

Social Media Guidelines for Clergy

The Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. ~Colossians 3:17 (NRSV)

Introduction

The term “social media” refers to “mobile and web-based technologies” used “to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content”

(Jan H. Keitzmann, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy, and Bruno S. Silvestre. 2011. “Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media.” *Business Horizons* 54:3, 241).

This includes social networking, blogging, private messaging, and other forms of interaction on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, X/Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and others.

Social media is a valuable tool for ministry, allowing clergy leaders to build relationships, communicate with others, promote events, and share information. Because this tool may be misused or cause unintentional harm, the Cabinet and Board of Ordained Ministry of the Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church have developed these guidelines for social media use by clergy, church staff members, and volunteers. These guidelines are intended to complement Virginia Conference policies for local churches and ministries with young people.

The goal of these guidelines is to ensure that our shared ministry, including our use of social media, reflects the reign of God at all times. As members of the body of Christ and leaders in the Virginia Conference, we recognize and celebrate the powerful witness our virtual presence can offer on behalf of the cause of Christ in the world.

Wesley’s General Rules

As in all ministries of The United Methodist Church, Wesley’s General Rules should guide our use of social media:

- ❖ Do no harm.
- ❖ Do good.
- ❖ Attend upon all the ordinances of God.

Christian Witness

Clergy are public figures who represent God and the church in their community, both in-person and virtually. Faithfulness to our shared call requires dedication to “the highest ideals of the Christian life” (BOD ¶ 304.2). This includes maintaining appropriate boundaries and professional integrity in the use of social media.

- ❖ Remember that your digital activity is a reflection of your ministry setting and The United Methodist Church, even when you are posting only on your own behalf.
- ❖ Ensure that all of your social media posts are truthful. Consult established news sources before sharing articles, and never present opinions (your own or those of others) as facts.
- ❖ Carefully consider the tone and word choice of your social media posts.
- ❖ Avoid all social media activity that limits your ability to minister effectively to your congregation and community.

- ❖ Avoid social media posts that promote activities or organizations that do not align with teachings of The United Methodist Church.
- ❖ Do not share pornography or other sexually explicit content on any social media platform, including private messaging.

Relationships with Church and Community Members

Social media can be an effective tool for ministry, as it provides outlets for making connections, sharing information, and publicizing events. Being intentional about the ways you relate to people in your church and community via social media will help these platforms remain a blessing in ministry.

- ❖ Social media is an appropriate platform for celebrating individuals and ministries. It is not an acceptable setting to question, criticize, or punish people in your congregation or community.
- ❖ Remember that all social media activity may be visible to colleagues, supervisors, and members of your community, even when you do not intend for them to be. Exercise discretion in all posts, as well as text messages, emails, and other forms of digital communication.

Relationships with Colleagues

Maintaining healthy, positive relationships with colleagues is vital to our connection as clergy in The United Methodist Church, and we are committed to social media practices that promote these relationships.

- ❖ Be charitable in your online interaction with colleagues. Prioritize social media posts that support and encourage them as ministry leaders.
- ❖ Seek to resolve conflict through direct conversation rather than public posts.
- ❖ Avoid posts that question or criticize the ministry of other congregations or leaders.
- ❖ Remember that “relationships and/or behavior that undermines the ministry of another pastor” (BOD ¶ 2702.1.e) is a chargeable offense. This includes any online activity that harms or interferes in others’ ministry.

Relationships with Supervisors and The United Methodist Church

All United Methodist clergy are accountable to the Bishop, District Superintendent, and appropriate boards and committees assigned to support and supervise their ministry.

- ❖ Social media is an appropriate platform for sharing resources from—and inviting prayer for—those who supervise your ministry. It is not an acceptable replacement for holy conferencing or direct conversation regarding disagreements with local church, district, or conference leadership. Social media activity that disparages colleagues or supervisors is a violation of our shared covenant.
- ❖ Consider all social media posts to be public statements, and remember that you are responsible for all content you share online.

Change of Appointments

As part of a covenantal community within our United Methodist connection, clergy are called to leave well and maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries when their appointed ministry setting changes.

- ❖ Social media is an appropriate platform for expressions of gratitude and excitement regarding a change in appointment. It is not an acceptable setting to share frustration, confusion, or disappointment about appointments.
- ❖ Avoid all interactions, including those on social media, that could undermine the leadership of your successor or the ministry of the church.
- ❖ Avoid all interactions that prevent you from being fully present and attentive to people in your new ministry setting.
- ❖ Remove yourself from any “administrator” roles or private groups on social media platforms associated with your previous ministry setting.
- ❖ Carefully consider your social media engagement with people from previous appointments, recognizing that frequent interactions may interfere with your successor’s ministry leadership.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Our commitment to doing no harm includes responsible attention to privacy and confidentiality in all use of social media.

- ❖ Remember that all social media activity may be made available to the general public, even if it has strict privacy settings or has been deleted. Never share private information on social media platforms.
- ❖ Do not publish contact information or current location of others without permission.
- ❖ Do not post prayer concerns or other sensitive information without permission.
- ❖ Before posting information about another person, consider whether the news is yours to share and whether social media is the appropriate platform for sharing it.

Cyberbullying

Christians are called to follow Jesus’ example of advocating and working for the wellbeing of all people, especially those who are most vulnerable to attacks from others. To this end, clergy must adhere to social media practices that promote dignity and safety in all relationships.

- ❖ Never post content that belittles or dehumanizes individuals or groups of people.
- ❖ Immediately remove any bullying, discriminatory posts, or other objectionable content that may inadvertently appear on your social media account.
- ❖ Remember that all Virginia Conference clergy are mandated reporters of child abuse or neglect. If you suspect that someone has been harmed or may be a threat to themselves or others, immediately contact the appropriate authorities.

Safer Sanctuaries (Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Adults)

The United Methodist Church is committed to ensuring the safety of children, youth, and vulnerable adults in every way possible, including through responsible use of social media.

- ❖ Do not initiate online relationships with minors.
- ❖ If a minor initiates an online relationship with you, consult with their parent or guardian before responding and include their parent or guardian in all electronic communication.
- ❖ Do not interact online with minors with whom you do not have a current or preexisting ministry relationship.
- ❖ If you choose to have minors “friend” or “follow” you on social media, be diligent in establishing privacy settings and avoiding questionable or inappropriate content on your feed.

- ❖ Never post identifying information of minors, including their name, age, contact information, school, or extracurricular activities.
- ❖ Do not post pictures of children or youth without the written permission of their parent or guardian.
- ❖ Do not “tag” minors in posts or pictures.
- ❖ Observe the “2 adult” rule in all digital communication with minors, including Zoom meetings, Facetime conversations, and other video conferencing.