Social Media Guidelines

For People Involved in Youth Ministry in The United Church of Canada

Social Networking

Facebook. Twitter. Blogging. Social media is more than a communications tool: it is an amazing, accessible, and exciting platform for building and maintaining communities, getting information out, reaching out to new audiences, and connecting with people. Although these may be new tools and media for you, the same "rules of engagement" apply regarding relationships, boundaries, and ministry practices that ensure a safe and spiritually nourishing environment.

These guidelines provide some information and advice for the paid staff and volunteers in youth ministry work in The United Church of Canada who use social media.

Represent!

- If you are an adult United Church youth program leader, either employed or volunteer, you represent The United Church of Canada in all your interactions.
- The United Church of Canada's Code of Ethics for Youth Ministry (www.united-church.ca/handbooks#ministry) applies to all your interactions, including those on social media. Be responsible, professional, mindful, accountable, and principled in your interactions.

Know the Boundaries

- Lines between a person's personal and work identity are often blurred in social media, so readers don't necessarily distinguish between "official" comments you might make in social media for work and comments you post on your personal pages and sites. You may be seen as speaking for the church.
- Set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile to shield adult and youth members from viewing content that may be inappropriate.
- Everything posted on the Internet is public. Even if you remove a document, posting, or article, traces of it remain on the Web.
- You are accountable for everything you say and do.

Common Sense and Safe Church

We compiled some best practices about interactions in social media and face to face when working with youth:

- Remember: you are responsible for what you say, whether online or offline.
- Adults have more power than children and youth, and this includes in online relationships.
- Youth ministers and volunteers have more power than people with whom they have a pastoral relationship.
- The mutuality of friendship cannot exist when there is a disparity of power.

Friends, Groups, and Networks

- Think twice before submitting "friend" requests to the youth and young adults with whom you work. You may make a young person feel uncomfortable about declining the offer.
- Consider the impact of accepting or declining a youth's "friend" request. You have more power than the youth you work with in all relationships, including online ones. It's worthwhile contemplating a personal policy where you accept all or no requests and letting the youth and young adults know in advance.
- If you would like to connect via a social networking website with church members, set up a group account that all churchgoers may join. The purpose of having a personal profile and church group is to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries with parishioners and real family, friends, and colleagues.

Be Prepared

- In contrast to many traditional communication media, the initiator has much less control over his/her message and the response it generates. As the forum or network takes on its own life, be prepared to accept that it may go in quite a different direction than you anticipated—that's the nature of the media.
- Having a plan for facilitating that change in direction, maintaining the network or site, and developing and nurturing participation are helpful in building online communities and networks.

Resources to Help You Navigate Social Networks

- The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut's Safe Church Guidelines for Social Media www.episcopalct.org/Find-Resources/General-Parish-Operations/Safe-Church-Resources/Guidelines-for-Social-Media
- Common Sense Media: Social Networking Tips www.commonsensemedia.org/social-networking-tips
- The United Church of Canada's Code of Ethics for Youth Ministry www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/youth_ethics.pdf (or see www.united-church.ca/handbooks > Ministry Personnel: Standards of Conduct)
- Social Media Starter Kit http://fastwonderblog.com/2008/02/09/social-media-and-social-networking-