



Synod Social Media Self-Care Guide

This guide is suitable for:

- Uniting Church ministers with a social media presence.
- Uniting Church members, staff and volunteers who use social media.
- People who manage Uniting Church affiliated pages, such as congregation Facebook pages.

Social media has changed the way people discuss public issues. No longer are people's opinions confined to the letters page of a newspaper; the rise of social media has opened up conversations to a whole new virtual world.

Many people use social media to engage in lively discussions with other users, but it can also be a space where people are subjected to abuse, vitriol and hurtful comments.

You should feel safe on social media. You do not need to tolerate abuse and offensive comments.

This guide aims to offer advice on:

- How to protect yourself from online abuse.
- What to do if you encounter online abuse.
- How to help someone who is affected by online abuse.

Privacy measures

Most social media sites come with a range of tools to help you keep safe. Familiarise yourself with the suite of privacy options available so that you can safeguard yourself from online abuse before it happens.

Facebook

On Facebook, verbal arguments you have with a stranger will most likely occur on a public page rather than on your own personal profile. This is because the majority of users use their personal Facebook profile to have conversations with their Facebook friends. We therefore strongly recommend that you only accept Facebook friend requests from people you know.

You can change the privacy of your personal page by going to 'settings' and clicking the 'privacy' tab on the left-hand side. You can now determine who can view your posts, contact you, add you as a Facebook friend and search for you on Facebook.

The privacy settings for specific posts can also be adjusted on your timeline. This may be particularly useful if you want to limit the visibility of certain posts to a select group of people. Click on the icon next to your post's time stamp to adjust the visibility of your post.

Twitter

Given the public nature of Twitter, it is more likely you will encounter 'trolls' or aggressive comments from other users. These may be people who do not 'follow' you but who found your tweets because of a hashtag you used or through retweets.





On Twitter, you have the option to make your tweets 'private' so only people you have approved as your followers can see and interact with you and your tweets.

To change your tweet settings, click on your profile picture on the top right hand corner and select 'settings and privacy'. Tick 'protect my tweets' so that only those you approve will receive your tweets.

Instagram

Instagram generally has a stronger focus on lifestyle photos than news and politics. However, some users do engage in political commentary on Instagram, which may attract negative comments.

If your account is public, anyone can view and comment on your photos. If your account is private, only people you've approved as your followers will be able to like or comment on your photos and videos.

What to do when you receive online abuse

Because online abuse is subjective in nature, it is up to the individual to determine what course of action best suits them. We have provided a list of possible action steps below that you may wish to consider if you encounter online abuse.

Option 1: Ignore

Often the best way to respond is to not respond at all. Most people who send you offensive messages will leave you alone when you refuse to engage with them.

Option 2: Block

If a user is a persistent troll or if you do not want to be subjected to further attacks, you can block that person from interacting with you.

Facebook and Twitter can be slow to react to reports of online abuse, so it is advisable to be proactive and stop the harasser from contacting you again.

The block function is available in all major social media sites.

Option 3: Report the user

You can report a user if you receive or see a post, tweet or comment that includes: bullying, harassment, threats of violence and threats on the basis of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religious affiliation.

In most cases, a user will not be banned just because they post negative comments in a condescending or disrespectful manner. They will have to violate the official Facebook, Twitter or Instagram community standards in order to be banned.

Option 4: Leave social media

This may be a temporary or permanent option for some users. A social media 'detox' can be helpful for some people who feel emotionally overwhelmed by the comments they receive online.

Ministers who feature in mainstream media may suddenly find themselves bombarded with tweets and comments from the public, particularly if they are speaking out on a controversial issue. In some instances, it may be advisable to go quiet on social media for a short period of time by temporarily disabling your account. It may also be prudent to mute notifications on your social media apps so they do not always pop up on your phone.

You will notice that none of the options above involves engaging with the online harasser. This is because responding to trolls or abusive





comments will rarely achieve a desired outcome and in many cases will lead to further frustration or ammunition for people to attack you. Do not feed the trolls!

Page managers

If you are the manager of a church-affiliated social media account, you have a responsibility to make sure any defamatory and offensive comments posted on your page are hidden or deleted.

Creating a Facebook page means you are a publisher and you have an obligation to take reasonable steps to remove or moderate comments that constitute as defamation, harassment or bullying.

Refer to our **Dealing with Trolls and Angry Users guide** in this toolkit for more information.

Help someone affected by online abuse

If your friend is targeted online, there are a few steps you can take:

- Check up on them privately to see if they are okay, either through a phone call, private message or face-to-face meet up.
- Advise them not to retaliate or engage with the harasser.
- Avoid confronting the harasser and becoming abusive yourself.
- Suggest blocking the user who is posting abusive comments.
- Ask them if they want to take a break from social media, but understand if they do not wish to – for some people, shutting down their account can be seen as conceding ‘defeat’ or being ‘silenced’.
- Always listen without judging.

- Do not say to your friend that they are being “too sensitive” or that “it’s not that bad” – this can normalise harassment and invalidate the person’s feelings.
- It is important to acknowledge that the person targeted by the abuse is hurting.
- Report any harassment you see to the social media platform.
- Report any threatening messages to the police.
- Contact the Synod’s communications office at communications@victas.uca.org.au for support and advice.

