

Internet Safety Guidelines

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INTRODUCTION

The emerging “digital age” has presented the Church with a new and evolving set of communication tools which offer great promise for developing and deepening ministries of relationship. Social networking sites, on-the-spot communication devices, and “old-fashioned” email can facilitate faith sharing and inquiry, organization for mission, and pastoral care. Their rapid manifestation raises anxieties as well. People legitimately feel discomfort with the unfamiliar. They certainly experience confusion when confronted with new tools to accomplish customary tasks. And they feel out of place in new communities that emerge around new communication technologies.

We offer this document as a guidepost to emerging technologies, and hope that it provides an opportunity for local church leaders to engage in conversation. The Church of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the United Church of Christ use the practice of covenanting to found and bound healthy, faithful communities. We hope this document will aid local church leaders to give expression to their own groups’ covenants, Safe Church policies, and ministry practices in the new world of electronic communication.

Where we offer advice about specific practices, we make it from a hope that these practices are more likely to produce strong, healthy relationships in the Body of Christ, and not from a legislative impulse or an attempt to proffer legal advice. That which builds relationship is a more exacting standard than public statutes. The whole United States Code may not be summed up in the commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” yet it still serves as a sound guide for Christian praxis.

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Recommendations—Safe Church (Minor-to-Adult Relationships)

Social Networking Sites— Relationship and Group Status

1. Adults should not submit “friend” requests to minors or youth. Youth may request friendships with adults, and adults should discern the level of contact they want to maintain with youth prior to responding to these requests.
2. When and where available, authorized youth workers may choose to create separate private and professional profiles on networking sites to create a line of privacy.
3. If an authorized youth worker chooses to accept friend requests from minors or youth that are associated with their community of faith, we recommend that other youth workers (within the same community of faith) have full access to the professional youth worker’s profile and correspondence.
4. Authorized youth workers who choose to accept friend requests from minors or youth should use all privacy settings applicable to shield youth from any inappropriate content that may exist within the authorized youth worker’s profile.
5. All youth and adults should be informed that any communication that is sent via digital means (email, social networking site notes or posts, etc.) is not confidential and may be reported or shared with others.
6. We strongly recommend “closed” groups, but not “hidden” groups be used for youth groups. These groups should have both youth and adult administrators.
7. Youth groups should decide within their covenant whether or not their social networking site groups are open to parents of current members.
8. Covenants should be created to govern what is appropriate and inappropriate content to be placed and displayed in the online group for a youth group.
9. Any inappropriate material that is not covered by “Mandatory Reporting” laws should be deleted from the site. Any material that is covered by “Mandatory Reporting” laws should be reported to the clergy (within your community of faith), documented for church records, and then deleted from the site.
10. Any content that details inappropriate behavior (outside of the bounds of the established covenant) during a church-sponsored event or activity should be addressed by authorized youth workers and parents.
11. Parents should be informed that content that appears on youth pages or groups that are not sponsored by the church are NOT within the purview of authorized youth workers.

Recommendations—Boundaries (Adult-to-Adult Relationships)

Social Networking Sites— Relationship and Group Status

1. Adult members of congregations or communities of faith who seek religious or spiritual advice from clergy via digital means (email, social networking site posts, etc.) should be informed that their communication is NOT confidential. Use of digital means to communicate nullifies confidentiality.
2. When and where available, clergy are encouraged to consider creating a personal and a professional account to maintain appropriate boundaries with members of their congregations or other members of communities of faith.
3. Clergy should consider the impact of declining a “friend” request from their church members. These encounters may create tension in “real world” relationships.
4. Clergy who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church-sponsored digital communications groups to maintain contact with youth members.
5. Clergy are encouraged to use privacy settings to shield both adult and youth members from viewing content that may be inappropriate.

General Recommendations for Communication and Contact

Recommendations for Transitions

1. Clergy who are leaving a specific ministry setting (congregation, cluster youth ministry, association, conference) should refrain from offering pastoral care through digital communication after the END date of their contract/call/covenant with their community of faith.
2. Former youth members and adult leaders of youth groups, due to departure, removal or loss of eligibility (aged out of a program) should be removed from digital communication youth groups (Facebook groups, list serves, etc.) (See Covenant recommendations for additional information).

Recommendations for Digital Covenants

1. Digital Covenants should acknowledge that materials posted on Church Sponsored sites (and or group pages) are not CONFIDENTIAL.
2. Digital Covenants should acknowledge that content deemed inappropriate will be removed from the site or group.

Recommendations for Digital Covenants (Continued)

3. Digital Covenants for communities of faith should address the following issues:
 - appropriate language,
 - eligibility of membership (do you have to be a member of a local congregation or youth group, are parents of current members eligible, are their age requirements/ restrictions for participation, etc.),
 - content that can be posted/published on the site or page (Rule of thumb: post your information and not others'),
 - who, how and when may photos be tagged (members identified by name; for example, individuals may tag themselves in photos but should not tag others),
 - stipulate appropriate and inappropriate (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, sexual acts, etc.) behavior of members and the consequence for inappropriate behavior,
 - transitions, due to departure, loss of eligibility or removal of youth members and/ or adult leaders, and
 - mandatory reporting laws will be followed (See glossary of terms for additional information on mandatory reporting laws).

Recommendations for Video Chats, Blogs, or Video Blogs

1. Adults should refrain from initiating video chats with youth.
2. Participants in a video chat or blog should consider what will be shown in the video such as their surroundings, their clothing/state of dress, etc.
3. All transcripts of online text chats, video chats, blogs, or video blogs should be saved when possible.
4. All clergy and authorized youth workers should consider the content and nature of any post that will be read by or visible to youth. Your voice is often considered the voice of the church, and your content may be viewed as church policy.

Recommendations for Publishing/Posting Content Online

1. All Communities of faith should take care to secure signed Media Release forms from adults and guardians of minor children who will or may participate in activities that may be photographed or videotaped for distribution.
2. Any congregation that distributes video of its congregational services or activities on the web or via other broadcast media MUST post signs that indicate the service will be broadcast.
3. Congregations are NOT considered PUBLIC space and therefore must inform participants when they are being videotaped.
4. Photos that are published on church-sponsored sites should not include name or contact information for minor children or youth.

Glossary of Terms

Authorized Youth Worker—any adult individual who is designated by a community of faith to work with minor children: This includes chaperones, employees and volunteers.

Community of Faith—a congregation, cluster of churches, association or conference that engages in ministry together.

Cluster Churches/Youth Ministries—two or more congregations that work together to form, support or maintain ministries to and with youth.

Church-Sponsored Sites—any group, page or list serve that is created by a designated member of a community of faith for the purpose of establishing, maintaining or growing ministries to and with youth and/or adults.

Mandatory Reporting—individuals who work with youth are responsible to report to clergy any activity or language which indicates that a minor is being severely harmed (sexual assault, physical abuse or emotional torment) by a youth or adult, considering doing severe harm to themselves (thoughts or plans of suicide) or severely harming others (abuse, homicide or rape). Any information that is posted on a church-sponsored site that includes this type of information should be reported to clergy, documented in church records and deleted from the site.

Inappropriate Content—refers both to content that is improper or offensive, but also content that might be suited to the medium but not to the relationship.

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