around his former role. This separation is to allow new personnel to assume their leadership role.

11. Former youth members who, due to departure, removal from position, or who are no longer eligible because they "aged-out" of a program should be immediately and gracefully removed from digital communication with the group and from associated church-sponsored social media sites for the group.

12. When a special group is formed for a short-term purpose (such as for mission trips, events, event planning, confirmation, etc.), the group should be terminated once the ministry has come to an end.

13. Photographic, Audio, and Video Recording and Publishing

There is nothing new that social media brings in the areas of recording or publishing, but current technology has put recording devices in many people's pockets, and publishing the information is at their fingertips. The issues of "can I make a recording here?" "can I publish it?" and "who must approve it?" continue to exist in print, and any issues that have always existed in print are the same in the digital world.

A. Do not publish any recording for news purposes or commercial purposes without permission of the creator of the recording, per the "Copyright" section above.

B. There are 5 general privacy guidelines that apply to all forms of recording:

1. Get permission to record on the property. Follow the guidelines that are given by whoever grants you permission. Permission for any type of recording on church property should be obtained from the vestry, rector, or other property-governing authority. Church property can be considered to be a semi-public space - it is privately-owned, but in most areas, the public is welcome. Because church property is privately-owned, permission for recording should be obtained.

2. Do not intrude into anyone's solitude or record in a location where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy.

3. Do not publish private information without permission. Private information may include name, age, address, or any contact information. Private information may also include whether someone is verbally or visually recognizable as an individual receiving counseling or attending a Narcotics Anonymous meeting or taking a medication. Carefully consider whether any written or visual private information is needed to maintain the integrity of the publication. Consider whether recognition of an individual associated with a news story is in the best interests of the individual's privacy, and if it is, then get their permission before publication.

4. Do not publish anything that presents the subject in a false or negative light.

5. Do not appropriate any recording of any individual for any commercial use without permission. Publication of recordings used for anything other than reporting news falls under commercial-use restrictions, and therefore the latitude offered to the "free and independent press" does not apply. However, church media may use recordings for commercial use without express permission if one of these two exceptions applies:

- a. an individual cannot be identified in the recording, as in a view of someone's back or a portion of their body.

- b. the recording is from a newsworthy event (note that is a broad, interpretative definition) at a public place (churches are semi-public), and if individuals are only incidentally visible (broad definition) in a large group (broad definition).

C. For news recording and publication, the United States constitution's protection of free speech and an independent press generally allows the media to publish news-related content in any form without personal permissions, following the 5 established privacy guidelines above.

D. Not everything that is legal is wise, so adhere to these additional best practices for church media:

1. For any type of recording at any time, inform people that they are being recorded.

2. If someone asks not to be recorded, honor their request.

3. Secure signed release forms from individuals being recorded. For child and youth participants, the release must be signed by a parent or guardian.

4. Include a broad and unrestrictive media release on every participation agreement and event/activity registration or permission form. The addition of a broad media release

form that grants all elements of a hierarchical organization the unrestricted use of recordings is an easy addition to a registration procedure and to forms. Having a media release that includes use by the diocese and all of its constituent organizations is in our collective best interest.

5. Church organizations should establish policies to state what their media creation, approval, and publication process are, addressing print and digital publication.

6. Participants in a video session should consider what will be shown in the video, such as their surroundings, their clothing, state of dress, etc.

7. Refrain from initiating live video interaction with youth or children.

14. Advertising on Church-Affiliated Sites

Advertising from commercial organizations on church websites and social media sites is discouraged.