



Guidelines for Clergy Use of Online Social Networking

These guidelines were adopted and approved for distribution by the Holy Synod at the Fall 2011 Holy Synod Meeting on October 6, 2011 in Syosset, New York.

Introduction

The popularity of social networking and digital communications is growing exponentially. The Church should not shy away from these new forms of media, but should be actively present in them. However, as with all forms of communication and personal interaction, there are healthy, normative ways of using these media and unhealthy, potentially abusive ways as well. These guidelines serve to identify normative behaviors that protect our clergy, our parishioners, and especially our youth. Social networking tools can build and deepen relationships, if used appropriately. These recommendations apply healthy boundaries to digital, online, and social media communications and relationships. It is important to always keep in mind that clergy are often assumed to be authoritative representatives of their church and diocese.

General Assumptions

- Clergy have a unique power dynamic with people with whom they have a pastoral relationship, and therefore have a special responsibility to guard how they interact with those people.
- All communications sent digitally (email, social networking sites, notes or posts, etc.) are not confidential and may be shared or reposted to others.
- Interactions in the virtual world need to be transparent, as a window in the door provides transparency in the physical world.
- In the virtual world healthy boundaries and practices must be adhered to just as they should be in the physical world.
- In the virtual world, “friend” can mean anyone with whom you are willing to communicate through that medium. In the physical world, friend can mean much more in terms of intimacy, self-disclosure, mutuality and expectations for relationship. The difference should be recognized and respected.
- Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse/neglect/exploitation of children, youth, elders and vulnerable adults apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.

General Guidelines

- Clergy are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile to shield both adult and youth members from viewing content that may be inappropriate.
- Digital communications are appropriate for communicating basic factual information such as the time of an event, agenda for a meeting, text of a document, etc. but it is not appropriate for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation and explanation.
- Individual personal profiles of clergy are to be used to interact with real friends, family and peers. Clergy should not submit “friend” requests to parishioners and others to whom they minister. The disparity of power may not give the other person the ability to decline such request.
- Clergy are strongly advised not to accept “friend” requests from people with whom they have no prior relationship. “Friends” on social networking sites should be limited to people you have met before in person.
- Clergy who want to connect via a social networking website with parishioners are strongly encouraged to set up a group account that all parishioners may join. The purpose of having a personal profile and parish group is to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries with parishioners and real family, friends and colleagues.
- Clergy should consider the impact of declining a “friend” request from parishioners. These encounters may create a tension in “real world” relationships. Clergy can direct “friend” requests from parishioners to the parish’s group page.
- Clergy who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church sponsored digital communications groups to maintain contact with youth members.
- When a clergy assignment at a parish or other ministry setting ends, the cleric should remove parishioners as “friends” or contacts in all forms of digital communications.
- Clergy should manage their own profiles, and in the case that they do delegate that work, closely monitor their profiles for potential problematic behavior.
- Clergy should refrain from making political statements, joining political groups, or “becoming fans” of particular political candidates or political causes on social network sites
- Clergy, especially new ones, should examine the pictures/videos that are posted of themselves to make sure they are appropriate to share with the general public
- All transcripts of on-line text chats, video chats, blogs or video blogs should be saved when possible.

Guidelines Specific to Interacting with Youth

- Adults who minister to children and youth are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile.
- Adults should not submit “friend” requests to minors or youth. Youth may be unable to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults. Youth may ask to be “friends”, and adults should discern the level of contact they want to maintain with youth prior to responding to these requests.
- Adults who want to connect via a social networking website with youth to whom they minister are strongly encouraged to set up a closed group account that youth may join. Youth requesting to “friend” an adult can then be invited to join this group rather than be accepted as a friend on an adult’s personal profile account. The purpose of the adult’s personal profile is to connect only with his or her real friends/relatives/peers. The purpose of these two separate accounts/profiles is to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy boundaries with youth and real family, friends and colleagues.
- Any material on any site (whether affiliated with the church or not) that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to the local Department of Children and Families. If the material is on a church-affiliated site, that material should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with DCF and/or police.
- Closed, but not “hidden” groups should be used for youth groups (Teen group, OCF, Jr. FOCA, Project Mexico Trip) These groups should have at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth administrators.
- Invitations to youth to join the group should be made by youth administrators, unless a youth previously asked an adult administrator to invite him/her to join the group.
- Behavior expectations should be formulated and clearly posted on the group page.
- Inappropriate material that does not raise suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should immediately be removed from the site.
- A least one youth and one adult administrator of any group should be charged with regularly policing the group page for inappropriate posts or comments.
- Social networking groups for youth should be open to parents of current members.
- Parents should be informed that the content of youth pages or groups that are not sponsored by the church are NOT within the purview of adult youth leaders.
- Adult leaders of youth groups and youth who are no longer associated with the group, due to departure, removal from position, or no longer eligible because they “aged-out” of a program should be immediately removed from

digital communication with youth groups via social networking sites, list serves, etc.

Guidelines for Posting Pictures and Videos

- Parish representative must inform parishioners when they are being videotaped because church buildings are not considered public space.
- Any parish or community that distributes video of its worship services or activities on the web or via other broadcast media should post signs that indicate the service will be broadcast.
- All parish communities should secure signed Media Release forms from adults and guardians of minor children who will or may participate in activities that may be photographed or videoed for distribution.
- Photos that are published on church-sponsored sites should not include name or contact information for minor children or youth.