

Social Media Guidelines for Local Churches

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)

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.

Basic standards for social media in the local church

- Be connectional! Don't disparage The United Methodist Church or other UMCs.
 - Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we know the Church is at work in small and large ways at any given moment in the world. Our churches are not in competition with it other as we are all focused on the collective mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.
 - Support other UMCs and see how both encouragement in word and action blessing your congregation and wider community.
- Maintain profiles
 - Be aware of the church's identity and presence outside the church walls
 - Regularly check all church communication channels (what users post to your profile and comment as well as reviews) as well as community communication channels such as Google reviews, community patch groups
- Promote events/opportunities
 - Be part of your community by sharing the events and programs for your community members to take part in.
 - Ensure that any promotions before or after the event do not feature photos of children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults that you do not have express permission to share
 - Recognize that communicating events/opportunities will sound different based on whether sharing with the church community versus the larger community (i.e. not all events will resonate and need to be amplified outside of your church)
 - How can social media help communicate your events in your community?

- Where possible, celebrate connectionalism and connection by tagging other churches and organizations in your social media posts
- View the Events tab on Facebook for events that your church could attend
- How can stories/reels on Facebook and Instagram help market your events?
- How might paid advertisements help engage community members to attend your event?
- Have you formed relationships with your local media outlets?
 - Send press releases of major events at your church to local media outlets
 - If contacted by the media, be courteous and responsive (i.e. Get back to them quickly if they request photos from a church event to help publicize/cover the story)
- Avoiding commentary
 - In practice your church social media is about user engagement and information. It is not a place for commentary about culture, politics, sports, etc.

Staff practices

- Standards of conduct and engagement
 - You are a representative of the local church you serve
 - Be sure to conduct yourself online in a way that reflects the values of the church you serve.
 - Don't say anything online that you would feel uncomfortable saying to a parishioner or community member.
 - Refrain from engaging in forums or spaces that could harm the witness of the local church.
 - Hate speech is never tolerated.
 - Avoid the practice of creating "shadow" or "burner" accounts to circumvent these standards.
- Best/worst practices
 - Best practices
 - Post on social media when you have something relevant to say.
 - Maintain boundaries.
 - Ask "is this helpful?" or "will this cause harm?" before making a comment on another individual's post. If it isn't helpful or is harmful, just don't.
 - Social media is a space to observe while passing through, not a place to set up camp and dwell in.
 - Worst practices
 - Post everything that is on your mind.

- Disengage the standards of conduct and engagement.
- Spend every waking moment in social media spaces.
- Develop an unhealthy need for affirmation or attention in online forums.

Copyright

- Picture/video usage
 - Sharing pictures of your church and the membership is a great way to make your website, social media, and print resources more lively and inviting. Churches will want to keep in mind people's privacy and especially how and when pictures of children in the church are used. Churches will want to consider photo release forms for parents to sign when capturing pictures of children.
 - Learn more with Discipleship Ministries: http://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/safe-sanctuaries/SafeSanctuaries_SAMPLESocialMediaGuidelines3.pdf.
 - Local churches and districts should be aware of images they use especially on their websites and in their newsletters and obtain permissions from copyright holders. Learn more from TechSoup at this link: <https://www.techsoup.org/support/articles-and-how-tos/finding-and-using-images-for-your-nonprofit>.
 - Learn more from Resource UMC at this link: <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/web-ministry-privacy-and-permissions>.
 - Contact the conference Communications Office to use any photos the conference takes for news stories or on the conference Flickr page: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vaconf/>.
 - Also, take a look at the denominational Communications page for resources: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/umcommunications/>.
 - This article detailing resources for stock photos that can be free to use: https://churchcommunications.com/best-stock-photo-resources/?fbclid=IwAR0xEmgMHD6AnMHAcFSUzTvUd47KH7193bzMZr8b_Lh-MFO5E5Yx-m2gSLw
- Sharing livestream services with music
 - Musicians, movie studio professionals and other creatives use their gifts and graces to bring their creations to life. As the church, it is imperative to acknowledge this work, support creatives, and follow copyright laws of the United States. As such, local churches need to ensure they are giving proper credit in all their print and online communications and also ensure any music, music lyrics, videos, or motion pictures shown in person, over livestream or recorded are licensed to be shown. While many ministries and local churches may feel protected under the Religious Service Exemption in American copyright law, this exemption does not apply to a

broadcast of a religious service, including online streaming. This means that you need a performance license for both live and recorded audio.

- Before livestreaming worship, be sure that you have all the proper copyrights in place. This includes making sure you are allowed to play a particular song, show music lyrics, print out musical scores or stream any worship service.
- Some Available Streaming Licensing Services:
 - Christian Copyright Solutions (CCS)
www.christiancopyrightsolutions.com
 - <https://christiancopyrightsolutions.com/blog/which-streaming-license-is-right-for-your-church/>
 - www.christiancopyrightsolutions.com/services/worshipcast
 - Christian Copyright Licensing Incorporated (CCLI)
<https://us.ccli.com/what-we-provide/>
- Promoting movie nights on social media:
 - Churches are known for skirting licensing and as such they risk being caught. When you buy or rent a movie, it is for personal use (i.e. at your home for family and friends). When you show a movie outside of your home, it constitutes a public performance. A public performance means you need to obtain a license and abide by the license agreement as you have a legal agreement to uphold. There are purposes for which organizations can claim fair use which include education, scholarship, and research. However, churches do not usually fall into these categories as churches are not showing movies at their facilities for reasons falling under the fair use parameters. Below are some companies that will work with you to discuss your needs and get the proper license. By doing so, you are doing the right thing and setting a good example for your faith community that copyrights should be upheld and creatives should be compensated when their products are used.
 - Services for this include:
 - Swank Motion Pictures <https://www.swank.com/>
 - Ideal for a planned and scheduled single movie event. The advantage of a license like this is you have the flexibility to show and promote your event (i.e. indoor, outdoor, public invitation, and even charging admission). Swank also has ready-made promotional templates such as posters.
 - Criterion Pictures www.criterionpicusa.com/licensing-options-motorcoach-services
 - This licensing company is ideal for showing films produced by 20th Century Fox. They have other productions as well. Similar to Swank, Criterion offers one-time licenses per movie, per show. Custom promotional materials are available.
 - Church Video Licensing (CVL) <https://us.cvli.com/>

- This licensing option has been specifically designed for churches offering an annual 'umbrella' license that allows you to show movies at church throughout the year. They also have a one-week option. You do need to make sure that CVL covers your desired movie, and there are restrictions about promotion and viewing location. Overall, this license is intended for showing movies on church property to members of the congregation and their guests. As a bonus, CVL offers ScreenVue, which has movie clips to use as teasers or in sermons. CVL is a division of Motion Picture Licensing Corporation (MPLC).
- Movie Licensing USA
 - This licensing group is specifically tailored and priced for public libraries, as well as K-12 schools. Movie Licensing USA is a division of Swank Motion Pictures. More information at <https://buildfaith.org/movies-at-church/>

Working with minors

- To maintain safe and faithful practices alongside minors on social media, reference the best practices below.
 - Obtain permission from a parent or caregiver is before engaging in digital communication with a child, youth, and/or vulnerable adult
 - Conduct digital communication with children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults in a professional manner, and save all such communications
 - Only post or share photos or videos of children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults online when written permission from a parent or caregiver is given
 - Ensure that photos, videos, and/or posts do not share information about the location, date, or time of a gathering of children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults until after the event is passed
- For more information about working with minors, including using digital platforms for gatherings, please visit <https://doc.vaumc.org/Children/ApprovedProtectionPolicy2024Sept19a.pdf>

Other forms of web presence aside from social media

- Website
 - Church websites should be updated regularly to reflect accurate calendars, event schedules, and theological perspectives.
 - It is the responsibility of the staff to ensure that, if applicable, the website domain and/or other database software is maintained.
 - Websites should avoid external advertising or marketing.

- When designing a church website, ethical concerns are crucial because the site will serve a diverse congregation and reflect the values of the community. Here are some key ethical considerations:
 - Privacy and Data Security: Churches often handle sensitive personal data, such as prayer requests, donations, and contact details. The website should ensure strong data protection practices to safeguard users' information, including secure forms and compliance with privacy laws (e.g., GDPR or CCPA).
 - Accessibility: The site should be designed to be accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities. This includes implementing features such as screen reader compatibility, proper alt-text for images, and navigable design for users with visual, auditory, or motor impairments (following standards like WCAG).
 - Transparency: The church's mission, beliefs, and financial transparency should be clearly communicated. Donors and visitors need to trust that their contributions are being used responsibly.
 - Representation and Inclusion: The content and imagery should reflect the diversity of the congregation and be inclusive. Avoid biased or exclusionary language and images that might alienate certain groups based on race, gender, culture, or social status.
 - Content Authenticity: Ensure that all content, especially spiritual messages or educational materials, is accurate and not misleading. Avoid sensationalism or exaggeration, and cite sources where necessary.
 - Respect for User Autonomy: Avoid manipulative design practices such as dark patterns (e.g., hard-to-cancel subscriptions or aggressive pop-ups for donations). Respect users' freedom to navigate the site and make decisions at their own pace.
 - Sensitive Content: Some church topics may be sensitive (e.g., personal counseling, confessions, or delicate theological issues). Consider how to present such topics with sensitivity and discretion, ensuring that the site does not exploit or trivialize serious matters.
 - Fair Use of Donations: If the site includes options for online giving, ensure transparency about how donations will be used. Clearly communicate donation policies and provide reassurance that funds will be managed responsibly.
- By addressing these concerns, the church website will be more trustworthy, welcoming, and in line with ethical practices that reflect the church's values.
- Apps
 - App development can be a way to harness additional connection within a congregation.

- Ensure consistency of visibility in the App Store and similar platforms.
- Have a person or team from the church available to assist congregants with app functionality.
- Podcast/YouTube
 - Maintaining consistent podcast and/or YouTube channels is an important way to drive engagement and reach for a local church.
 - Develop a consistent schedule and style for what content is shared in these channels.
 - Monitor comments sections for any salacious commentary that should be flagged or deleted.
 - (Especially with YouTube) Be mindful of what other videos the person responsible for posting content is watching from their account, as these will often be linked as “similar content”.
- What about A.I. (artificial intelligence)?
 - This is a reality you will face that, when used appropriately, can be helpful. Be sure to:
 - Avoid using A.I. for plagiarism
 - Check A.I. generated content for accuracy, grammar, etc.
 - Be aware that the landscape of A.I. is evolving. Stay current on trends and monitor use for best practices.