



Best Practices for Online Communication

(updated 02/23/2026)

Digital communication is an essential part of life in the twenty-first century. It can be a useful and necessary means of developing relationships and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world today. The purpose of the following guidelines and practices is to support the behavior and actions of **individual church leaders in their personal digital/online presence**, thereby encouraging the frequent, intentional, and appropriate use of various forms of social media, email, blogging, and texting. Individual church leaders include both clergy and laypersons who serve as staff members and/or have a visible and active leadership role in their congregations or in the TWK annual conference.

For help establishing best practices for **church** or other organizational social media use, see <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/do-you-have-an-online-communication-policy>.

As TWKUMC clergy and lay leaders, 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 in the digital world, as in the real world, it is good practice to follow Wesley's General Rules: *Do no harm, do good, attend to the ordinances of God.*

Do No Harm

- You represent but do not speak for the United Methodist Church
- Display discretion, honor confidentiality, value and respect privacy
- Respect fellow church leaders and other United Methodist Churches
- Adhere to safe sanctuary guidelines online
- 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
- Pay attention to your tone and language
- Be accountable

Attend to the Ordinances of God

- You are a public figure
- Establishing guardrails
- Always show the love of Christ

DO NO HARM

You Represent but Do Not Speak for the United Methodist Church

We are all representatives 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 reflects 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, and 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, Honor Confidentiality, Value and Respect Privacy

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, particularly content that could cast The United Methodist Church or any other relationships in a bad light. Confidential content should be shared solely by the individual whom it directly affects.

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. It is not appropriate to share someone else's concerns or joys without their consent. To post a health concern without an individual's prior permission is a violation of clergy ethics. 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/>

When posting photos, allow others to identify themselves. 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 confidentiality issues.

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 Church Leaders and other United Methodist Churches

With social media, the line between public and private communication is thin, blurry, and often nonexistent. Just like communicating in person, it is never a good idea to make disparaging comments about fellow clergy, their ministry, congregants, or other congregations in written or digital

communication. Avoid all caps “shouting” in your messaging. Support your colleagues and be respectful of other clergy and other opinions.

Once you say something online it remains accessible forever — even if you delete it.

Adhere to Safe Sanctuary Guidelines Online

Never post photos of minors without prior written parental consent. Never identify minors in photographs.

Do not communicate one-on-one with a minor. Take care to adhere to Safe Sanctuaries guidelines, adapting them to social media practices. For Internet safety resources, please review the information posted with conference safe spaces ministry (<https://twkumc.org/equip/safe-spaces/>).

Protect the safety of congregants, minors, vulnerable adults, and yourself. Do not share the addresses, locations, or other private information about congregants and minors via social media.

Leave a Church/Charge and “Friends” Well

Clergy are encouraged to be open to connecting with members of their congregation. It is preferable to accept an invitation, rather than initiating these connections. Be prepared to friend all members if you friend any, to avoid the appearance of favoritism or creating cliques. It is 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.

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 the clergy and staff 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.

When leaving a clergy appointment or church staff position, 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. Collaborate with the incoming pastor or staff person to take over these roles via the church’s social media and other online accounts.

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.

The pages and posts that you “like” and “follow” are also a representation of the church, whether it’s on your individual personal social media account or the church’s professional social media accounts. Be aware of who you “follow,” what posts you “like” and the type of audience that you are reaching. Always remember that a public post is open to the world. If you wouldn’t say something in public don’t say it online. Do not EVER assume confidentiality when using digital communications!

Social location platforms are tools you can use 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).

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 missional 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 is not be the best place for every thought, comment, concern, or consideration. Be mindful of your mental, spiritual, and emotional state when posting, commenting, or responding to email.

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

Pay attention to your tone and language

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. In the world of social media, what is intended as playful might be read as flippant. Direct, brief wording can come across as dismissive, arrogant or mean. 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 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, sometimes posing as an existing friend. A general rule of thumb is if it looks too good to be true, it

very well may not be true. If you suspect a friend's account is being tampered with, notify the account owner that their account may be compromised.

Verify that information (including anecdotal stories and news articles) is factually true and intended to be shared before sharing them as facts. Artificial intelligence (AI) is often used to generate anecdotes, images, and even videos that are misleading or outright false. This makes it doubly important to check and verify the truth of what you share. Check official organization websites and social media pages to verify information before clicking "share."

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. Be honest about your true intentions, understand the receiver's perception, and display humility in apologizing for misconceptions to help resolve these issues and prevent further damage. Updating a post to correct wrong information, clear up a misunderstanding, or admit a mistake is more helpful than removing the original post, as it proactively communicates the correct information.

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, even your personal and/or private accounts. We sometimes like to wear our "clergy" or "church" hats in religious spaces and then our "average person-on-the-street" hats in other spaces. When posting online, 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.

Establishing Guardrails

Communication includes what is said as well as what is not said.

Guidelines outside of the church's control exist and must be respected. See the frequently asked questions about the IRS ban on political campaign intervention by 501(c)(3) organizations here: <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/charitable-organizations/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-ban-on-political-campaign-intervention-by-501c3-organizations>.

See information on the restriction of political campaign intervention by IRS Section 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations here: <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/charitable-organizations/restriction-of-political-campaign-intervention-by-section-501c3-tax-exempt-organizations>.

Know what to share. Appropriate things to share through digital communication include:

- Daily scripture
- Links to resources (books, previous sermon series, devotionals)
- Photos from regular meeting times and special events
- Highlights of important causes and events within the community

- Responses to current events

Know what not to share. Social media is not the place for hotly debated social issues or self-promotion. If your church is going to be a positive presence on social media, be careful about the following:

- Anything that promotes a particular leader based on personality. This creates a culture around that person, rather than the church itself.
- Controversial statements about political beliefs. It's not wrong to care about these things, but social media is never the place to get into a controversial conversation about it.
- Photos of members of your church without their permission, particularly children.

Always Show the Love of Christ

Remember your Christian witness and allow your digital presence 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 / X / Instagram / VIMEO
- [TWKUMC.org](https://www.twkumc.org), Conference Website
- TWKUMC weekly E-Newsletter
- twkumc.org clergy and staff 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>.

The Communications Strategy Team will review these guidelines at the beginning of each calendar year and make updates as needed. Please contact the communications staff at communications@twkumc.org with any questions or concerns.