Diocese of Fairbanks Social Networking and Technology Policy

This policy is designed to aid church personnel in determining appropriate boundaries in regards to their use of technology within their ministerial relationships.

2015

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In the interest of making the use of technology safe for young people and ministry leaders, the following policy, and best practices will serve as a supplement to existing diocesan policies on Safe Environment, Policies for Activities with Children & Youth and the Pastoral Code of Conduct. In this document, "church personnel" is defined as anyone—priest, deacon, religious, bishop, lay employee, or volunteer—who provides ministry or service or is employed by an entity associated with the Diocese of Fairbanks .

Introduction

Church leaders, including Pope Benedict XVI, articulate the clear need to use new technologies to express the Word of God to all people in all generations. This is articulated as well in the *National Directory for Catechesis* as it states that, "using the media correctly and competently can lead to a genuine inculturation of the Gospel" (*NDC* 21). It further calls for:

- Training of pastoral ministers to be specialists in communications technology
- State-of-the-art productions centers
- Communication networks (NDC 21).

It is important to remember that all principles of maintaining appropriate boundaries in person-to-person communication must be applied to electronic communication as well.

The enclosed policy is designed to aid church personnel in determining appropriate boundaries in regards to their use of technology within their ministerial relationships.

Values to Guide Pastoral Practice

As church personnel employ new ways to reach out to young people (and others), questions may arise as to the proper use of such technology and social networking media. Additionally, communication technologies and the Internet will continue to evolve and school personnel, religious educators, and youth ministry leaders will need to keep pace with the latest tools and potential threats. The development of comprehensive policies that strike a balance between safety and pastoral effectiveness must be guided by three essential values. We must ask ourselves if the use of such technology is prudent, reasonable, and transparent.

Prudence encourages forethought and weighs the merit of the technology and its attending policies in light of pastoral effectiveness and potential risks. Policies and certain technologies may be deemed *reasonable* if the use is practical, sound, and considered a normative practice or standard. Lastly, being *transparent* requires that all we do is open to the scrutiny of others and that the use of technology and subsequent policies be clear, intelligible, and observable.

With this balance the ability to train, share new ministry techniques, communicate, and evangelize will be enhanced and continue to be an advantage for our parishes, schools, and ministries.

Church and Ministry Websites

- Catholic parishes, schools, and organizations should make every effort to establish an organizational website and commit to regularly updating the content.

- Web content should consistently represent the views/teachings of the Catholic Church.

- Public websites should not contain personal and/or contact information about young people.

- Written permission must be attained prior to posting photographs, or other identifying information, of minors/young people on websites. When posting photographs of minors/young people, it is advisable to caption the photographs using only the individuals' first name.

- A minimum of two adults functioning with an official organizational capacity should have full access to all organizational account/site(s).

- No personal photographs or information of parish, school or organizational staff or volunteers should appear on any page/site. This includes family pictures, social events, home phone numbers and addresses, and personal e-mail accounts, etc.

- The official organizational logo or standard images should appear on the site to distinguish it as the organization's official site, and not that of a specific person.

- Communication with visitors to the site should be done through official organizational e-mail.

E-Mail and Text/Instant Messaging

- Good judgment should always be used with text based communication tools.

- Parents should be informed of the use of e-mail or instant messaging for communications purposes with minors, and that it is a standard part of youth ministry.

- Church personnel should maintain separate e-mail accounts for professional/church and personal communications. Home or personal accounts should not be used when communicating parish, school, or organizational business.

- The same boundaries observed in oral/personal communication should be adhered to when communicating via e-mail/text messages. E-mail, text messages, and instant messages can be logged, archived, and forwarded to other parties. Avoid engaging in any postings/communications that could be misconstrued or misinterpreted.

- There should be clear parameters with regard to times of communication between adults and young people. While young people may be on the phone/texting in the late evening hours, church personnel, especially those who minister with young people, should pre-determine a timeframe when it is too late to take a professional call, except in the case of serious urgency.

- Communications should be professional bearing in mind that they are acting on behalf of the parish, school, or organization to young people.

- E-mail and instant messaging should only be used with the matters that deal with one's professional relationship. Communicate only about matters relative to the ministry (i.e., parish, school, or organizational matters or pastoral care matters that are appropriate for discussion.)

- Care should be taken to maintain professionalism and appropriate boundaries in all communication. Do not overstep the boundaries of adult/youth relationships.

- Avoid any communication which might be construed as having sexual overtones. Do not reply to any such e-mail received from teens; make and keep a copy of any such inappropriate communication and notify an administrator/pastor/supervisor if necessary.

- Write as though others will read what is written. Messages may easily be shared or forwarded with students and others. Always double check messages to see if someone reading it might read something into it that is not intended or if your message might be misinterpreted. If you think an e-mail might somehow be misunderstood, do not send it. Do not send messages in haste or when emotions are involved.

- There is no such thing as a private e-mail/instant message. All such communications are organizational in nature, may be viewed by the organization at any time, and may be subject to legal action.

- Church personnel should save copies of conversations whenever possible, especially those that concern the personal sharing of a teen or young adult. (This may be especially important with text messaging.)

- Ask, "If my bishop/pastor/principal asked to see this communication, would I be embarrassed by what I have written?" If the answer is "yes," do not send the message.

Social Networking Websites

Social media has become the standard form of communication in the United States, especially among youth and young adults. Our Church cannot ignore it, but at the same time we must engage social media in a manner that is safe, responsible, and civil.

General Ministerial Social Networking

- Include a Code of Conduct that should be posted on social networking sites for visitors to the site. These codes should always be brief and immediately apparent to visitors. Visitors should also be made aware of the consequences of violations of the Code of Conduct. Always block anyone who does not abide by the Code of Conduct.

- Trust your instincts on blocking repeat offenders of a site's Code of Conduct. Argumentative participants can easily change the tone of every post. Do not allow those unwilling to dialogue to hold your site and its other members hostage. In particular situations, the moderator might determine it is best to ask a member to take a conversation "offline." These offline conversations can be conducted in person, over the telephone, or through private e-mail. The site moderators should be able to refer to the appropriate resources, such as the pastor, diocesan director, regional coordinator etc. .

- Church personnel will establish separate sites and pages for personal and ministerial use. A personal page is "created by employees, clerics, and volunteers primarily to share personal communication with friends and associates" . While a ministerial page is "created by employees, clerics, and volunteers for the sole purpose of conducting diocesan/affiliate business."

- Be aware of the terms of use, age restrictions, and privacy options and controls for each site prior to establishing a ministry presence.

- Passwords and names of sites should be registered in a central location, with more than one adult having readily access to this information.

- A minimum of two adults functioning with an official organizational capacity should have full access to all ministerial social networking sites. Both adults should be registered to have e-mail alerts of page activity sent to their official organizational e-mail addresses. This allows for a quicker response time to urgent requests and helps to ensure that all postings are appropriate.

- On the original social networking site, the "no tagging" option should be set.

- Personal photographs or information of parish, school or organizational staff or volunteers should not appear on any page/site. This includes family pictures, social events, home phone numbers and addresses, personal e-mail accounts, etc.

- Identify yourself. Only authorized personnel can use the name of the parish, program, etc., as your identity, unless authorized to do so.

- Remember to write in first person. Only authorized personnel can claim to represent the official position of the organization or the teachings of the Church.

- The official organizational logo or standard images should appear on the site to distinguish it as the organization's official site, and not that of a specific person.

- Abide by copyright, fair use, and IRS financial disclosure regulations.

- Report unofficial sites that carry the diocesan or parish logo to the appropriate diocesan office and the pastor. It is important that the owner (the diocese or the parish) is able to protect its brand and identity.

Special Considerations for Social Networking with Minors

Those who minister and work in pastoral settings with adolescents—youth ministry and catechetical leaders, pastors, teachers, school staff, and catechists—have long understood that our ministerial efforts are to be relational. In *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Youth Ministry,* it is expressed that, prosperous ministry with adolescents is, and has always been, built on relationships and effective communication.

The vision for youth ministry as identified by the U.S. bishops and others, clearly calls for the evangelization and catechesis of the young. The inculturation of the Gospel—in language and forms accessible to younger generations—is a complex, but essential task. For evangelization to be effective, it must "use their language, their signs and symbols, . . . answer the questions they ask, and . . . [have impact] on their concrete life" (EN 63).

Respecting the Role of the Parents

Those who minister with youth must recognize the importance of the role of the parents when dealing with all technological forms of communicating with their young people. A parent must never have cause to be concerned about church personnel subjugating the primacy of the role of the parents. Therefore:

- Obtain permission from a minor's parent or guardian before contacting the minor via social media or before posting pictures, video, and other information that may identify that minor.

- Parents should be informed that a social networking site is being utilized as a standard part of the ministry.

- Parents must have access to everything provided to their children. For example, parents should be made aware of how social media are being used, be told how to access the sites, and be given the opportunity to be copied on all material sent to their children via social networking (including text messages). While parents should be provided with the same material as their children, it does not have to be via the same technology (that is, if children receive a reminder via Twitter, parents can receive it in a printed form or by an e-mail list).

Social Networking with Youth

- Church personnel should save copies of conversations whenever possible, especially those that concern the personal sharing of a teen or young adult. (This may be especially important with text messaging.)

- Become aware of the ***Children's Online Privacy Protection Act*** , which is federal legislation that oversees how websites interact with children under age 13.

- Church personnel will establish separate sites and pages for personal and ministerial use.   A personal page is "created by employees, clerics, and volunteers primarily to share personal communication with friends and associates" . While a ministerial page is "created by employees, clerics, and volunteers for the sole purpose of conducting diocesan/affiliate business."

- There is a difference between initiating a "friend request" and accepting one. Friend/connection requests should be initiated by the young people, not the adult representative of the parish, school, and/or organization.

- In photographs of youth activities, youth should not be "tagged," or identified by name in the photograph.

- Because of the potential of teen crises or time relevant information, the page should be monitored frequently by official organizational personnel. A plea for help that goes unanswered can be legally damaging to the parish, school, and/or organization and dangerous for teens and their families.

Personal Social Networking and Ministerial Concerns

- Personal sites of church personnel should also reflect Catholic values. Businesses are cautioning their employees that, while employees have a right to privacy and confidentiality regarding what their employers know about them, an employee's use of social networking—because of its very nature—means he or she relinquishes some privacy and could be construed as representing the company's ethics and values. Likewise, church personnel should be encouraged to understand that they are witnessing to the faith through all of their social networking, whether "public" or "private."

- Church personnel utilizing social networking sites, either for ministerial or personal use, must be vigilant in representing themselves as ministers of the Catholic Church in all interactions that can be viewed publicly. Anything that could cause scandal to the ministry should be avoided. Such may include mention of inappropriate use of alcohol, advocacy of inappropriate music/movies, inappropriate language, inappropriate dress, or the expression of opinions that are contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

- Know that even personal communication by church personnel reflects the Church. Practice what you preach.

Blogging

- Professional, ministry based blogs should only be utilized to promote upcoming events or programs and for the purpose of evangelization and providing resources and information within the ministry setting. Such blogs should not be used to conduct or promote outside business and/or personal activities, and should not divulge any personal information regarding those being ministered to.

- Extreme care should be taken that information regarding personal blogs not be made available to minors.

- As in all professional/ministerial settings, posted information, opinions, references, and resources should reflect the teachings of the Catholic Church.

- Communications should be professional and are being rendered on behalf of the parish, school, or organization.

- Blogs are an efficient method for disseminating fliers for upcoming activities, permission/consent forms, calendars, and ministerial updates.

- Other possible uses include: posting links and references for faith formation; communicating sacramental preparation information or parent resources; communicating daily Scripture passages, prayers, or spiritual links/resources.

- If minors are to engage in blogging as a part of an officially sanctioned organizational activity; such activity must be monitored by at least 2 adults, no youth should be identified by name or other personal information, and the content of such a blog must be in compliance with Catholic Church teaching and values.

Online Video and Chat Rooms

- The use of chat rooms is not encouraged, however if the necessity arises there must be two authorized adults over the age of 25 in the chat room. The adults must have completed background checks and Safe Environment training.

- It is recommended that streaming video be used for education, communication, and promotional purposes.

- Any use of live streaming or chat rooms that leads to, supports, or encourages exclusive youth-adult relationships is not recommended.

- When posting videos online, extreme care must be taken to protect the privacy of young people, and such videos should only be utilized to showcase/advertise ministry related events and activities.

- At no time is one-on-one video or chat room interaction appropriate between adults and minors.

- When presenting personal opinions and engaging in chats/discussions, it is essential for church personnel to remember that even on the World Wide Web, others may recognize them.

Enforcement and Violations

These policies are meant to be illustrative of the range of acceptable and unacceptable uses of Internet Facilities and is not necessarily exhaustive. Questions about specific uses related to issues not enumerated in this document should be directed to the appropriate diocesan director. The Diocese will review violations on a case-by-case basis.