

Guidelines for the Use of Social Media and Other Online Platforms Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference

Approved by Coordinating Cabinet 7/1/2020

As we share in ministry for the cause of Jesus Christ, your Cabinet expects that Conference leaders, both lay and clergy, will commit themselves to principles and boundaries that will help to ensure the healthiest possible dynamics in the use of social media and other online communication.

When engaging in social media conversation, using online meeting platforms, and writing blog posts, all those who represent the United Methodist Church in the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference should conduct themselves in a responsible, respectful, and disciplined manner, thereby maintaining a consistent witness and honoring both the personhood and the integrity of those they are engaging.

The Cabinet believes that the following guidelines must govern the use of social media and other online platforms:

- ***Guard and honor all boundaries related to privacy, confidentiality, and the prevention of inappropriate relationships.*** It is important not to share anything that you do not want to be remembered or anything that would violate another person's privacy. It is also essential for church leaders to establish and observe the kind of boundaries in their online communication that will ensure the prevention of inappropriate intimacy or a breach of Safe Sanctuary protocols.
- ***Ask permission before re-posting or repeating information about others that is of a personal nature.*** Boundaries related to the sharing of personal information should be no different in social media than they are in more traditional contexts.
- ***Be careful not to overshare details of your personal life.*** Remember that your social media networks may be wide, but not all "friendships" are equally deep. Some personal details demand a more intimate relationship than social media can accommodate.
- ***Refrain from insults, inflammatory language, disparaging rhetoric, and uncharitable memes.*** One's audience in social media normally includes a wide spectrum of thoughts and perspectives. Caring respectfully for that audience demands a commitment to abstaining from the belittling of other viewpoints.
- ***When articulating a strong or prophetic viewpoint on a controversial matter, make certain that your tone does not become so abrasive or strident that it obscures your message.*** As convinced as you may be that you are right, a willingness to acknowledge the possibility that you are not can help to prevent a distorted and crippling sense of self-righteousness. We want leaders to be prophetic but not acrimonious in their communication.
- ***Practice great patience and care in crafting your communication.*** Since words and images are so powerful and so frequently misunderstood, they demand a careful and disciplined stewardship.
- ***Post or share nothing that compromises your personal well-being or the well-being of others.*** Committing to doing no harm with our communication must be a priority in the ministry we share.

- ***Clergy, be cautious and discriminating when it comes to engaging with parishioners and former parishioners on social media.*** As a clergy leader, make certain that your communication neither compromises relationships in your present appointment nor impedes the work of your clergy colleagues in your past appointments.
- ***Never represent yourself, your church, or your organization in a false or misleading manner.*** We are people who resist bearing false witness so that we might point consistently to what is true.
- ***In all forums and platforms, commit to communication that is truthful instead of misleading, respectful instead of insulting, edifying instead of destructive, and Christ-honoring instead of narcissistic.*** Social media and other online platforms are an important segment of our mission field. The words, images, articles, and memes that we share there must illuminate the truth, not dishonor it.

If, as determined by the Bishop and Cabinet, a clergy or layperson disregards these guidelines, it may lead to supervisory intervention. Stating this possibility is intended, not as a threat, but as a reminder of our shared accountability.

We are grateful for your willingness to join us in the discipline of subordinating even our online communication to the sanctifying grace of Jesus Christ. The Cabinet's hope and prayer is that, as we continue to grow in this area, our presence in social media will faithfully honor this Biblical teaching:

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”—Ephesians 4:29