Ministers' Use of Social Media Policy & Guidelines

UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

1 Policy Statement

The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (the Synod) is committed to ensuring that anyone who has a formal relationship with the Church, including ministers, undertakes internal and external communications, including social media communications, that are responsible, respectful, and lawful.

2 Affirmations for using social media

We believe that the reputation of the Church as loving, hope-filled and welcoming demands calls us to be openly engaged and present as ministers of the gospel of Christ in social and other media platforms.

We encourage ministers to use social media to engage with the various communities with which they minister, and to utilise these ministry expressions in promoting the gospel of Christ.

We affirm social media and gaming platforms as valid places for mission and ministry.

We believe that all ministers are called to risk living the way of Christ in all community contexts, including social media and relational settings.

We believe that growing faith and offering pastoral ministry can be effectively undertaken online, including through the use of social media platforms.

We believe that lively debate is as valid on social media platforms as it is in study groups, with the same respect for maintaining respectful relationships and honouring diverse opinions.

We believe that evil should be called out at all times, including when expressed in social media, especially all forms of exclusion, discrimination and hate speech.

We believe that the life-giving reign of God should be conveyed, including in social media, in ways that evoke the love of Christ, the hope of the gospel as good news for all and grace for the broken, especially the downtrodden and least in our society and communities.

We affirm a posture of humility, engagement, curiosity and hope in all social media engagements.

3 Scope

This policy applies to all ministers, as defined in the Church's *Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice*, within the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

4 Objective

To provide direction to ministers for the responsible use of, respectful engagement through, lawful publication, and commentary on, social media.

5 Definitions

Definitions for the purposes of this policy are provided below.

'Social media' means any facility for online publication and commentary, including but not limited to, blogs, wikis, forums / online communities, social networking sites including, but not limited to, Facebook, LinkedIn, X, TikTok, Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Vimeo, YouTube.

'Minister' means Candidates, Community Ministers, Deacons, Deaconesses, Interns, Lay Pastors, Ministers of the Word, Pastors, Youth Workers, as described in the Church's Code of Ethics; and Ministers from another denomination serving in an approved placement (Reg 2.9.5).

'Church' means the Uniting Church in Australia.

'Code of Ethics' means the Church's *Code of Ethics for Ministry Practice*.

'Synod/We' means the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

6 Conditions of publishing or commenting via social media

Provided that ministers adhere to the conditions of this policy they are free to comment on, publish or otherwise engage in social media activities.

Conditions are as follows:

a) that the minister makes it clear that they are not speaking on behalf of the Church;
b) that positive conduct as described in Code of Ethics, particularly in Section 3, and communication standards that reflect such conduct, feature in all social media engagement by the minister;
c) that compliance is maintained with relevant legislation including copyright, privacy, and anti-discrimination legislation;
d) that no person is defamed. (Defamation comprises intentional false communication, either written or spoken, that harms a person's reputation; decreases the respect, regard, or confidence in which a person is held; or induces disparaging, hostile, or disagreeable opinions or feelings against a person.);
e) that information which is not in the public domain and/or confidential is not published;

7 Supportive document/policy

This policy and following guidelines are to be read and followed in conjunction with the:

(a) the Code of Ethics (insert hyperlink); and

(b) the VicTas Synod's Guidelines for Safe Ministry Using Digital Media (insert hyperlink) as approved by the Synod Standing Committee in December 2023. (These guidelines address a breadth of topics including appropriate child safe responses.)

8 Social Media Guidelines

To be read in conjunction with the Ministers' Use of Social Media Policy elements above.

(i) Acceptable activities

(a) Disclaimers

To help reduce the potential for confusion, if ministers are using their personal name account it is recommended that they prominently display and make it clear to readers that they are a UCA minister, and that the views expressed are the minister's – whilst reflecting the standards for ministerial practice in the Code of Ethics.

Ministers should be aware that even though they have made it clear that views are personal, the public may automatically assume they are speaking on behalf of the Church, particularly if the minister is in a leadership role. The public may also incorrectly interpret what is being said as Church policy when posts on topical issues are made.

(b) Protect privacy

Ministers should be mindful of posting information that they would not want the public to see.

(c) Respect Confidentiality

It is perfectly acceptable for ministers to share about their ministry and have a dialogue with the community, but it is not acceptable to publish confidential information. Proper care must be taken to not purposefully or inadvertently disclose any information that is confidential. If ministers are unsure about the confidentiality of any information, they should consult their supervisor and/or relevant presbytery officer.

(d) Respect the audience

Ministers should always use social media respectfully. This includes not only the obvious (no ethnic slurs, offensive comments, defamatory comments, personal insults, obscenity, etc.) but also proper consideration of privacy and of topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory. Remember that social media is read internationally, and topics and views that are acceptable in Australia, may have cultural sensitivities for audiences in other countries. This does not mean relevant subjects should be avoided, more that it is good practice to think about everyone who may have access to posts.

(e) Awareness of overlap between professional and personal relationships

It is recognised that ministers often include people they have met in ministry contexts in their social media contacts/lists. Therefore, ministers need to be conscious of making social media postings in lists that overlap between professional/ministry contexts and their personal relationships. Distinguishing between a personal post and pastoral/ministry comment can sometimes be difficult for recipients. Hence, as a way to strive for appropriate relationships with colleagues, councils of the Church, people in ministry contexts; and to exercise suitable teaching, professionalism, power, confidentiality, etc, it is very important for minsters to consider both the style and content of any and all social media posting(s) that they make. (See also point (k): Moving on from a placement/role [below] regarding regular and deliberate updating of personal social media accounts.)

(f) Respect copyright laws

It is critical that ministers show proper respect for the laws governing copyright and fair use or fair dealing of copyrighted material owned by others, including the Church's own copyrights and brands. Ministers should always attribute quotes or work to the original author/source. It is good general practice to link to others' work rather than reproduce it.

(g) Be Honest

Do not blog anonymously, using pseudonyms, or false screen names. Transparency and honesty are paramount in social media use. Ministers should use their real name and be clear about who they are. Ministers should not say anything that is dishonest, untrue, or misleading.

(h) Use of avatars/handles/usernames

Ministers who use an avatar/handle/username for ministry-related purposes must ensure that they are identifiable.

(i)   Controversial Issues

If ministers see misrepresentations made about the Church in the media and wish to point that out, always do so with respect and with the facts. If ministers speak about others, they should ensure what is said is factual and that it does not disparage that party.

(j)   Be the first to respond to and 'own' mistakes

If a minister makes an error, they should be up front about their mistake and correct it quickly. If someone accuses a minister of posting something improper (such as their copyrighted material or a defamatory comment about them), the minister should deal with it quickly, and remove/change it immediately. Being transparent and honest regarding mistakes is the only good way to practice social media.

(k)   Moving on from a placement/role

If a minister is changing their placement/role they should ensure that updates are made to personal social media profiles to reflect this.

(l)   The law

The Synod requires all ministers to respect Australian and State laws relating to cyber bullying, cyber stalking, cybercrime, and child abuse and sexual grooming. Grooming can include conduct online, for example via interaction through social media, web forums and emails. Many perpetrators of sexual offences against children purposely create relationships with victims, their families or carers in order to create a situation where abuse could occur.

https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/safer-communities/protecting-children-and-families/grooming-offence

(ii) Unacceptable activities

(a) Trolling activity

Trolling is a form of online stalking in which someone targets another online user for the purpose of subjecting them to intimidation, harassment, abuse, bullying, embarrassment, shame, demeaning comment, or similar outcome. Thus, a troll will pro-actively seek victims whose social media they can disrupt with abusive comments, or whose posts or images they can copy and reproduce elsewhere for the purpose of either inciting other people to engage in trolling behaviour, or otherwise cause distress or harm to the victim. Ministers should not undertake trolling activity.

(b) Click-baiting

Click-baiting is when someone makes a deliberatively provocative comment or post and waits for people to 'take the bait'. This behaviour is unacceptable in any social media practice. Ministers should not undertake click-baiting activity.

(c) Doxxing

Doxxing is a form of cyberbullying that uses sensitive or secret information, statements, or records for the harassment, exposure, financial harm, or other exploitation of targeted individuals. This behaviour is unacceptable in any social media practice. Ministers should not undertake doxxing activity.

Approved by: VicTas Synod Standing Committee: *13 April 2024 (SC 24.17.14C)*
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