



Conference Social Media Best Practices

(updated 8/23/2023)

Executive Summary

Social Media is a useful and necessary means of developing relationships and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The purpose of the following guidelines and practices are to encourage the frequent, intentional, and appropriate use of the various forms of social media.

As TWKUMC employees and/or clergy, you are ambassadors to the United Methodist ministry and act as a face for visitors to identify with online both through your professional AND personal social media presence.

Remember your Christian witness and allow your use of social media to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How we say things matters as much as what we say. People need to see the love of Christ in us on digital media.

When engaging on electronic media, it is good practice to follow Wesley's General Rules:

- Do no harm
- Do good
- Attend to the ordinances of God

Within this construct, we have provided guidelines for your consideration:

- Do No Harm
 - You represent but do not speak for the United Methodist Church
 - Display discretion and honor confidentiality
 - Respect fellow professionals and United Methodist Churches
 - Value and respect privacy
 - Leave a church, or charge, and "friends" well
- Do Good
 - Manage your digital presence
 - Set engagement expectations
 - Be a good steward of digital media tools
 - Be accountable
- Attend to the Ordinances of God
 - You are a public figure
 - Always show the love of Christ

This document is intended to be a resource for local churches and Pastors when engaging our communities in digital spaces.

DO NO HARM

You Represent but Do Not Speak for the United Methodist Church

We are all representative of the United Methodist Church. To give your opinions, especially on hotly debated topics, can be construed as making a statement on behalf of the church, even with a disclaimer. When commenting on current events from social issues to church politics, clergy should strive to maintain their prophetic voice; while, at the same time maintaining the clergy covenant to uphold The United Methodist Church and its social practices, leadership, polity, and ministry.

If you feel led by the spirit to comment, understand what you say and do does reflect on your church as well as the denomination. Should you be contacted by the media regarding a potentially controversial news topic or during a crisis, please refer to conference media protocols, seek advice from a trained church communicator or consult the conference's director of communications, prior to your response.

Please be aware that the IRS has very specific guidelines related to political commentary offered by churches and/or clergy. Clergy and church representatives are encouraged to maintain a healthy balance between a prophetic voice and keeping the church's tax-exempt status intact as violations of IRS regulations can possibly result in a revocation of a church's tax-exempt status. Refer to www.irs.gov for information.

Display Discretion and Honor Confidentiality

Information is valuable. Be judicious in your online conduct and speech. Use discretion by refraining from sharing confidential information from meetings or personal interactions with others that could cast The United Methodist Church or any other relationships in a bad light. Confidential content should be shared solely by the individual who will be held accountable for what is shared if confidentiality is broken.

It is not appropriate to share someone else's concerns or joys without their consent. To post a health concern without her or his prior permission is a violation of clergy ethics and HIPPA guidelines. Consider adding a box to your prayer concerns card: "Do we have your permission to share this concern on Social Media or via email?" For more information on HIPPA guidelines, please visit: <http://www.hhs.gov/>

Social media is never an appropriate medium through which to counsel parishioners - even in private messages, text messages, and emails. Move counseling conversations to an appropriate venue.

Respect Fellow Professionals and United Methodist Churches

With social media, the line between public and private communication is thin, blurry, and often nonexistent. Just like communicating within the church, it is never a good idea to make disparaging comments about fellow clergy, their ministry or congregants in social media. Avoid all caps "shouting" in your messaging. Support your colleagues and be respectful of other clergy and other opinions.

Once you say something on the Internet it remains accessible forever — even if you delete it.

Value and Respect Privacy

Please be respectful of your own privacy and the people you serve. Social Media is an excellent way to share the good moments and the sad moments in our lives, but as leaders, we are called to be especially mindful of how people respond to hearing news in such a non-personal manner.

When posting photos, allow others to identify themselves. Ensure no photos of minors are posted without prior written parental consent. Never identify minors in photographs. Do not communicate one-on-one with a minor who is not in your family. Take care to adhere to Safe Sanctuaries guidelines, adapting them to social media practices. For Internet safety resources, please review the information posted with our safe spaces ministry.

Protect the safety of congregants, minors, vulnerable adults, and yourself. Do not share the addresses and locations of congregants and minors via social media. Social Media such as Foursquare, Yelp, Facebook, etc. that allow one to “check-in” at one’s current location should be used with discretion. When posting on Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, etc., be discreet in tagging or checking in with persons who are in the same location as you; rather, use hashtags as a means of facilitating conversation. Remember that when you tag or check in others, especially ailing parishioners, you may be violating HIPPA guidelines and creating other confidentially issues.

Social location platforms are tools to highlight your church’s location and functions. It also serves as an accountability tool for clergy who are not in their office (i.e., holding drop-by office hours at a local coffee shop).

Leave a Church/Charge and “Friends” Well

United Methodist clergy serve among a people for a season and, eventually, move on to another place of ministry. Church staff move on as well. We agree to go where we are sent as well as “leave when we leave.” As ministers and leaders within the TWKUMC, we are held to a high standard to be in ministry with our current congregation while allowing people who follow after us to be fully present and pastor to their congregations and community.

Social media presents a new dynamic to these transitions as connections could linger beyond an appointment. Social media tools like hiding individuals from your timeline or changing their “friend” status to an acquaintance allow for separation while not completely severing the connection.

You also will want to remove yourself from any Facebook groups that have been created for your former church as well as remove any content creation/administration rights you have to your former church’s digital media accounts and website.

Clergy are encouraged to be open to connecting with members of their congregation (adding them as a friend, following them, etc.) - preferably accepting an invitation, rather than initiating these connections. Once you start connecting with church members, you must be willing to accept all invitations, within reason. It would be advisable to make an open invitation for your congregation to connect with your social accounts instead of hand selecting members of your congregation or organization.

DO GOOD

Manage Your Digital Presence

Claim, maintain, and monitor email and social media profiles and websites often. Take care to keep your online presence current. It is recommended that clergy maintain an internet presence by having an active professional email account, social media profile, a blog, or at minimum a bio and contact information on your church's website. We encourage clergy to take advantage of all the positive benefits of social media while remaining aware of potential areas of concern.

Set Engagement Expectations

Set clear expectations with your congregation of how you will use social media and how you will not. For example, it is best if all congregants know to communicate pastoral care emergencies through a phone call instead of digital media outlets.

Be a Good Steward of Digital Media Tools

Digital media outlets are great tools that can be used for the message of Pastors and Churches worldwide. They also place a great amount of responsibility on us to be good stewards of this tool. The world is watching. Think through a post or response and, if needed, have a trusted friend review it before posting. Every post, personal or corporate, reflects back on you. Social media may not be the best place for Every thought, comment, concern, or consideration. Be mindful of your mental, spiritual and emotional state when posting or commenting.

When using social media, please remain attentive to the stewardship of your time and the time of others. Always maintain appropriate boundaries with others.

It is important to use care in your language, as meaning and tone are often lost in texts and posts. Knowing this, it is important that we take the time to carefully craft words, especially when dealing with potentially sensitive topics. If you would hesitate to say something in person, it is best not to say it via social media or text.

Be Accountable

Review the content you are posting for factual and grammatical errors. You may consider using Google or local and national news websites to check "news" before you share it with others. Also, take care to not infringe upon the copyrights of other people and organizations through the use of photos, music, videos, and other content.

Be careful when posting or following links shared with you while on social media or that come through email that lead you to external websites. These are often phishing ploys to get information about you or your friends. Protect yourself and your friends by being careful about what you click on or post on a wall.

These ploys could also appear as messenger bots that attempt to friend you or hold a conversation with you. A general rule of thumb is if it looks too good to be true, it very well may not be true. When these things do happen, notify the social account owner that their account may be compromised.

Mistakes will be made. Misinterpretations and misperceptions happen during in-person communication and definitely will happen in digital communications. Honesty, understanding, and humility are keys to managing these situations. Being honest about your true intentions, understanding the receiver's perception, and displaying humility in apologizing for misconceptions will help to resolve these issues and prevent further damage.

ATTEND TO THE ORDINANCES OF GOD

You Are a Public Figure

Be professional and maintain the integrity of clergy, church staff, and church volunteers through digital media.

We sometimes like to wear our "clergy" or "church" hats in religious spaces and then our "average-person-on-the-street" hats. When posting on Facebook, tweeting, or updating a blog, it is important to realize most people do not see that differentiation.

You are their pastor, church staff, or the pastor in the community, and they hold you to a higher standard. Make sure everything you post or share, whether it is words or photos, is worthy of this calling and higher standard.

Always Show the Love of Christ

Remember your Christian witness and allow your use of social media to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How we say things matters as much as what we say. People need to see the love of Christ in us on digital media as well as in face-to-face interaction. As John Wesley said, do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God.

Official TWKUMC Platforms

These online platforms are the legitimate resources for TWKUMC-related ministries and are under the administration of TWKUMC staff:

- TWKUMC on Facebook / Instagram / VIMEO
- @TWKUMC on X (formerly Twitter)
- [TWKUMC.org](https://twkumc.org)- Website
- TWKUMC weekly E-Newsletter
- twkumc.org email addresses

We encourage you to share posts from the UMC, TWKUMC and local Church-related pages to further the dialogue about upcoming ministry programs and opportunities. For more communications tips and information, go to <https://twkumc.org/communications/communications-resources>.

Please contact the communications staff at communications@twkumc.org with any questions or concerns.