

Guidelines for Safe Ministry using digital media



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

Developing and maintaining healthy relationships in ministry with people is a core component for safe ministry. Online ministry environments are an extension of 'real world' ministry environments. Appointed Leaders engaging with people are encouraged to use digital and social media (e.g. Facebook), subject to these guidelines.



SCOPE

These guidelines apply to all people within the bounds of the Synod conducting activities as part of the ministries of Uniting Church congregations and faith communities, presbyteries and Synod.

This includes all ministry agents and all "appointed leaders" as defined by the Synod's Working with Children Check /Registration policy. Where their work intersects within the scope of these guidelines all measures must be taken to ensure compliance.

Exclusions:

These guidelines are not intended to apply to the agencies, regulated businesses, colleges and schools of the Church. These entities are required to ensure that they comply with their respective statutory and regulatory obligations and to maintain policy, process and resources relating to child protection and safety which are specific to their context.

PRINCIPLES

All online ministry conducted within the scope of these guidelines must be conducted in a manner which is consistent with the Synod's Child Safety policy and the following principles:

- **Principle 1: Online engagement must enhance face-to-face community and engagement. It must be conducted in such a way that its use does not marginalise or exclude.**

The use of social media is not meant to replace genuine, face-to-face interactions. Face-to-face interactions remain the ideal (and broadly, safest) way to build relationships with most people. Don't use electronic communications for matters that are pastorally sensitive, emotionally charged or that require an increasing number of back-and-forth replies in the chat. In those cases, it's much better to have the conversation in person.

If someone initiates a sensitive or pastoral conversation with you using an electronic method, ask them if you can talk in person with them about it next time you see them, or offer to set a face-to-face meeting to discuss it. Some people may not be as aware of boundaries, particularly young people and those with other vulnerabilities. You, as the Church representative, need to be aware of when a

conversation has crossed boundaries and is no longer appropriate, or is dealing with a topic that warrants a face-to-face conversation. Understand that sometimes prayer requests are indicators of, or a request for, a pastoral conversation. Be aware of your role and capabilities, and make appropriate referrals when you need to link someone to more specialised help.

Wherever possible, communicate electronically with groups rather than individuals. The best practice when sending emails or text messages, especially with young people, is to include multiple people and ideally another leader in the message. A group chat is ideal in this situation.

If you're using social media for group ministry purposes, consider using closed groups or community pages with known security limits where possible (for example, Facebook) and direct people to the group rather than your individual account. If using the closed group model ensure a number of leaders/ministry agents are administrators of that group to provide transparency and safety for all.

If you are posting on social media, think carefully about the impact of what you communicate on the entire church community (including children, youth and the vulnerable).

Remember that Ministry Agents are bound by the Code of Ethics and Lay Leaders are bound by the Church's Code of Conduct for Lay Leaders and that the Church places expectations on a leader's behaviour.

Consider how you can build up the church community, and avoid being divisive, showing favouritism or making others feel excluded or inferior.

If someone was to question you regarding a Uniting Church position or policy, any person can express the Church's position or policy on a matter. If a journalist wants someone to comment on behalf of the Church, direct them to the manager of the Synod communications and marketing team, who will arrange for the Moderator to comment.

Avoid sending a Facebook friend request to a child, following children on Instagram or adding them as a friend in a gaming network, though you might choose to accept if they initiate. In making this choice, it is important to think about these considerations:

- You should be aware of their online presence and how this is consistent with real life presence at both youth events and every part of their life.
- Be aware, particularly with requests from young people, that to accept some and not others could be seen as favouritism and could be counterproductive to your ministry.
- Bear in mind that social media friends are subject at times to content not authored by you that may be inappropriate.
- If you choose to accept friend requests, you should keep very clear boundaries, and be aware of subject matter or posts which are inappropriate or ambiguous. As part

of a Christ-centred ministry, interactions need to be appropriate, non-discriminatory, and inclusive.

• **Principle 2: Online engagement must be conducted in an open, transparent and age appropriate manner.**

Emails, text messages, or conversation threads - particularly with young people and the vulnerable - should only be used for administration. Be aware that those who wish to abuse someone, particularly young people, may try to cultivate secretive or exclusive relationships through electronic communications (this is known as grooming and is a crime in Victoria). This is another reason it is so important to be transparent in all your communications. Your leadership role in the Church comes with behavioural expectations and boundaries. Remember that what you do within your private life may reflect on your role within the Church.

Ensure your communication is from a trusted source. Don't ever hide your identity or pretend to be someone else. Electronic communications that seek to hide the identity of the sender or represent the sender as someone else should not be used in ministry in any circumstances.

Where possible, try to minimise (with settings) the opportunity for 'private' conversations, i.e. one on one conversations or chats. Keep conversations public, i.e. in full view of the group. You should also keep any emails, text messages or conversation threads, in case an accusation is ever made against you or a misunderstanding arises. Remember that you are accountable for all your online interactions.

Group video calls (e.g. Skype) may be a useful tool for example in leadership development particularly in remote or rural settings. Explicit permission from parents or guardians is required for this kind of online engagement with children and young people. Video calls with children or young people are to be limited to a group setting with at least two adults in the group. The process of gaining carers' permission provides carers with context regarding video call groups and enables carer oversight (i.e. carers may like to suggest to their child that the group video calls take place in a family room rather than the child's bedroom).

Texts/iMessages should follow the age-contextual communications guidelines below. In all blast communications include the parents in the distribution as well.

Where digital messaging is integrated to a social media platform (e.g. Twitter DMs, Facebook Messenger, Instagram messages, SnapChat, WhatsApp or Kix Messenger, messages within Xbox/Playstation gaming networks), follow the Text/iMessage age-contextual communications guidelines.

At least two adult leaders must have administrator access to any digital Church platform. Interactions are best to be 'in full view'.

Ensure that any interactions, particularly with children or vulnerable adults, from your private account/s are public.

If someone initiates a conversation with you electronically, consider how you might redirect it to a more transparent forum or include other people in the conversation. This might mean talking face-to-face or including another leader/ministry agent in the communication,

generally with the person's permission. In cases where you have an obligation to report matters, permission is not needed. See Reporting Online Abuse below.

- **Principle 3: Online engagement must create an environment in which all people feel safe and are cared for, respected, nurtured and sustained.**

Any communication should be above reproach, both in terms of the content and the way you communicate. Ask yourself: If this communication were to be made known to all of my church, would they consider it to be respectful and appropriate?

Be sensitive to the impact of the words and images you use, to avoid offence or miscommunication.

Mistakes in tone and content are made often when posting online, and exhibiting grace and offering forgiveness to those who slip up will assist and enhance any digital ministry.

Try not to automatically assume the worst circumstance from a given message.

Never use flirtatious, sexually suggestive, explicit or offensive language or images. Be conscious too of how things might look. Avoid ambiguous comments or comments with double meanings. Be careful that the circumstances of your communication do not suggest that your relationship with someone, particularly a young person, is inappropriate by, for example, communicating regularly or late at night. Even if your motives are appropriate, your intentions can be misunderstood.

Monitor posts you are tagged in for similar offensive or suggestive content, and un-tag yourself as soon as possible if you are tagged in a post that is not above reproach.

Remove any comments or material that are vulgar, offensive or bullying in nature.

If you are sent an inappropriate image, particularly from, or of a young person and especially if the image is of a sexualised nature, DO NOT delete, forward or share the image. Immediately contact the Culture of Safety unit or Secretariat. They will advise you what to do. This may involve contacting the police.

All leaders need to reflect on the reality of the power imbalance that exists between you and the people you are ministering to. That power imbalance might make it difficult for them to say 'no' when you initiate a friendship on social media. Friend requests to a closed group, i.e. Facebook, should be initiated by the leader to ensure that no one is excluded. It is best not to initiate friendships through your private account.

Be careful to observe confidentiality and privacy in electronic communications, for example, do not publish the names, contact details or other personal information of people online, except if you have been given their permission, and/ or their parent's or guardian's permission.

Only share the contact details of a person with someone else if you have gained permission

from the person whose details are requested.

If not using email list software (e.g. MailChimp) ensure that all emails are addressed to people in the BCC (Blind Carbon Copy) section to protect the recipient's privacy. A person's email address is as private as are their other contact details, so respect this accordingly.

Only take photographs of children when you have their parents' or guardians' written permission, and the child is willing for the photo to be taken. Never share identifying details about a child online (this could include photos of them in their school uniform). There are tools to assist you to record and keep track of permissions, it's a good idea to use them and refer to them as you go. See 'Taking, sharing/ using photographs and videos' (below) for more information.

Principle 4: Online practices must be conducted in accordance with all relevant legislation and Church policy and process.

As with all congregational activities where children are engaging, ensure that parents' and guardians' permissions are obtained before children participate in online or digital groups. Operating within the wishes and permissions given by parents or guardians is a demonstration of respect.

If you're using Social Media, be aware of and comply with the terms of use, age restrictions, privacy options and controls for each site prior to using it in your ministry. Most of these age restrictions for young people to have accounts on the various networks allow for accounts from the age of 13.

Be aware that your obligations under Church policy regarding mandatory reporting of suspected abuse, neglect or exploitation of children, young people and adults apply equally to the digital world. This is non-negotiable and any instance should be reported through the correct channels immediately.

In any engagement, whether direct or indirect, you are acting in your position as a Lay Leader or Ministry Agent, therefore some of your engagement with family and friends online may not be appropriate for the people you work with, particularly children or vulnerable adults. You may wish to consider having a public page (with appropriate privacy settings) for ministry purposes and engagement and reserving your private account for communicating with family and friends.

Know your reporting obligations. Read the Mandatory Reporting Process for Lay Workers, and if you have any questions about it, ask your Ministry Agent, Presbytery or the Culture of Safety Unit.

AGE-CONTEXTUAL COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES

Mode of communication	Upper Primary School	Years 7-9	Years 10-12 under 18 years
Phone calls (voice only calls)	Only if explicitly requested by the parent/guardian.	Only after gaining permission from the parent/guardian to speak with the child. Stay brief, on point.	Long conversations should be avoided – stay focused on the ministry purpose for the call.
Text/Messaging	For logistical purposes only (e.g. mass communication about upcoming program).	For logistical purposes only (e.g. mass communication about upcoming program).	Logistics; encouragement; remain transparent.
Email directly to young person	For logistical purposes only (e.g. mass communication about coming events)	Logistics; encouragement; remain transparent.	Logistics; encouragement; remain transparent.
Social (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)	Do not engage.	Be wise and use your discretion; acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.	Be wise and use your discretion; acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent. under 18 only Acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.
Video calls, streaming calls, (where you can see people and they are part of a group)	Do not engage.	Limited to group setting with at least two adults in the group; Parental permission	Limited to group setting with at least two adults in the group; Parental permission. under 18 only Acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.
Online Gaming (non betting)	Do not engage without explicit parental permission.	Do not engage without explicit parental permission.	Acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.

TAKING, SHARING/USING PHOTOGRAPHS and VIDEOS

<p>Gaining permission</p>	<p>You must obtain written permission from the parent/guardian of all children who appear in any photograph or footage, prior to using the image in any format. In addition you should ensure that the child is willing to allow their image to be used. If a person refuses to give permission, the image must not be used. To assist, tools have been developed, refer to the Culture of Safety website.</p>
<p>Taking and sharing images</p>	<p>Photos of children should focus on small groups rather than individuals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders should not identify in writing the person/s in the photograph (e.g. tagging on Facebook) unless permission gained from the person themselves and the young person's parent/guardian. • All young people must be appropriately dressed when photographed (e.g. not in swimsuits or pyjamas). • Children should not be able to be tracked down as a result of the manner in which photos are taken and shared, e.g. because of school uniforms, name tags etc • Embarrassing or offensive photos or videos must not be either taken or shared. <p>When video of services or activities is distributed or streamed on the web or via other broadcast media, signs and/or notifications should be posted that indicate the service is being or will be broadcast.</p>
<p>PAGES vs GROUPS</p>	<p>Utilising social media platforms such as Facebook allows churches and ministry groups to easily communicate information, share details of upcoming programs, pictures, video, articles, and more.</p> <p>The way people interact with Facebook groups vs. Facebook pages is significantly different and should be considered when determining which is best for your ministry.</p> <p>Pages</p> <p>These are excellent for broadcasting information, though a well-developed page will build its own community around it. Depending on the security settings of the page the security can be altered, for example, anyone can post, anyone posts through owner moderation or only the owner can post. These kinds of systems can be good for developing community and communicating information where all is public.</p> <p>Community Groups</p>

	These are well used for developing smaller subset communities and can be completely public and open to join or inclusion moderated by group administrators.
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DEFINITIONS

Term	Meaning
Child	A child is defined under the Child Protection Act 1999 as an individual under 18 years of age.
Digital media	Refers to any technological application or virtual place where individuals can converse, exchange or broadcast ideas through visual, audio or written means
Ministry agent	Ministers (of the Word and Deacons), pastors, lay pastors, lay preachers, youth workers and community ministers. The ministries of lay pastor, youth worker and community minister were closed for entry by Assembly some years ago. However, anyone still operating in one of the now closed ministries is covered by these guidelines.
Social media	Social media uses digital media to build new connections, friendships and do business.
Transparent	Action, method, or procedure that lacks hidden agendas and conditions, and complies with the disclosure requirements of transparency in word and intention

Document Review History				
Version Number	Date	Reason	Developed by	Approved
1	2017		Culture of Safety	
1.1	January 2023	Updated to include vulnerable adults	Culture of Safety	Gen Sec-Jan 2023