

## **Social Media and Boundaries for Authorized Ministers**

### **Theological Grounding**

We believe in a God who is defined by relationship in the Trinity, who values interconnectedness and calls us to relationships of health and wholeness. We also value the covenants that exist between God and creation, among family members and communities, and between ministers and those with whom they minister. Those covenants help us to participate in relationships that are rooted in authenticity, wholeness, and integrity, to the glory of God.

These recommendations are designed to address authorized ministers in the United Church of Christ, although they have value for all persons who have paid or volunteer roles in congregations as well as the wider church, particularly if they minister to children and youth. A Prezi is available to address some of the key issues raised in this document: <https://prezi.com/n00niscnkdwu/social-media-boundaries-in-the-ucc/>.

### **Opportunities and Expectations for Ministry**

Social media is a form of communication, used for connection, relationship, conversation, advocacy, evangelism, debate, news and information, and a means of seeking and offering support. It may not be everyone's preferred form of communication, but it is an important method, and we have an expectation that most ministers can, should and will utilize social media in their ministries in ways that enhance ministry, enrich lives, and reflect individual and organizational values.

At the same time, the 24/7 "always on" nature of social media creates expectations about the accessibility of authorized ministers, what news and information ministers see on social media, and confidential spaces. Some of those expectations may be reasonable; many, however, are implicit and will need to be named in order to evaluate their appropriateness for any particular ministry setting.

Questions of liability also must not be ignored. In many states, authorized ministers are mandatory reporters and are bound by law to report certain actions or behaviors to secular authorities. Social media is not considered a private space, and nothing revealed on social media can be construed as confidential information.

## Boundary Considerations

In all social media activities by the authorized ministers of the UCC, basic boundary considerations must be made. How does the authorized minister, who has greater power in pastoral relationships, appropriately compensate for that power on social media? What care is needed to avoid or minimize any harmful use of power by the authorized minister, even if unintentional? Who controls the information shared on social media? Whose story is it to tell? Who else may need to know this information? Are there additional concerns, such as mandatory reporting obligations? Do policies regarding transparency provide for periodic review of the authorized minister's social media interactions, to ensure both confidentiality and appropriate behaviors?

## Recommendations – General Guidelines

1. A synonym for “pastor” is “parson,” which comes from the same root as “person.” Spiritually grounded authorized ministers see themselves as embodying whole, authentic and integrated personhood, and should strive to be the same person online that they are in other spaces. Guidelines for social media consumption and participation should mirror any minister's personal rule for life, and should be in concert with the UCC Code of Ethics for Authorized Ministers.<sup>1</sup>
2. At the same time, authorized ministers are professionals by virtue of their authorization (regardless of their particular employment), so they must strive to balance this authenticity with appropriateness, and maintain appropriate boundaries around one's personal and professional spheres. An authorized minister will exercise great care in sharing and speaking on social media, even on personal accounts.
3. Authorized ministers must remember that social media is not confidential space. Even in “closed” groups or private communications, it's possible for information to be copied and shared in other spaces. Ministers should assume that anything they share on social media may be shared by others, even if the minister maintains strong privacy settings.
4. At the same time, authorized ministers should not assume that just because they have read personal information about or from others on social media, the information is therefore public and may be freely shared with others.

---

<sup>1</sup> The UCC Codes of Ethics for Ordained, Licensed and Commissioned Ministers can be found in Section 1 of the Manual on Ministry, available here: [http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy\\_url/1298/mom-2001-20partners-1.pdf?1418424767](http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/1298/mom-2001-20partners-1.pdf?1418424767)

5. Before posting, authorized ministers must consider whether social media is an appropriate medium for the message. In communicating with individuals over social media, ministers must also consider whether they would convey this same message in the same way in face-to-face conversation with the parishioner. Ministers should also avoid posting vague messages that invite rumor or speculation, particularly (though not exclusively) on the part of those they serve.
6. A minister's voice is often considered the voice of the church, and social media content from the minister may be viewed as church policy or as representing a church position.
7. Authorized ministers must maintain a current list of pages, groups and accounts associated with the church or ministry setting, along with any relevant passwords and the names of all administrators. This list will always be accessible to another member of the ministry setting staff or governing board.

### **Recommendations – Safe Church (Minor to Adult Relationships)<sup>2</sup>**

#### *Social Networking Sites; Relationship and Group status*

1. With regard to a congregation's Safe Conduct policies, digital space should be regulated in similar ways to other church space: there must be more than one adult who administrates church-related sites, closed groups, list serves, etc.; adults should not be in private, one-on-one conversations with youth; the congregation should periodically monitor the social media interactions of the adult leaders (authorized ministers, employed or volunteer youth workers, etc.).
2. Adults, including authorized ministers, should not submit "friend" requests to minors or youth. Youth may request friendships with adults, and adults will discern the level of contact they should maintain with youth prior to responding to these requests.
3. If an authorized minister or other youth worker (employed or volunteer) chooses to accept friend requests from minors or youth that are associated with their community of faith, we recommend that other adults within the same community of faith have access to the that adult's profile and correspondence.
4. When and where available, authorized ministers and other youth workers

---

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the Connecticut Conference's Internet Safety Guidelines, available here: <http://www.ctucc.org/internetsafetyguidelines>

may choose to create separate personal and professional profiles on networking sites to create a line of privacy. Authorized ministers are still held accountable for what is shared in those personal accounts.

5. Authorized ministers and other youth workers (employed or volunteer) who choose to accept friend requests from minors or youth will use all applicable privacy settings to shield youth from any age-inappropriate content that may exist within the authorized minister or youth worker's profile.
6. All youth and adults will be informed that any communication that is sent via digital means (email, social networking site notes or posts, etc.) is not confidential and may be reported or shared with others.
7. Authorized ministers who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church-sponsored digital communication groups to maintain contact with youth members. These groups must include other adult leaders (employed, volunteer, or parents).
8. We strongly recommend "closed" but not "hidden" groups be used for youth groups. These groups should have both youth and adult administrators, and only those known to the group should be permitted access to those groups.
9. Covenants should be created to govern what is appropriate and inappropriate content to be placed and displayed in the online group for a youth group.
10. Youth groups should decide within their covenant whether or not their social networking site groups are open to parents of current members. Additionally, former youth members and adult leaders of youth groups, due to departure, removal or loss of eligibility (aged out of program) will be removed from digital communication youth groups (Facebook groups, list serves, etc.) in a timely manner.
11. Any inappropriate material that is not covered by mandatory reporting laws should be deleted from the social networking group or site. Any material that is covered by mandatory reporting laws should be reported to the authorized minister, documented for church records, and then deleted from the social networking group or site.
12. Any content that details inappropriate behavior (outside of the bounds of the established covenant) during a church sponsored event or activity should be addressed by authorized ministers, other youth workers and parents.
13. Parents should be informed that content that appears on youth pages or groups that are NOT sponsored by the church are not within the purview

of authorized ministers or other youth workers. Authorized ministers and youth workers do not participate in any youth page or group that is not sponsored by the church.

14. Adults should refrain from initiating video chats with youth, and if initiated by youth, should include another person, preferably an adult.
15. All transcripts of on-line text chats, video chats, blogs or video blogs must be saved when possible.
16. All authorized ministers and youth workers must consider the content and nature of any post that will be read by or visible to youth. Authorized ministers and youth workers' (including employed and volunteer) voices are often considered the voice of the church, and all such content may be viewed as church policy or as a church opinion.
17. The United Church of Christ's Office of General Counsel advises against using any pictures that include identifying features (such as faces) of minor children. Authorized ministers and youth workers may only post non-identifying pictures of minor children on church-related social media with written permission of the family. A sample permission is included on page 7-8 of this document. Authorized ministers and youth workers may not post identifying images of minor children on their personal social media pages.
18. Additionally, pictures or video may only be shared with the express permission of the owner of the image (the copyright holder) to use the image. A sample permission is included on page 9 of this document.

### **Recommendations – Boundaries (Adult to Adult relationships)<sup>3</sup>**

#### *Social Networking Sites; Relationship and Group status*

1. Adult members of congregations or communities of faith who seek religious or spiritual advice from authorized ministers via digital means (email, social networking site posts, etc.) must be informed that their communication is NOT confidential. Use of digital means to communicate nullifies confidentiality.
2. When and where available, authorized ministers are encouraged to consider creating a personal and a professional account to maintain appropriate boundaries with members of their congregations or other members of communities of faith.
3. Authorized ministers should consider the impact of declining a "friend"

---

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the Connecticut Conference's Internet Safety Guidelines, available here: <http://www.ctucc.org/internetsafetyguidelines>

request from their church members. These encounters may create tension in “real world” relationships.

### Recommendations for Transitions<sup>4</sup>

Prior to departure from a ministry setting, authorized ministers create and share a social media transition plan as part of overall ministry transition, and commit to following through on that plan as part of their departure from the ministry setting.

This plan will take into account the following recommendations:

1. Prior to departure, the minister will pass along administrator duties, remove their own administrator status, and share password information to someone else in the congregation for all ministry-related pages, groups and accounts.
2. Unfriending/unfollowing parishioners and others with whom they've had a pastoral relationship is the strongly preferred practice, although there may be situations where moving to a restricted list is appropriate.<sup>5</sup> Ministers must prioritize the needs of the congregation and incoming ministerial leadership over their own desires to maintain relationships (or the desires of parishioners to stay in contact). Ministers must be consistent: either unfriend/unfollow *everyone* from that setting, or move *all* to a restricted list. Ministers will communicate this policy to their congregation as part of their departure plan so that there is no confusion.
3. Ministers must refrain from providing pastoral care through digital communication after the end date of their contract/call/covenant with their former congregation. Continuing to provide pastoral care through social media interferes with the ministry of one's successor and is a violation of the Minister's Code of Ethics.
4. Following a period of 1-3 years, ministers may discern whether they will begin to accept friend requests of former parishioners, and/or change their privacy settings. Ministers should not initiate friend/follow requests with former parishioners, and they must continue to refrain from providing pastoral care through digital

---

<sup>4</sup> Includes information from the Connecticut Conference's resource, "Internet Safety Guidelines," available here: <http://www.ctucc.org/internetsafetyguidelines>

<sup>5</sup> Adam Cleaveland makes compelling arguments for both options here: <https://alban.org/archive/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media/>

communication to former parishioners.

## Photo/Video/Audio Release

I grant **[name of ministry setting]** the right and a license to reproduce and publish for worldwide electronic and print distribution the identity and/or image of me or my child and, at its sole discretion, to share these names and images with others included, but not limited to, for use in **[name of ministry setting]**'s publications and displays, the online news magazine of **[name of ministry setting]**, the email newsletter of **[name of ministry setting]**, print newsletters and other publications, **[name of ministry setting]**'s website and/or other electronic and print forms of media.

I hereby waive any right to inspect or approve the finished photographs or printed or electronic matter that may be used in conjunction with them now or in the future, whether that use is known to me or unknown, and I waive any privacy and publicity interests which me or my child may have in our identities or such images.

I hereby agree to release, defend, and hold harmless **[name of ministry setting]** from and against any claims, damages or liabilities arising from or related to the use of the names or images covered by this agreement.

Please check the paragraph below which is applicable to your present situation:

\_\_\_\_ I am 18 years of age or older and I am competent to contract in my own name. I have read this authorization and release before signing below, and I fully understand the contents, meaning and impact of this release. I understand that I am free to address any specific questions regarding this release by submitting those questions in writing prior to signing, and I agree that my failure to do so will be interpreted as a free and knowledgeable acceptance of the terms of this release.

\_\_\_\_ I am the parent or legal guardian of the below-named child. I have read this authorization and release before signing below, and I fully understand the contents, meaning and impact of this release. I understand that I am free to address any specific questions regarding this release by submitting those questions in writing prior to signing, and I agree that my failure to do so will be interpreted as a free and knowledgeable acceptance of the terms of this release.



---

Name (please print)

---

Date

---

Address (Street)

(City)

(State)

(Zip code)

---

Signature

---

Signature of parent or legal guardian (if under 18 years of age)

Please return the completed form to:  
**[name and address of ministry setting]**

## Addendum: Sample Photo Permissions

### Permission to Use Image

The owner/copyright holder of the attached photographs/images grants permission and a license to **[name of ministry setting]** to reproduce the photographs/images, in whole or in part, in its displays, publications, web pages, or elsewhere and in any form or medium for an unlimited period of time. I hereby waive any right to inspect or approve of the finished product using such images, and I understand that the photographs/images will not be returned to me. I affirm that the photographs/images attached are original on my part and that I am the sole owner/copyright holder of the material, and that neither the materials nor the permission granted hereby infringe upon the rights of any others.

---

Signature

---

Date

---

Printed Name

## Sources

We are grateful for many sources of information that have informed this document. Much has been adapted or informed by the Connecticut Conference's "Internet Safety Guidelines:" <http://www.ctucc.org/internetsafetyguidelines>. These guidelines also include recommendations for digital covenants and online publishing/posting.

The Southern CA-Nevada Conference has created some excellent resources for social media boundary training for authorized ministers. Those resources are not online, but the conference has generously shared them with all who have requested them. Contact the staff at: [www.scncucc.org](http://www.scncucc.org).

We are also grateful for the Insurance Board's SafeConduct™ Policy and Procedure Template: [http://www.insuranceboard.org/safety\\_solutions/safe\\_conduct\\_workbench.aspx](http://www.insuranceboard.org/safety_solutions/safe_conduct_workbench.aspx) (click "Policy Template"). Pages 54-57 in particular provide helpful guidance for congregational policies and codes of conduct for social media.

Church Law and Tax Report has a five-part series on communication policies for youth ministry programs: <http://www.churchlawandtax.com/blog/2014/april/does-your-youth-ministry-have-communication-policy.html> (see all the links to the 5-part series).

Presbyterian minister the Rev. Adam Cleaveland created a five-part series on "Pastoral Transitions in the Age of Social Media." All of these articles were informative:

<http://pomomusings.com/2013/07/02/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media-part-1-introduction/>

<http://pomomusings.com/2013/07/03/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media-part-2-staying-organized/>

<http://pomomusings.com/2013/07/04/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media-part/>

<http://pomomusings.com/2013/07/08/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media-part-4-top-10-things-to-do-when-leaving-a-church/>

<http://pomomusings.com/2013/07/09/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media-part-5-top-10-things-to-do-when-starting-at-a-new-church/>

Some of this was adapted for an article for the Alban Institute, available here: <https://alban.org/archive/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media/>

The UCC Ministers Codes of Ethics for Ordained, Commissioned and Licensed Ministers (found in the Manual on Ministry, section 1) and the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers ([http://www.ucc.org/ministers\\_marks](http://www.ucc.org/ministers_marks)) are also appropriate tools for authorized ministers to integrate their boundary awareness with regard to social media.

### **Additional Sources**

Facebook Guide for Pastors, from Hacking Christianity:

<http://hackingchristianity.net/2014/04/facebook-guide-for-pastors-in-transition-updated-2014.html>

The Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow is a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), a consultant and coach with the Center for Progressive Renewal and an author who has written and spoken extensively on social media in the church. He wrote an excellent letter when he left his church in the Bay Area in 2011:

<http://www.reyes-chow.com/2011/05/pastoral-transitions-social-media/>

This 2012 article of his sensibly addresses the actual dangers of social media:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/breyeschow/2012/10/10/an-open-letter-to-pastors-about-the-dangers-of-using-social-media/>

Finally, he has created a PowerPoint entitled “Using Social Media in the Church” that will be of value for many. The most recent iteration is here:

<http://www.slideshare.net/breyeschow/4hour-bootcamp-on-social-media-and-the-church-claremont-ucc>.

MESA recommends that any authorized ministers or volunteers who lead boundary awareness training with regard to social media have strong competencies in the “Marks of Faithful and Effective Boundary Trainers:”

<http://uccfiles.com/pdf/The-Marks-of-F-and-E-Boundary-Trainers.pdf>.