The Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth

Expectations, Guidelines, and Best Practices for Social Media Users

This statement governs the publication of and commentary on social media by employees of The Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth, its related clergy, congregations, and ministries ("the Diocese"). For the purposes of discussion here, "social media" means any facility for online publication and commentary, including blogs, wikis, social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, and YouTube. These guidelines are offered in addition to any existing or future policies regarding the use of technology, computers, e-mail, and the Internet.

The diocesan Director of Communications, clergy, designated church members and designated staff are free to publish or comment via social media in accordance with these guidelines. No unauthorized persons may speak for the Diocese, its churches, or ministries. Before engaging in social media on behalf of these entities, individuals must obtain the permission of the Bishop, the Director of Communications, or the rector/vicar/priest in charge.

When engaging in social media for personal use, all such individuals should take care not to appear to speak for anyone but themselves and follow the guidelines and best practices described herein. With the privilege of being a diocesan leader comes the obligation of mature self-censorship and self-control. Good social media practices are similar to any other kind of publication or commentary. All uses of social media must follow the same ethical standards followed elsewhere in the Diocese.

Requirements, Expectations, and Best Practices:

• If you post on behalf of a congregation or ministry, be sure you understand its mission and its audience. Communications should be consistent with these. Do not endanger the organization's reputation.

• Use your access to social media to build up others and equip them for ministry. Offer praise, encouragement, and examples of Godly living. Recommend appropriate resources that do the same.

• Generally, follow the same rules of courtesy and mature behavior you would observe on the phone or in a letter. Observe all laws and regulations governing operations of your congregation or ministry.

• Check all facts. Proof-read for mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Try to make your message error-free.

• Slow down. Think about consequences before you post. Review your message before you share it. Perhaps you should trim it ... or just delete it without posting.

• Do not speak with malice or contempt. Do not engage in libel, slander, gossip, or belittling or degrading language or post images (such as memes) with that effect. Don't be obscene. Don't stalk others. Don't "hang out" on Internet pages simply in order to disagree.

• Do not reveal private information or knowledge you may possess. Don't publish embarrassing, immodest, inappropriate, or unflattering photos or commentary. Even if you have the permission of the person in the photo/comment, consider whether it is appropriate for your audience and consistent with your congregation or ministry's overall mission and message.

• Do not endanger minors. Avoid revealing names or other personal information that might allow a predator to target or stalk a child either online or in person. Do not give the impression that children are without adult protection. Always protect the innocent and vulnerable, no matter the age.

• If you work directly with youth, read and sign the guideline document for youth leaders.

• Don't break copyrights. For example, publish a link to a great blog post rather than copying it to your own page. Never offer someone else's work as if it were your own. If you extract a quote, acknowledge the author and source. Don't use graphics obtained without permission. Remember that this can be a cause of litigation.

• Stay away from controversies. Correct mistakes (especially your own) and make apologies when appropriate. Offer clarifications when these are helpful. Don't heat up an argument. Disagreements involving Christians should be handled according to New Testament standards of humility and gentleness.

• Don't use your position to settle a score or to promote your own interests or those of a group of insiders.

• Persons with authority to appoint social media users are responsible for providing clear direction and follow-up. Be sure your goals for social media communication are being met.

• Violations will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination for cause. Discipline will depend on the offense and the person's status. Clergy will be disciplined by the Bishop under the diocesan Constitution and Canons. Lay employees will be disciplined by their employers according to local labor law. Violations by volunteers will be reviewed by the parish or ministry leadership. Diocesan officials may be consulted during any such review. Criminal activity will be reported to the police.

Guidelines

From ancient times, the physician's motto has been "First, do no harm." This is a good touchstone for all communications, too. Whatever you say or share should meet that standard.

The main purpose of all media is to share information. Keep people informed! If your Web site or Facebook page isn't freshened regularly, interest will wane. If you need help or time away, tell the person who gave you the job so that something can be worked out.

As much as possible, if an employee or volunteer is updating a media account (Web site, Twitter page, etc.), it should be done in the church office. Logon information for any account should not be known solely to one person. A copy of all account names and passwords should be kept in a secure place accessible to the senior clergy, senior warden, administator, or ministry chair.

It's a rule of thumb that Web sites (and Facebook pages, etc.) have two audiences: the membership and the inquirers. Also consider that some may visit you online but never be able to be with you in person. Perhaps they are homebound or isolated. Remember those visitors in what you offer.

Check security settings on your media accounts. Protect passwords. On Facebook, you can choose whether others can contribute to the page, or if all posts will be made by the administrator. Look at your personal privacy settings, too.

Don't crowd your message and overwhelm your audience. Leave visual space.

When promoting any event, remember to tell Who, What, When, Where, Why, and $How Much. For example, "The Pancake Supper on Tuesday, Feb. 30, will be served in the parish hall by the youth. A $5 donation is encouraged. Funds raised will be used to buy the rector a boat."

Remember that social media now replace the Yellow Pages as a source of information. Offer complete contact information on your Web site, and put that link on your Facebook (Twitter, blog, etc.) page. Remember that your church's name probably isn't unique, so mention your city. If a nonmember wakes up on Sunday morning and wants to attend church, are your physical address and service times easy to locate? Have you mentioned that you have nursery care, or that this is Picnic Sunday?

Use actual images of your facility and your people (with their written consent). If you manage social media for a church, images should include both the exterior and interior of the building. The exterior is vitally important to newcomers. Images of your people and activities show how your church or ministry is functioning as a Christian community. Arty stock photos are ultimately empty and frustating.

Don't steal sheep! Invite members of other congregations to your events, but always assume they will be in their own churches on Sunday mornings.

It's better not to post something than to have to delete it because it is embarrassing, off-message, etc. By the time you take it down from your page, someone else may have cached it, and it will be out of your control.

If you need to be clear that you are not speaking for the diocese, congregation, or ministry in a particular instance, use your own profile. If you need to be more clear, use a disclaimer. The Director of Communications can help you write one if necessary.

About types of online media

Web sites should be a window on your parish or ministry. They should reflect the personality of the community, offer easy access to information, and be updated regularly. Certain areas or documents can be password-protected as necessary.

E-mail newsletters are a great way to reach your existing membership quickly and inexpensively. Constant Contact and MailChimp are both good services for this purpose. You can offer a spot on your Web site for new people to sign up to receive e-mail.

Facebook offers different levels of privacy, as well as short- and long-term presence. A "group" can be private, while a "page" for an entity is public. Pages can be built for specific events. Facebook is a forum for give-and-take. A public page may need to be monitored for inappropriate comments posted by outsiders. Be aware that moderating discussions (comment threads) is sometimes a no-win task.

LinkedIn is a professional networking community. While it is used by some folks who just want a "grown up" version of Facebook, it is intended as a way for individuals to make their resumes public, to receive endorsements for their accomplishments, to locate potential customers, to network with others in their fields, and to explore new employment opportunities.

Twitter has fewer users than Facebook, and they tend to be younger people who spend a good deal of time online every day. Messages are short (140 characters). Account/user names begin with an @. Hashtags (beginning with a #) help tweets reach an interested audience. Think of Twitter for announcements. Generally it is for one-way messaging, though hashtags can tend to gather comments in a conversational way.

Blogs are one of the earliest types of social media. Generally the blogger posts an article, and readers can comment. The Diocese has a blog where congregations and ministries can contribute announcements about upcoming events. Blogs are public. Blogger and WordPress are two leading blog hosts.

Instagram is an arty forum for sharing photos. It works much like Twitter. Images are cropped square, like old Polaroid pictures, and the photos can be posted as-is or tinted and touched up. Comments can be added. The advent of the smartphone camera has made Instagram a star.

Flickr, Photobucket, Shutterfly, Smugmug, etc., are avenues for sharing photo albums online. Individual albums can be either public or private. Take note of copyright controls on images shared in this way. Some of these hosts have indicated an interest in reselling posted images, thus generating cash for the hosting service, but not for you.

YouTube is a place to post and enjoy videos. If you want a video tour of your parish on your Web site, you can upload the video to your YouTube account and then link to it on your site. This helps manage the problem of posting large files to your Web site, which your hosting service might not like. Choirs like to post their best performances to YouTube. Conferences, workshops, and mission trips can be videotaped and shared this way, too.

Note that social media accounts can be linked so that posting on one platform automatically generates a post on the other. For instance, a Twitter account can be set so that every tweet posts on a Facebook page, too.

Setting up Social Media/Tips for Success

Assistance in setting up social media accounts and adjusting their settings can be obtained from diocesan Director of Communications.

Social media identities, logon IDs and user names may not incorporate the Diocese's name or insignia without prior approval from the Bishop. Likewise, the names and insignia of congregations or ministries may only be used with permission of the priest or layperson in charge. All such decisions should be shared appropriately – with other staff members, parish wardens, etc.

Select social media platforms to serve your particular purposes. Don't have more than you need.

The best way to be interesting, stay out of trouble, and have fun is to write about what you know. There is a good chance of being embarrassed by a real expert or of being boring if you write about topics you are not knowledgeable about.

Get help with your weaknesses. For instance, if you're not design-oriented, ask someone who is whether your blog looks decent, and take their advice on how to improve it.

The speed of being able to publish your thoughts is both a great feature and a great downfall of social media. The time to edit or reflect must be self-imposed. If in doubt over a post, or if something does not feel right, either let it sit and look at it again before publishing it, or ask someone else to look at it first.