Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Social Media and Electronic Communications for Children and Youth

This Policy applies to all online and mobile platforms for sharing content and information, whether controlled by the Episcopal Church in Colorado or hosted by others, on which members of the Episcopal Church in Colorado community engage in discussions or activities relating to the Episcopal Church in Colorado. Online and mobile platforms include social networking services, blogs, short-message services, message boards, wikis, podcasts, image- and video-sharing sites, and other methods for real-time information sharing among users. Because this is a constantly evolving area, this policy applies to all new social media platforms whether or not they are specifically mentioned in this policy.

Social media shapes the lives of young people and has the potential to empower ministry. Behavior in the digital sphere is never private. Posted content may be used out of context and out of the control of the originating individuals and organizations, putting them at risk. In addition, these powerfully connective tools are subject to the same dynamic of unequal power and potential for abuse that present a risk in all ministry relationships. Churches face the challenge of identifying and proactively addressing areas of potential risk in social media use in the midst of rapidly evolving technology. The following recommended practices and guidelines are designed to be a flexible template for developing policies and covenants governing the safe use of social media and digital communication in ministry settings.

General Information about Digital Communications

- All communications sent digitally (email, social networking sites or platforms, notes, texts, or posts, etc.) are NOT CONFIDENTIAL and can be shared or reposted to others.

- Interactions in the virtual world need to be transparent; that is, occurring in such a way that it is easy for others to see what actions are performed.

- In the virtual world, healthy boundaries and safe church practices must be adhered to as they are 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.

- Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation of children or youth apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world. Check your local applicable laws.

Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Churches and Organizations

- Establish a policy that outlines professional and institutional standards for profiles and interactions on social networking sites and platforms.

- Establish a policy of transparency regarding social media accounts. The best practice is to have the diocese, congregation, or organization create and "own" the social media accounts representing the diocese, congregation, or organization

respectively and have multiple administrators and/or supervisors with access. If personal accounts are used, a system of monitoring should be established.

- Establish a policy regarding the identification or "tagging" of individuals in online photos or videos. For example, on Facebook, "tagging" someone in a photo or video creates a hyperlink to that person's profile page that can be clicked by anyone. The best practice is for the diocese, congregation, or organization not to identify or "tag" individuals, and individuals should also be discouraged from self-tagging. The "tagging" of children and youth should be prohibited. When written permission is provided by a parent/guardian, the captioning of photos or videos of minors may be permitted. The caption should not include the minor's full name, nor should it create a clickable link to someone's personal profile.

- A diocese, congregation, or organization does not have a responsibility to review or monitor the personal pages or groups that are not sponsored by that diocese, congregation, or organization.

- Email can be a good method of communication, and it also has the opportunity to be misunderstood. Having a clear understanding and procedure for responding to digital communication that raises concern is prudent for all. Best practices can include not responding immediately and sharing the communication with a supervisor before responding. Phone and face-to-face meetings are preferred when responding to emotionally driven communications or pastoral emergencies.

- When using photos and videos for ministry purposes, obtain a media release for each person and only post images that respect the dignity of every person depicted.

- Dioceses, congregations, or organizations must inform participants when they are being videoed because church buildings are not considered public space. Signs should be posted to indicate that a service or activity will be broadcasted when worship services or activities are streamed or distributed on the web or via other broadcast media.

Recommended Practices for Interacting Digitally with Children and Youth

- Prudent judgement should be used in the time of day a child or youth is contacted through text or social media. Under normal circumstances, refrain from contact or exchanging texts, chats, or emails before 8:00 am, after 9:00 pm, or during school hours.

- Privacy settings and personal boundaries should be implemented.

    - Create and use profiles on social networking sites that meet professional and institutional standards.

    - Do not submit connection requests (such as friend requests on Facebook or "Add Me" on Snapchat) to children or youth for personal interactions. Youth may not be able 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 nature of contact appropriate for healthy ministry.

- Apply privacy settings that are consistent with all children and youth, across all social networking sites and platforms. Avoid playing favorites or the appearance of playing favorites.

- Establish a regular ongoing and consistent system of review that focuses on settings, accessible content, photos, and videos to ensure compliance with professional and institutional standards.

- Obtain written permission from parents to communicate with their children and youth using social networking sites and communications platforms used within the ministry.

- When possible, send communication (1) to entire groups, (2) on an individual's "wall," or (3) in public areas, rather than in private messages. This includes photos, images and videos.

- When sending emails to a child or youth that contain personal or private information regarding that child or youth, a copy should be sent to the parents or guardians as well. Examples of these types of emails include: payment due information, specific medical requests or questions, etc. Mass emails sent to an entire group are not required to be copied to parents or guardians, although ministry leaders may find this to be a helpful practice in keeping parents and guardians informed.

- Disclose **ongoing** digital pastoral communications (i.e., e-mails, texting, etc.) with children and youth to a parent and/or a supervisor to determine when a referral to a professional provider or resource is needed.

- Any use of digital media that does not comply with this policy should be brought to the attention of the Office of the Bishop.

- Create covenants to govern digital groups, which include:

  - The purpose of the group.

  - Description of content that can be posted or published on the site or page.

  - Appropriate and inappropriate behavior of members (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, illegal activities, sexual acts, etc.) and the consequence for inappropriate behavior.

  - Who may join and/or view group activity, when participants should leave the group and when/if the group will be disbanded;

  - A prohibition of "tagging" photos and videos of children and youth. However, the captioning of photos and videos is permissible with written permission from a parent or guardian.

  - Notification that mandatory reporting laws will be followed.

  - Consequences for breaking the covenant.

- Delete inappropriate material posted in digital groups, address the behavior and report it, if necessary, in accordance with legal and institutional requirements. In

video calls, follow the same criteria used in telephone calls. In addition, prudent judgement regarding attire and surroundings should be observed.

- Comply with the following best practices regarding "groups" on social networking sites:

    - Have at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth administrators for groups that are designed for youth.

    - Use closed groups, but not "hidden" or "secret" groups, for youth.

    - Have only youth administrators invite other youth to join the online group, unless a youth previously asked an adult administrator to invite them to join.

    - Remove any content that shows or describes inappropriate behavior outside the bounds of the established behavioral covenant.

    - Open social networking groups for youth to parents of current members.

    - Remove adult leaders of youth groups and youth who are no longer members, due to departure, removal from position, or who are ineligible because they "aged-out" of a program from social networking sites, list serves, etc.

    - Observe mandated reporting laws regarding suspected abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

- Consistently model and hold others accountable to social medial and electronic communications modes of behavior that respect the dignity of each person:

    - **Be smart** – A blog or community post is often visible to the entire world and can be shared by others in ways that you cannot control. Remember that what you write is public and will remain public for a very long time (perhaps permanently). Be respectful to everyone.

    - **Be identified** – Authenticity and transparency are driving forces behind social media. Use real identities to the greatest extent possible rather than anonymous posts and comments.

    - **Respect the privacy of others** – Do not publish the personal information of others in the community without their permission or, in the case of children under 13, written permission of their parents.

    - **Respectfully disagree** – The Episcopal Church in Colorado is a thoughtful and prayerful community that encourages free expression and values civil debate. If you disagree with others, do so with civility. Respect your audience, express your views with appropriate language, and be respectful of the Church and its teachings.

    - **Be trustworthy** – Respect the confidentiality of matters that are shared with you in confidence, or that are meant to be kept confidential by the nature of your work, ministry, or volunteer mission.

Recommended Platforms for Digital Communications

There are a variety of digital platforms available. Be selective. Use the right medium for your message: A blog or social network might not be the right place for messages intended only for a small group, and email or other more targeted media might be best. Be sure to obtain permission from parents or guardians to communicate with youth under the age of 18 before using the following or any other forms of communication.

- **Email/Texting Messaging:** Appropriate for youth ministry staff and adult volunteers to use as a means of communicating with youth. As much as possible, send mass texts to communicate with youth, and avoid sending individual emails. Save sent email messages and keep a transcript of online texts. Use e-newsletter blasts to communicate with youth, parents, and the church. Services like MailChimp and Constant Contact are recommended.

- **Facebook:** Appropriate for providing information about programs. Facebook is more popular with adults than youth. Closed groups may be set up for youth and parents using the guidelines provided above in Recommended Practices for Digital Communications with Children and Youth. Youth leaders are discouraged from friending or accepting friend requests from youth.

- **Instagram:** Appropriate for engaging with youth and parents/guardians. Instagram is a popular social media platform for young people. It is useful to have a youth group account where announcements are made, upcoming events are visible, and registration links are shared. Use the Messenger app to respond to inquiries only. It should not be used for personal communication.

- **GroupMe:** A good group messaging tool for communicating with youth and adults. It is an effective way to share documents and links, and to conduct polls. Have one group for youth group and a separate group for the adult leadership of youth group. Have at least two adults in the youth GroupMe group. Use the Messenger app to respond to inquiries only. It should not be used for personal communication.

- **Remind:** A group texting application used by youth and adults. It is an effective tool for mass communication to the entire community of youth, parents, and other adults. This is primarily used as a one-way communication tool, although there is a feature that allows users to respond. Users subscribe using the unique code assigned to your Remind account. Use Remind to text, share documents and links, and post Christ-centered formational content. Use the Messenger app to respond to inquiries only. It should not be used for personal communication.

- **Zoom:** A widely used videoconferencing platform for conducting online meetings. When conducting online meetings use the same Safe Church standards you would use in person. There should always be at least two adults present in a Zoom meeting with youth.