**Electronic Communication Recommendations**

For the purposes of this document, “Electronic Communication” refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to advance interactive communication–both public and private uses–and includes, but is not limited to, the use of social media platforms, instant messaging, texting, emailing, and video chat.

The use of electronic communication allows people to stay connected with one other. Modern technology can be a helpful tool for ministry. However, as with all forms of ministry, inherent risks are involved with the use of electronic communications. While there is no way to eliminate all risk, following the recommendations below can help ministry leaders, particularly those in ministries with children and vulnerable adults, to minimize the risk and to make informed decisions when higher risk actions are necessary (such as in emergency situations).

# General Best Practices

* **Assume anything and everything in cyberspace is public information**.

Once something is posted on the internet, or sent via email, messaging, or text, it is impossible to fully recover or erase it. There should be no expectation of privacy or reasonable expectation that the information stops with the person for whom it was intended. A good rule of thumb: If you don’t want it posted on the church sign, website, or bulletin, do not text it or post it via social media.

* **Utilize electronic communication to promote Christian community and the building up of authentic relationships.**
* It is highly recommended that ministry groups establish their own “page” in order to communicate with group members, as well as their parents/legal guardians/caregivers where relevant.
* Blogs allow adults and older children a place to express ideas, thoughts and opinions, and to allow others the opportunity to engage them through response.
* YouTube and other video websites are useful for sharing video clips from any number of church-related events, sharing original video produced to promote an upcoming event or idea, or sharing video produced by another individual or group that might be used by your ministry for conversation, worship, or reflection.
* Texting and Tweeting are effective means of communication for getting a message out quickly to one individual or to an entire group.
* **Minimize the posting of identifiable information. For example:** 
  + Use the “Bcc” option (blind carbon copy) when emailing a group of people so that each recipient sees only his or her address when a message is received.
  + Be cautious when transmitting easily identifiable information about specific participants and when they might be present at a particular event.
  + Limit what is communicated in prayer requests. When placing anyone on an electronic prayer list, consider using only first names.
* **Use caution when sharing photos.** 
  + Consider using stock or purchased photos.
  + Obtain all necessary legal permission to use photos or other content (poems, songs, etc.).
  + If sharing photos, refrain from using names (especially last names) or other personally identifiable information.
  + Check photos for vulnerable/compromising situations and to make sure they uphold your mission.
  + Check to make sure nametags are not distinguishable.
  + Use low-resolution photos whenever possible and slightly blur/pixilate photos and/or add a watermark or logo.
  + Block "save photo as" options on websites.
  + Limit access to photos by employing the use of a password.
* **Similarly, use caution when livestreaming worship or other events.**
* **Do not engage in the creation, viewing or distribution of pornography.**
* Engaging in such behavior is a violation of civil laws and clergy ethics and can lead to incarceration and the revocation of clergy credentials.
* **Refrain from engaging in, encouraging, or condoning electronic harassment or cyberbullying.** 
  + Behaviors that constitute electronic harassment include, but are not limited to, online or electronic comments that are derogatory with respect to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, color, or disability; sexually suggestive, humiliating, or demeaning comments; and threats to stalk, haze, or physically injure another person.
  + Cyberbullying is bullying (intentional, repeated, hurtful acts, words, or other behavior on the part of one or more other individuals) utilizing technology (including email, social networking sites, texts, websites, gaming sites, chat rooms, or blogs). Cyberbullying can include disclosure of personal, humiliating, or embarrassing information about another person without permission to share or fraudulent use of another person’s internet accounts. It can also become cyberstalking, in which cyberbullying is carried out in a pattern of events and/or behavior that creates extreme emotional distress over an extended period of time.
  + Volunteer training should include a session on the types and consequences of cyber-bullying, including how to identify it and how to report it.
  + Ministry groups for vulnerable people (such as children’s ministries, youth ministries, and groups for vulnerable adults) should offer developmentally appropriate guidance on how to avoid these behaviors and encouragement to report them if and when they occur.
* Friend Requests, Follow Requests, Circle Requests, etc. between leaders of a ministry and participants in that ministry should generally be initiated by the participant, especially if the participant is a child or vulnerable adult.
* Pastors should use extraordinary care to maintain appropriate pastoral boundaries when leaving one faith community and moving into another. At the time of a move, pastors need to create room for new relationships with the members of the new church; the constant reminders of the very recent past are not helpful. Furthermore, the intrusion of the former pastor, however unintentional, in the social media lives of former congregants is not a collegial thing to do. In this hyperconnected age, making space for a new pastor is not as easy as it once was, and it requires care and intentionality. (Adapted from the North Georgia Digital Move Checklist for Clergy.)

# Best Practices in Communication with Children and Vulnerable Adults

* **Obtain advance written parent/legal guardian permission.** In addition to general permission to participate in a conference ministry or event, obtain written or electronic advance parent/legal guardian permission for children and youth, and personal permission from vulnerable adults or their guardian if applicable, for:
  + Taking and using photos or videos of participants, for example, posting on sites, sending by email or by cell phone, reproducing photos in brochures, posters or newspapers.
  + Communicating or transmitting data electronically with children or vulnerable adults, including in group text blasts or chats.
  + Sending out a contact list which includes full names or other personal information.
* Any conversations with minors or vulnerable adults shall occur in open channels. When emailing, texting, tweeting, or Facebook messaging a minor, adults should copy another adult (ideally a parent or guardian) on the message or post it in a public venue (e.g. a Facebook wall as opposed to a private message). This will allow adults to maintain the “two adults present” Safe Sanctuaries standard when using social media.
  + When legitimate, private, electronic communications are necessary (e.g., in an emergency situation), they should be documented.
* Social media, even though it offers convenient and private channels, is not an appropriate medium for counseling - especially with minors. Begin or transition a pastoral conversation into an approved Safe Sanctuary model (e.g., office with windows, two adult rule abiding settings, etc.).
* **Do not collect online, or allow third parties to collect online, personal information from children under the age of 13. See Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (“COPPA”) and Federal Trade Commission Rules implementing COPPA (the "Rule").** COPPA and the Rule require specific permissions and privacy policies if a website or online service collects, or allows third parties to collect, personal information if the service is directed to children under the age of 13. Restrictions also apply if the site is directed to a general audience and the organization has actual knowledge that it collects personal information from children under 13 years of age.
* When checking in on Foursquare, Facebook, or any location tagging social media, only “check in” yourself. Never check in minors. Be sensitive to tagging or revealing other participants’ location without their expressed permission. Rather, create a hashtag to facilitate conversation.

# Best Practices for Digital Groups

* **Use a group social media site that is monitored by at least two moderators/administrators.** 
  + If an administrator leaves the ministry, that individual’s administrative status must be revoked.
  + Include a code of conduct/terms and conditions for the site that expressly states expectations for posts and a clear expression of how violations, offensive and objectionable material will be addressed.
  + Photos may only be posted to the Facebook page by page administrators. Adults (staff, volunteers, parents, etc.) should not identify children in photographs posted online or in print. Individuals (including children) are welcome to identify (“tag”) themselves.
  + Monitor the site and remove inappropriate comments, photos, links, etc.
  + Restrict who can be a friend.
  + Do not post anything that you would not want printed in the newspaper, church newsletter or bulletin.
  + Be familiar with, and comply with, social media provider policies, restrictions and terms and conditions. For example, according to Facebook’s own terms, children under 13 years of age may not sign up for a Facebook account.
  + Encourage children, youths, and vulnerable adults to follow these same guidelines as appropriate.

**Administrators for social media groups** **and pages related to ministries for children under 18** should utilize controls available through the particular social media platform to restrict membership and participation in such groups to approved members.