



## Social Media and Congregations

Strategies, Guidelines, Best Practices and Resources

### Defining Social Media

There are a number of great social media tutorials on [YouTube](#) and [Slideshare.net](#). A simple view is that social media are web and mobile device-based tools for sharing. Some basic characteristics of social media include:

- *Listening* to what members and others are saying, about their congregation, the ELCA as a denomination, "being Lutheran" and about what is going on in their lives. Members are able to post text, images, sound and video in easily accessible ways, so following them online can provide helpful community insights.
- *Posting* useful, inspiring text, images, audio and/or video on a regular basis.
- *Commenting* on the posts of others.
- *Sharing*, pointing others to information and resources that may be of help to them.



Some congregations are abandoning traditional websites and doing all their online communication through social media sites like Facebook; others use their website as the place where they bring all their social media initiatives together in one spot: announcements from Twitter, calendar from Google, photos from Flickr and videos from YouTube. As Facebook features expand, it may be less necessary to use separate sites for photos, videos and groups. Facebook is already the most popular photo-sharing site.

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### Elements of a Social Media Strategy

The resource list below has a number of good references for helping you develop a comprehensive social media strategy. Ideally this strategy will be one component of an overall communication plan for your congregation that includes all the ways you interact with your members and the community. A good strategy provides a rationale, plus some structure and foundation for this aspect of ministry. Basic strategy elements should address some of these questions:

- *What's the plan?* Involve key stakeholders in planning a strategy. What is your organizational strategy ... where does social media fit in? Help the group answer the basic question of: What are your objectives? Evangelism and outreach? Information for members? Inspiration?
- *Who is your target audience?* Are you primarily trying to reach and connect members, or are you primarily hoping to reach out to the community and prospective members? Most congregations are trying to reach both, but you should still describe your audience as thoroughly as possible, since you will want to target your efforts and possibly use different channels to reach different audience segments.

- *Why are we considering this means of communicating?* Outline your reasons for this initiative. Social media offers the possibility for collaborating with purpose. It can extend the community that gathers on Sunday morning into the rest of the week and integrate "church life" into daily life.
  - *Where?* When choosing a social media platform, the most cost effective and successful approach is usually to boldly go where your members are. Are your members active on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, etc.? This may mean setting aside your personal preference for social media platform in favor of reaching your members where they are.
  - *Public vs. Private space?* Eventually you will probably need both: outposts where your members already are; home spaces for private groups. You can also build private spaces within public spaces (e.g. private Facebook groups). Start with where people are. If you outgrow that, consult with key users and get their buy-in before branching out.
  - *Who will implement the strategy?* Are you willing to shift your thinking about congregational communication, and shift your time from other tasks, to feed and monitor a social media presence? This work is a great opportunity for lay leadership, but staff oversight and some level of participation is needed. Your strategy needs to identify the human resources that will be applied to setting up and maintaining a social media presence.
  - *How will the strategy be implemented?* Transforming into a networked organization involves trust and getting more people involved. This is easier when you have a policy to empower staff and volunteers to communicate freely in a responsible way. Develop work flows for how information will be shared over time, and a schedule of who will monitor and support this virtual community on a regular basis.
  - *How will the communication needs of all members continue to be met?* It is important to avoid creating a "technology gap" in your overall communication strategy, where members without the means or desire for digital connections are left out. Using online community to help mobilize volunteers to connect with the offline community can help fill this gap, as well as on-demand printing of some essential communications for those who indicate that preference.
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## Developing a Social Media Policy

Having an agreed-upon policy for congregation staff and volunteer leader use of social media services like Facebook can seek to set guidelines about participating responsibly online, while at the same time seeking to reduce risk to the congregation. Social media policies generally address two areas of concern, **guidelines** for appropriate use, and a **manual** documenting work flow, roles, and activities that support your church communication strategy.

### Social Media Guidelines

There are [MANY examples](#) of social media guidelines developed by organizations, including some policies developed by [congregations](#). Ford Motor Company has a great single-page set of [Digital Participation Guidelines](#) that would be a good starting point. There is even an [interactive tool](#) that will prompt for information specific to your organization and generate a draft policy for you to then edit for your needs (you will need to edit out the sections more pertinent to a for-profit business).

When staff use social networking sites, such as FaceBook, MySpace, and Twitter etc., it is important to have safeguards and understanding about use. Such sites are usually not private and even if privacy settings are used, sometimes information becomes public. Because of the widespread use and the ease of copying and forwarding electronic materials, it is very important to make sure that your staff is not exposing the congregation to liability or bad publicity due to foolish or unwise social network postings.

This discussion with staff relates to on-the-job social networking. However, it is important that all staff remember that they are holding out a public witness in their personal life, so they should be careful and prudent on their personal social networking communications. As appropriate, particularly when discussing ministry related issues, staff should let it be known that private personal postings are their own opinions and not that of the congregation.

**Sample Staff Guidelines** This is a resource with suggested guidelines and policy samples. It is important to consider carefully all such documents and review these with your congregation's legal counsel.

### **Church Staff Guidelines Regarding the Use of Social Media**

When I am representing the congregation on any social networking site such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, or similar sites, I understand and agree to comply with the following:

- I will use my own name;
- I understand I represent the congregation's ministry and my postings will be appropriate to the mission;
- I will keep all confidential and sensitive information private and will not post such information;
- (insert if applicable) I have read the congregation's policies on use of the internet and social media; and
- If I have a question, uncertainty or concern about the proper nature of a posting, I will consult with my supervisor and leadership before posting.

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Signature by employee

Decide whether you will disseminate such a policy as part of a meeting, include it in your employee handbook or actually have staff sign. In any event, if your congregation has an employee handbook, personnel policy, or orientation for new workers, it is a good idea to make this topic clear in those resources. While this discussion deals mainly with staff, it is wise to also share these concerns and safeguards with leadership and volunteers who are communicating on behalf of the congregation.

The main concerns here are for privacy issues and appropriate behavior. Use a password-protected service as a way to share directory information, photos with captions, etc. only among members. Facebook could be your more open community presence, but monitor it to make sure that member privacy is respected. This involves common sense concerns:

- Don't post [images](#) of children without the consent of a parent or guardian
- Don't caption photos with full names of children (even if there is consent)
- Don't post member e-mail addresses or phone numbers
- Help [protect members from fraud](#).
- Make sure that church staff and volunteer leaders are using church computers appropriately.

## Social Media Practices and Procedures Manual

Now that you've established guidelines for staff and volunteer leader participation online, this portion of your social media policy can describe HOW you hope to support and sustain a social media initiative. Here are some things topics you may want to discuss and document in your social media manual:

- *Publication schedule.* Establish a plan for how often posts will appear in your various social media channels (e.g. one video a month on YouTube, two wall posts per week on Facebook, a Twitter update every other day). This ensures that the areas don't become stale, and by spreading out posts you make "space" for member comments and contributions.
  - *Automated posts.* Automation methods can help keep your site fresh. For example, an "Announcements" RSS feed on your congregation website can automatically update your congregation Facebook Wall and Twitter feed. This acknowledges that members have different preferences for how they receive information, and you are striving to provide church information in the most convenient way for them.
  - *Moderator schedule.* If you are successful, members and prospective members will be participating with posts, comments on your Facebook wall, and be sharing links, photos and videos with other members. Part of the responsibility of having a social media presence is monitoring what goes on there. Establish and schedule a social media team to monitor your site 7 days a week. Not all members of the team need administrator rights to remove posts that are spam or offensive, but they need to know how to contact an administrator if intervention is needed.
  - *Helpful tools.* If you're lucky enough to have several congregation staff members interested in participating online, tools like [MediaFunnel](#) and [HootSuite](#) can help coordinate and manage your social media presence by letting you schedule posts, establish a work flow and review process.
  - *Talk about your approach.* In the least, your social media presence might be a convenient way to get announcements out to members in a place where they are already visiting (and each announcement can be used to drive people to more information on your congregation Web site). So in addition to collecting together updates for occasional publication in the Sunday bulletin or congregation newsletter, as soon as you hear about some event, deadline, news item, update, etc., you would do a wall post on the congregation Facebook page. The best posts are ones that also invite members to comment. And the ideal site has members posting announcements and reminders themselves.
  - *Developing a place for members to reflect on their faith.* Is there a "member care" or "fellowship" group who could intentionally post reflections, event images and videos, and questions for member response? Maybe approach members of your adult education or learning committee to develop regular questions to post online (make sure other committee members are ready to respond with comments, in order to prime the pump).
  - *Look for models of effective use of social media in congregations.* One example of a congregation with well-developed e-communication tools is Zion Lutheran Church in Buffalo, Minn. (<http://www.zionbuffalo.org/>). A church staff person does regular Facebook posts and members occasionally comment (<http://www.facebook.com/ZionBuffalo>). It's interesting to note that, in general, discussion boards seem fairly quiet on Facebook, but people are often willing to comment and "like" wall posts. Polling congregation staff and lay leaders to see if others are willing to post and comment is an important step, otherwise, by default all posts will be from you. That may be helpful for members, but not as interesting as the variety you have with many people contributing. A "Welcome" page is useful for people who may be new to Facebook. Facebook has become the most popular photo-sharing site. Zion has built up a large library of albums that help provide a window into congregational life. Facebook's "tagging" feature lets parents or the people pictured decide if they will be identified in a photo.
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## Selected resources on church communication and social media for non-profits

- [Mediating Faith: Faith Formation in a Transmedia Era](#), book by Rev. Clint Schneklath, 2/1/2014.
- [The Social Media Gospel](#), book by Meredith Gould, July 9, 2013.
- [Getting started in church communication](#), by Pastor David Hansen, June 17, 2013
- [Justice issues as they relate to the use of online technology](#), by Cheryl Leanza, November 15, 2013.
- ["Establishing guidelines for electronic communications,"](#) article in the Fall, 2012 issue of *Risk Reporter*.
- [Click2Save: The Digital Ministry Bible](#), a hands-on guide to using social media in ministry by [Elizabeth Drescher](#) and (ELCA Pastor) [Keith Anderson](#) (Morehouse 2012).
- [#ChSocM](#) (ch-sock-em) is a weekly Twitter-based chat about using social media to build church and faith. Welcoming, informative, ecumenical. Tuesdays, 9PM, ET. Commentary, interviews, transcripts, and fun stuff on [this blog](#).
- The [New Media Project](#) at Union Theological Seminary is a two-year research oriented project involving six research fellows who are conducting case studies; interviewing experts in social media, congregational ministry, theology, and journalism; collecting and sharing research online; writing theological reflection essays; and commenting regularly via blog posts. You can access most of this from the [Findings](#) tab.
- Articles about Facebook from ["Church Marketing Sucks"](#)
- [Facebook for Pastors](#) resource by Chris Forbes.
- Social media-related articles on [ChurchMag](#)
- Facebook Rules for Pastors: <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2010-10/facebook-rules-pastors>
- Articles on congregational use of social media from *The Lutheran* magazine:
  - ["Beyond Technology: mission-inspired strategies make social media manageable,"](#) August, 2012.
  - ["Is Facebook...church? Meaningful connections may not be enough,"](#) February 2010.
  - ["Dos and don'ts. Say no to Facebook excess,"](#) February, 2010.
  - ["First step: Just show up. Then ask this of social media: Why do it?"](#) February, 2010.
- A number of bloggers provide good ongoing coverage of issues and developments for churches and other non-profits using social media:
  - [Anna Belle Leiserson](#)
  - [Beth Kanter](#)
  - [Pastor Keith Anderson](#)



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The best congregation social media presence is one that "runs itself," with congregation members and staff contributing regularly in ways that enhance community and help make connections between members. This helps to make visible the real community that gathers on Sunday morning and during the week, and makes others want to get involved more or consider joining.