Church Social Media and Digital Communication Policy

CHURCH NAME HERE

DATE HERE

**Introduction and Purpose**

These guidelines are offered as a synthesis of best practices. In this document, “church personnel” is defined as anyone – priest, deacon, lay employee, or volunteer – who provides ministry in, or service to, or is employed by, CHURCH NAME HERE.

Many church personnel are interested in using digital communication and social media services, such as text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, etc., to maintain contact and to send important, but unsolicited, messages to members and contacts of theirs and of CHURCH NAME HERE.

Email systems, email addresses, and computers are provided to church personnel to be used primarily for ministry purposes. Ministry is by its very nature relational, so the use of digital communication to expand and develop a sense of community is a valuable tool for reaching people, but it needs appropriate guidelines.

The goals of all CHURCH NAME HERE communication are these:

a. To promote member and community awareness of ministry initiatives and opportunities.

b. To support ministry efforts by targeted promotion and timely interactive feedback.

c. To provide relational points of connection and response through blogs, social networking software, church ministry websites, email and text messaging.

To promote accountability and responsibility on the part of creators and distributors of content to consumers and recipients of content.

This policy sets forth boundaries for using these digital forms of communication by church personnel of CHURCH NAME HERE.

**Electronic Communications Policy**

When sending a mass email to members of segmented groups of the congregation the email should be run through \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for timing and coordination.

All communication through any electronic form is subject to public scrutiny and can represent a reputation risk to the individual as well as to CHURCH NAME HERE. Therefore, it is important for each person to consider carefully the information shared through these mediums.

Opinions expressed could be unintentionally interpreted as representing the position of CHURCH NAME HERE although they are communicated through a non-CHURCH NAME HERE source like Facebook or Twitter.

Personal information that is shared through these mediums can present the sender, someone else, or the church in a bad or compromised light. Most often when it comes to images and words of communication, perception becomes reality. Therefore, we must be careful with both what and how we communicate so that our motive is not misunderstood.

Pictures and information posted on personal sites are public with world-wide exposure and therefore can have work implications related to reputational risk.

**Philosophies to Consider when Communicating**

Integrity is necessary for ministry. Therefore, church personnel should not communicate confidential personal or sensitive information about people through these public digital sources.

When using text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, and other similar digital forms of communication to contact CHURCH NAME HERE members or other interested persons, church personnel should consider providing “OPT IN” opportunities for members and such other interested persons to participate rather than assuming that individuals will want every communication that CHURCH NAME HERE can give them.

Church personnel must realize their responsibility for appropriate online communication behavior both with content and contact. It is the responsibility of church personnel to maintain boundaries for communications that are appropriate.

**Content Topics**

a. Appropriate text and posting topics include, but are not limited to:

1. Timely departmental and ministry updates.

2. Specific information to parents or family members related to completion time of ministry events, arrival time from trips, and prayer/ministry updates from events.

3. Administrative announcements that are specific and time-critical.

4. Personal information that enables individuals to feel connected with church personnel in their capacity as leaders of the church or of an area of ministry and which enables them to get to know such church personnel at an appropriate social level.

5. Invitation for participation or involvement in departmental ministry.

b. Inappropriate topics include, but are not limited to:

1. Any message whose content goes beyond church or departmental mission or appropriate personal data.

2. Any discussion or presentation of sensitive CHURCH NAME HERE organizational or ministry information that has not already been made public.

3. Any solicitation for personal benefit.

4. Any message that includes improper or discourteous content or abusive language (including sexually-suggestive content, profanity, racial or sexual slurs) or that is otherwise not consistent with CHURCH NAME HERE’S core teachings and beliefs.

**Communication with Minors**

Based upon applicable law, the church considers anyone under eighteen (18) years of age to be a minor. Great care should be exercised when communicating with a minor. Adults should not initiate “friend” requests with minors and should consider carefully “friending” request from “minors.” Church personnel should avoid any communication which:

a. Would potentially allow the minor’s personal information, address, phone number, picture or similar personal information to be available over the Internet or to third-parties not having a proper church-related purpose.

b. Violates the church’s children/youth or safe church policies or would violate the policies if communicated in person rather than in a virtual or digital format.

c. Requests the minor to agree to or participate in an activity or undertaking which requires parental consent or that would customarily be understood to require parental consent. Parents must have access to everything provided to their children.

d. Suggests the minor meet with you for any kind of activity not part of regular church events or church-related purposes.

e. Would be considered as child abuse or neglect as described by the church’s policies and applicable law.

Church personnel should be encouraged to save copies of conversations whenever possible.

**Online Communication Methodologies**

The term “online” is continually being updated because of new technologies. The following is representative of the current technologies available today.

Email

The policy of the church requires church personnel to respond to emails in a timely way.

Text Messaging

Text messaging is one of the fastest ways to connect with the cell phones of a congregation. Church personnel are responsible for their own text activities and the amount of text information they send out.

It is recommended that text messages are sent only to those who request to be updated via SMS text. Not everyone has a text messaging plan, so it is inappropriate to force church members or other interested persons to incur charges for texts if they do not have a text messaging plan.

Minors use text messaging on cell phones far more than they use cell minutes to talk on their phones. Though this is an obvious means of communication with minors, great care must be taken to establish specific boundaries and guidelines for texting with minors that relate to both content and time of day the texting takes place.

Ministry Group SMS Text Messaging

Reaching the cell phones of our members and church personnel is one of the best ways to share urgent information and event reminders. Unlike email, text messaging requires short, concise messages with actionable items. Church personnel are encouraged to find ways to leverage text messaging to specific people or groups as an effective means of communication.

Various tools for text messaging need to be evaluated for consistency with our privacy policy and for opt-in availability. There should be no private departmental tools for group communication or data base management. Church personnel should exercise wise judgment about which text messages need to be copied into the member record for unique or urgent issues.

Personal Social Networks

Some of the newest and least understood tools are online social networks. Ranging from simple, personal connection points such as MySpace and Facebook to group-wide, affinity-based social groups such as Ning, to the text message based service, Twitter, it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each tool in the context of sharing information. Most important is remembering that all of these mediums are public to one extent or another. Therefore, church personnel should be very careful when updating private information with these tools.

Facebook

Facebook allows both individuals and organizations to create profiles for sharing information, pictures, experiences and even videos on a large platform. Though some levels of security exist, church privacy guidelines need to be adhered to as boundaries for online community tools.

Each ministry may want to create a specific “Group” on Facebook as a way to share pictures, calendar updates, event details and unique, ministry-specific information. All church-sponsored Facebook groups should include links back to the church website and/or church website ministry pages.

Twitter

Twitter is unique in both its ability to allow each person to learn and share with others (those they ‘follow’) and to share and update information with those interested in a particular ministry (‘followers’).

Twitter is considered a valuable tool that can be used for staying connected to church members and other interested persons. As such, personal interaction and sharing certain aspects of your personal life are encouraged as a part of building community. However, church personnel should be mindful that information shared on even their personal Twitter accounts may be construed to represent the church.

MySpace

Church leadership should decide if a church-sponsored MySpace page is warranted due to the fact that the advertising displayed on MySpace cannot be controlled. Individual MySpace accounts for ministry staff should be discouraged.

Church Website

The church website is created, maintained, and serviced by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Departmental websites created by staff should be reviewed and approved by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Blogs

Blogs (also called Weblogs) are a popular way of sharing resources, thoughts, links, and stories in a format that can vary from paragraphs of text to audio recordings (podcasts), and video recordings (vidcasts). Overall, blogs are an incredibly helpful way to share “beyond the website” in a format that’s typically casual, personable and freely accessible. Blogs should be presented to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for approval and inclusion on the main CHURCH NAME HERE website.

The church policy on confidentiality and electronic communications applies to blogs. Personal information shared can present the person sharing the information, someone else, or the church in a bad or compromised light.

Church Blogs

The use and content parameters of church-sponsored blogs should be approved by church leadership. Church-sponsored blogs may be on the church website as micro-sites (i.e. pastorsblog.churchname.com). This allows for greater search optimization and easier navigation for site visitors.

Personal Blogs

Privacy concerns for sharing confidential information must be taken into consideration. Each department and individual must operate within the guidelines of this policy regarding the content of their personal blog. When a ministry staff person has a personal blog it should be declared on the Outside Interest Declaration form to the church’s warden(s) or other overseer(s).

Church Oversight

The online activities of church personnel are a reflection of the church and represent the ministries of such personnel. Therefore, any opinions expressed can be taken as representing the position of the church, even if they are communicated on personal communications tools online.

Account Access

Church leadership or a person or department acting at church leadership’s direction will determine which accounts have a master password and email address associated with the church. In this way, accountability and protection of church communications, even those shared through “personal” accounts, will be monitored and reported to church leadership.

Privacy Expectations

All church communication equipment (computers, telephones, network, servers, etc.) belong to the church and are ultimately subject to being inspected or reviewed by appropriate church personnel.

Utmost care should be taken not to publish, directly, or by virtue of links, passwords or employee personal information such as social security numbers, drivers license numbers, home address or other confidential information.

Online Public Statements

All online public statements and interactions on behalf of CHURCH NAME HERE or its ministries will be coordinated through \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to the press, both offline and online. Church personnel are not authorized to make any public statement regarding: church policy organizational structure, management, governance issues, or regarding any alleged liability of the church to any third-party that has not already been communicated through \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ or from the pulpit in a worship service. Employees and volunteers are instructed to direct all questions on these issues to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

There will undoubtedly be technological advances in the future that are not specifically described under this policy. Church personnel should use their best judgment to assume that the overriding concerns for security and privacy expressed throughout this policy apply to such new technology, and any church personnel who adopt or use new technology are expected to bring such advances to the attention of church leadership for evaluation.

Any social media or electronic communications issues not described above need to be brought to the attention of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for review with church leadership.