

SPSP10

Guidelines for Safe Ministry using digital media



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA



Developing and maintaining healthy relationships in ministry with people is a core component for safe ministry. Online ministry environments are an extension of 'real world' ministry environments. Appointed Leaders engaging with people are encouraged to use digital and social media (e.g. Facebook), subject to these guidelines.

SCOPE

These guidelines apply to all people within the bounds of the Synod who are conducting activities as part of the ministries of Uniting Church Congregations and Faith Communities, Presbyteries and the Synod.

This includes all ministry agents and all appointed leaders as defined by the Synod's Working with Children Check (Victoria) /Vulnerable People (Tasmania) Registration policy. Where their work intersects within the scope of these guidelines all measures must be taken to ensure compliance.

Exclusions:

These guidelines are not intended to apply to the agencies, regulated businesses, colleges and schools of the Church. These entities are required to ensure that they comply with their respective statutory and regulatory obligations and to maintain policy, process and resources relating to child protection and safety which are specific to their context.

PRINCIPLES

All online ministry conducted within the scope of these guidelines must be conducted in a manner which is consistent with the Synod's Child Safety policy and the following principles:

- **Principle 1: Online engagement must enhance community engagement. It must be conducted in such a way that its use does not marginalise or exclude.**

The use of digital media/platforms/networks is for connecting people in order to build safe, healthy and genuine communities, whether face-to-face or through online engagement. In matters that are pastorally sensitive, emotionally charged or that require an increasing number of back-and-forth replies in the chat, it is best these engagements do not take

place in a public forum. All ministry agents and appointed leaders need to be mindful of:

- The physical environment in which they're conversing (e.g. on a phone call in a café, or in the church foyer while programs are being facilitated onsite, etc.), and/or;
- The digital environment in which they're conversing (e.g. a public forum on social media, reply chains in emails, or verbally when in stream/broadcast, etc.).

If, while online, a person initiates a sensitive or pastoral conversation it is important to adhere to the Ministerial Code of Ethics and/or the Code of Conduct for Lay Leaders, as well as to assess your own competencies in conversing through a digital medium. Ministry agents and appointed leaders need to consider the following factors:

- Are you able to shift your communication skills? (e.g. are you competent in written communications if you are engaged in conversation via messaging/email?);
- Are you able to maintain adequate engagement to offer effective and pastoral communications? (i.e. if you do not like conversing via digital mediums, does this affect your capability in offering effective support?);
- Are you able to pick-up on and translate language cues? (i.e. how face-to-face engagements allow people to recognise body language cues.) Are you competent in understanding the verbal/visual cues people may display in the digital medium you are participating in?
- Are you able to assess the person's needs in order to offer appropriate referrals to more specialised help, and be able to connect them to services if required?(e.g. if a person needs urgent help, such as medical treatment, are you able to connect them to emergency services?); and,
- Are you able to establish safe administrative skills? (e.g. adequate knowledge of the medium being used, secure chat archives, safe data storage, an email address solely for your own personal access and use, and appropriate password protections on your devices/programs).

Assessing your own competencies in digital communications (whether email, messaging, phone or video calls) may result in you offering an alternative method of communication. These alternative methods could be scheduling a different method of digital communications, or arranging a time to meet face-to-face with the individual. Along with digital competency, appointed leaders need practice age-appropriate communication methods (these are specifically outlined in the 'Age-Contextual Communications' table below).

Being able to establish boundaries of communication with your community is important. Appropriate personal boundaries may include:

- Specific mediums of preferred conversation (e.g. phone calls rather than messages, or vice versa);
- Time restrictions (e.g. no communications before/after a designated time);
- Different mediums for personal and professional communications (e.g. establishing a work phone alongside your personal phone; maintaining different social media accounts for personal and professional use; establishing distinct usernames/handles/avatars for personal and professional use; having a work email address alongside a personal email address).

Establishing these boundaries of communication is important to maintain safe and healthy

communications for you and all community members. It creates an understanding of your capacities and helps the community to establish realistic expectations. Remembering that what may be a boundary of communication for some people might not be for others, and respecting other's boundaries establishes safe and healthy connections for the whole community. Appointed leaders need to acknowledge their behaviour beyond community interactions, and as such, having different personal and professional modes of communication should always be treated as communication boundaries, not behavioural boundaries.

As a ministry agent, or appointed leader, it is important to acknowledge the power dynamics in communications. If you are facilitating a program/game/discussion that enables synchronous engagement between individuals, it is recommended that a minimum of two appointed leaders are present at all times (e.g. if you are broadcasting your sermon online, another appointed leader should be facilitating the chat; or, if you are running a discussion group in Zoom, a minimum of two leaders should be in the Zoom room).

In asynchronous engagement, it is important that communications can be kept securely and overseen by the leadership team. In some digital mediums this would include administrator access to effectively moderate content. Wherever possible, communicate electronically with groups rather than individuals. The best practice when sending emails or text messages is to include multiple people, such as the appointed leaders and parents/guardians where applicable.

If you're using social media, consider the purpose of ministry engagement and whether or not you are able to moderate the content effectively. If relying on social media as an avenue for event and program communication, consider limiting response avenues (i.e. turning off comments/limiting it to specific users). Being able to moderate content is key to effective digital communications; this includes making sure people are conscious of these communication limitations/boundaries so they're aware of how they can, or should, engage.

If you are seeking to engage community through asynchronous mediums (e.g. posts/stories/reels/blogs/websites) it is important that you have a minimum of two appointed leaders that have full administrator access.

If using the closed group model ensure a minimum of two appointed leaders are administrators of that group. Multiple appointed leaders provide transparency and safety for all people—this includes greater oversight of content being shared and greater oversight of how others engage with the content. This oversight is particularly important if your social media communications allow engagement (e.g. commenting, sharing posts, etc.) from those outside the ministry community.

If your medium of communication allows for wider engagement, everything you communicate is public and should always aim to build safe, healthy and genuine communities. It is important to avoid being divisive, showing favouritism or making others feel excluded or inferior.

In no situation do you, an appointed leader, or a community member represent the opinions of the Uniting Church. Though we each have personal opinions and convictions, it is important to remember that social media communications are public and

communal, and should not imply the Uniting Church's opinions on any political or social matter. If a journalist wants a comment on behalf of the Church, direct them to the manager of the Synod Communications and marketing team.

When connecting with community members via digital communications, it is important that you wait for them to initiate contact. If you are seeking a method of connection to help with event/program communications, asking for an email address/phone number is appropriate if they are over the age of 18. If under the age of 18 methods of communication should be sought through the parent/guardian. If a child gives you a phone number, email address or initiates contact with you via social media or a gaming platform, it is important that you communicate this with their parent/guardian. In some instances a parent/guardian may deem communication with their child/ren through a digital medium is okay; you must have consent for this communication in writing from the parent/guardian.

When adding community members into a closed group (e.g. texts, whatsapp, social media messaging group, email group, minecraft, etc.) it is important for leaders to follow the same principles addressed above. Best practice is for leaders to connect people into the group to ensure that no one is excluded, however, this is only to be done after consent is obtained from the individual, and parent/guardian where applicable. Appointed leaders should avoid social media connections that do not keep records (such as Snapchat, BeReal, etc.). Any contact information acquired should only be used for that specific ministry engagement.

In connecting with the community via digital media, it is important to consider your boundaries and be aware of any communication which is inappropriate or ambiguous. As part of a Christ-centred ministry, interactions need to be age and content appropriate, non-discriminatory, and inclusive.

• **Principle 2: Online engagement must be conducted in an open, transparent and age appropriate manner.**

Open and transparent environments should be considered in three areas of focus:

1. **Your physical environment.**

If you are communicating through digital mediums that require audio, the community should be aware of who can hear them. Being open and transparent about the people in your physical surroundings helps people know who they are talking to.

If you are communicating through digital media that are visual, it is important to be aware of what people can see, such as items/people/photos/posters that can be observed in your video background.

2. **Their physical environment.**

If a child is engaging with you via a digital medium, it is important to remember that a parent/guardian has oversight of the child's physical safety and wellbeing. Being explicit and open in communication with the parent/guardian helps to keep safety a priority and reminds parents/guardians that appointed leaders can only moderate what happens in the community forum; it is still the responsibility of the parent/guardian to moderate the child's access to wider internet exploration and communication.

3. **The digital community environment.**

It is the responsibility of the appointed leaders to moderate the digital medium effectively. This oversight is addressed Principle 1.

Creating open and transparent content and age appropriate environments across the three areas of focus above helps to establish safe communities for all people. Though digital communities connect people beyond the physical presence, it is still possible for abuse, grooming and misconduct to happen. In creating communities of trained leaders, informed parents/guardians and healthy behavioural and boundary expectations, we are working toward creating healthy, safe and live-giving communities for all people.

Don't ever hide your identity or pretend to be someone else. It is important to not confuse someone's username/handle/avatar with a means of deception. Having a username/handle/avatar is a feature, and an appropriate expression of one's digital identity. In digital communities it is important for members to be able to associate your username/handle/avatar to you. It is recommended to display your username/handle/avatar alongside your profile within a work setting (e.g. staff profile, email signature, etc.) or offer direct links that connect people to a specific platform. It is recommended that your username/handle/avatar is consistent across platforms to keep openness and transparency, as well as help to avoid confusion and increase a leader's findability. Connecting direct links from your work profile also protects you from clone and impostor accounts, as the links are directly connected to your profile.

If someone links/tags you in offensive or suggestive content make sure that you un-tag yourself as soon as possible.

Make sure to remove any comments or material that are vulgar, offensive or bullying in nature.

If you are sent an inappropriate image, DO NOT delete, forward or share the image. Immediately contact the Culture of Safety unit or Secretariat. They will advise you what to do. This may involve contacting the police.

- **Principle 3: Online engagement must create an environment in which all people 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. Communication across digital media/platforms/networks should always aim to build safe, healthy and genuine communities. As a ministry agent, or appointed leader, it is important to acknowledge the power dynamics in communications. Regardless of whether you are communicating in a public forum or within a closed group, it is important to acknowledge the public nature of these conversations. Everything you communicate is public and should avoid being divisive, showing favouritism or making others feel excluded or inferior. Be sensitive to the impact of the words and images you use, to avoid offence or miscommunication.

People have varying levels of digital competency (Addressed in Principle 1) and mistakes in understanding another's tone through various communication methods will happen. Exhibiting grace and offering forgiveness to those who slip up will assist and enhance any digital community. Try not to automatically assume the worst circumstance from a given message.

Establishing community boundaries and communication guidelines can help to maintain safe and healthy communications for you and all community members. These boundaries can help establish the expectations of appropriate or inappropriate actions. It is recommended that these boundaries are spoken of, written out clearly and are easily accessible by all community members.

Along with following the Ministerial Code of Ethics/Lay Leaders Code of Conduct, it is important to be conscious of how your digital actions may appear to others. To keep communications safe, respectful and above reproach one should never use flirtatious, sexually suggestive, explicit or offensive language, links or images. In all manners, try to avoid ambiguous comments, or comments that could be read with a double meaning. Be careful that your communication does not leave room for misinterpretation; even if your motives are appropriate, your intentions can be misunderstood (e.g. communicating at late hours).

Make sure you're able to effectively moderate and observe people's confidentiality and privacy. This includes not publishing the names, images, contact details or other personal

information of people online (even prayer points of individuals in handouts, or written on the screen during a broadcasted worship); 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 an email program (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 parents' or guardians' written permission, and the child is willing for the photo to be taken. Never share identifying details about a child online (this could include photos of them in their school uniform). 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 congregational activities where children are engaging, ensure that you obtain the parent/guardian's permission before children participate in online or digital groups. Operating within the wishes and permissions given by parents or guardians is a demonstration of respect.

Be aware that your obligations under Church policy regarding reportable conduct, the obligation to report 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. This means knowing your reporting obligations. If you ever are unsure, ask your Ministry Agent, Presbytery or the Culture of Safety Unit.

AGE-CONTEXTUAL COMMUNICATIONS

All digital communications with children should only occur if direct communication with the young person has been requested from the parent/guardian. Do not initiate connection (e.g, social media requests), rather wait for them to request communication first, and then confirm with the parent/guardian. Otherwise, all communications should go through the parent/guardian until permission has been granted to contact the child directly.

In any social media or gaming platform communication, it is important to acknowledge the user age limits.

Mode of communication	Upper Primary School	Years 7-9	Years 10-12 under 18 years
Phone calls (Audio)	Only if explicitly requested by the parent/guardian. Best option is to get the parent to initiate the call.	Long conversations should be avoided – stay focused on the ministry purpose for the call.	
Messaging and Emailing (Text & Image)	For logistical purposes only (e.g. mass communication about upcoming program).		For Logistical purposes (e.g. mass communication about upcoming program). Can offer messages of encouragement, remain transparent in communications.
Video calls, streaming calls, (where you can see people and they are part of a group)	Limited to group setting with at least two appointed leaders in the group; Parental supervision still required for child’s physical environment. (see Principle 2). Reminder to be wary of user age limits of specific programs, and treat all text/image and audio communications as addressed in the points above.		
Online Gaming (non betting)	If facilitating a game, it needs to be limited to group setting with at least two appointed leaders in the group; Parental supervision still required for child’s physical environment. (see Principle 2). If connection across gaming consoles requires ‘friending’ (e.g. Playstation, Nintendo, Xbox, etc.) or a connection across gaming platforms requires ‘friending’ (e.g. Minecraft, Animal Crossing, Tabletop Simulator, Pokemon Go, etc). it is important to gain parental/guardian permission before connection,. Reminder to be wary of user age limits of specific programs/games, and treat all text/image and audio communications as addressed in the points above.		
Social Media	Do not initiate connection, however, if a child over the age of 13 requests connection, gain parental/guardian permission before accepting. If a child under the age of 13 requests connection, it is important to notify		

	<p>the parent/guardian and not to accept – though user age limits vary across social media platforms, 13 is the most common age restriction across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, etc. Regardless of age, social media applications that do not allow for transparent and open communication storage (such as SnapChat, BeReal, etc.) should not be used.</p> <p>Treat all communications, whether through text/image or audio, as addressed in the points above.</p> <p>It is important to follow the recommendations written in the guidelines above.</p>
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TAKING, SHARING/USING PHOTOGRAPHS, NAMES and VIDEOS

Gaining permission	You must obtain written permission from the parent/guardian of all children prior to using them in any image/text/audio/video 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, then their image/name/voice/video must not be used. To assist, tools have been developed, refer to the Culture of Safety website.
Taking and sharing images	<p>Photos of children should focus on groups, and/or capturing the activity/program (e.g. worship, craft, etc).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. <p>When services or activities are being uploaded/distributed or livestreamed across any broadcasting media, program or website, one should make appropriate signs and/or notifications should be made to indicate the service is being, or will be, broadcast.</p>

DEFINITIONS

Term	Meaning
Child	A child is defined under the Child Protection Act 1999 as an individual under 18 years of age.
Digital media/medium	Refers to any technological application or virtual place where individuals can converse, exchange or broadcast ideas through visual, audio or written means
Ministry agent/appointed leader	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 these guidelines.

Social media	Social media uses digital media to build new connections, friendships and do business.
Transparent	Action, method, or procedure that lacks hidden agendas and conditions, and complies with the disclosure requirements of transparency in word and intention
Synchronous	refers to people gathering at the same time and (virtual or physical) place and interacting in “real-time”.
A-synchronous	refers to people accessing material at their own pace and interacting with each other over longer periods.