



Guidance note Using Digital Media

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Related policies

[Safe Ministry with Children](#)

[Policy for Safe Ministry with Children using Digital Media](#)

Related documents

[Image release form](#)

[Attendee information form \(short\)](#)

[Attendee information form \(long\)](#)

[Mandatory Reporting Process – leaders and helpers](#)

[Mandatory Reporting Process – ministry agents](#)

Introduction

This document is to be read and applied in conjunction with the Social Media Policy for Safe Ministry with Children, and with reference to the related policies and documents. These guidelines are offered to all people working with children as they develop their strategies and frameworks for ministering in the online/digital space. Don't be locked in by seeing this document as a set of rules; rather use it to help make smart decisions about how to include online platforms in your ministry opportunities.

The ideas included in these guidelines are equally important to share with those you minister to. Your duty of care as a person working with children provides you with a unique opportunity to educate those you work with as to how they live a Christ-centred digital life.

There is no doubt that the use of social media provides new and exciting opportunities for engagement with youth. But be conscious that it also places a responsibility on you as a church representative. Be an example to others as to the respectful yet enjoyable use of social media.



Practices that apply the principles for digital ministry

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.

It's a good idea to explain the 'rules' or 'boundaries' of participation to your group of young people as well. That way everyone has the same information about how to communicate.

When creating any page or group using any social media platform consider developing a covenant or code of conduct that all who are involved are encouraged to read and adhere to.

Initially, have conversations (include parents of young people, your leadership team, and the young people themselves) to discuss options for digital communication, listen to how they would like digital communication, and agree on a way forward. Provide a written summary for people you're ministering with and to, of how digital information will be shared in your congregation or group. Take regular opportunities to communicate with people you're ministering with – particularly the parents of young people—about who the leadership members are and the preferred mediums of communication that will be used (e.g. Our youth leadership team is made up of these people and we will communicate primarily via iMessage/SMS and using our closed Facebook group, but also sometimes via email from this specific email address).

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. Young people may not be as aware of boundaries. 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 Ministry Practice and leaders are bound by the Church's Code of Conduct for Lay Leaders and that the church places expectations on a leaders' 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, 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 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 with young people 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). 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, keeping conversations public, i.e. in full view of the group. You should also keep any emails, text messages or conversation threads with young people, 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 is required and video calls are to be limited to a group setting with at least two adults in the group. The process of gaining parental permission provides parents with context regarding video call groups and enables parental oversight (i.e. parents

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.

Be aware of the leadership ratios that apply to Safe Ministry with Children, and that they also apply in digital settings. 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 with children 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 children 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 innuendo (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 pure, misunderstandings can arise.

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 follow the Mandatory Reporting Process for Lay Workers, which requires you to inform your Ministry Agent. The Ministry Agent will advise you what to do, this may involve contacting the police. The police may ask you to retain the image for them to forensically acquire. Only delete the image once the Police have advised accordingly. Take detailed notes of how it came into your possession, what you did/who you alerted, and the interaction with Police. The Complaints and Allegations Statement template may help you to keep this information.

All people working with children 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 parent's written permission, and the child is willing for the photo to be taken. Never share identifying details about a child online. 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 Safe Ministry with Children activities, 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 is a demonstration of respect. Attendee Information Forms are on the Synod website to assist you with this process.

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 with children, whether direct or indirect, you are acting in your position as a leader or ministry agent, therefore some of your engagement with family and friends online, may not be appropriate for the children you work with. 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.



Age-contextual communications guidelines

Mode of communication	Up to Grade 7	Grades 7–9	Grades 10–12	Post school/< 18
Phone 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.	Acknowledge principles above; remain transparent.
Text/Messaging	For logistical purposes only (e.g. mass comms about upcoming program).	For logistical purposes only (e.g. mass comms about upcoming program).	Logistics; encouragement; remain transparent.	Logistics; encouragement; remain transparent.
Email	For logistical purposes only (e.g. mass comms about upcoming program).	Logistics; encouragement; remain transparent.	Logistics; encouragement; remain transparent.	Acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.
Social (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)	Do not engage.	Be smart and use your discretion; acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.	Be smart and use your discretion; acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.	Acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.
Video calls, streaming calls, chat rooms	Do not engage.	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
Gaming	Do not engage without explicit parental permission.	Do not engage without explicit parental permission.	Acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.	Acknowledge the practices above; remain transparent.

Taking, sharing/using photographs and videos

Gaining permission

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. Photo permission clauses are included in the following tools which can be downloaded from the Safe Ministry with Children website:

- Image release form
- Attendee information form (short)
- Attendee information form (long)

Taking and sharing images

- Photos of children should focus on small groups rather than individuals
- 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.



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.

Pages vs groups

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.

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.

Pages

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.

Community Groups

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

Definitions

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

Queensland Synod Means the work and activities of the Uniting Church in Australia performed within the bounds of the Queensland Synod

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 this policy.

Social media Social media uses digital media to build new connections, friendships and do business.

Document Review History

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1.0	Guidelines for ministry in a digital context created on request of General Secretary via Safe Ministry (children) administrator	Digital Youth Discipleship Project Officer	Presbytery (Safe Ministry) reference group Legal counsel Associate general secretary Safe Ministry (children) administrator		
1.1	Collaborative review of first draft	Safe Ministry, Legislative and Compliance Officer	Senior Legal Officer ED Risk (Acting) Manager, Communications and Marketing Manager, Group Insurance	Associate General Secretary	29.8.2017
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