

Ministers' Use of Social Media Policy & Guidelines

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 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.

3 Objective

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

4 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 such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, TikTok, Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Vimeo, Periscope, and 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 for Ministry Practice; 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' means the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

5 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 compliance is maintained with relevant legislation including copyright, privacy, and anti-discrimination legislation;
- c) 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.);
- d) that the reputation of the Church is not brought into disrepute;
- e) that information which is not in the public domain and/or confidential is not published;
- f) that use of social media is in accordance with responsibilities and obligations outlined in the Church's *Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice*.

6. Social Media Guidelines

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

(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 ministers to consider both the style and content of any and all social media posting(s) that they make. (See also point 11: Moving on [below] regarding regular and deliberate updating of personal social media accounts.)

(f) Consciousness of trolling-like activity

Trolling is when someone makes a deliberately provocative comment or post and waits for people to 'take the bait'. This behaviour is unacceptable in any social media practice. Also, it does not reflect the values and themes expressed within the Church's Code of Ethics. Ministers should not undertake

trolling-like activity, and should always strive to be respectful and courteous in any social media environment.

(g) 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.

(h) 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.

(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

If a minister is changing their placement 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>

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