

Faith Community Considerations: Social Networking

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“I don’t post anything on my Facebook page that would not be acceptable to my mother and my Bishop.” –a local pastor

The explosion of the use of social networking technology creates many opportunities for ministry and also brings significant challenges. The lines between public and private have become blurred; the boundaries between faith leaders and congregants have become confused. In this environment, it is easy for naïve faith leaders to inadvertently cross boundaries in ways that may be harmful or certainly not helpful to congregants. It is also easy for predatory faith leaders to use this technology to exploit congregants.

How can we begin to think critically about our choices in the use of the social networking technology so that it builds up our faith communities as healthy and safe places rather than undercutting the integrity of our faith communities?

Guiding Principles: Transparency, Screening, and Monitoring

- Does the faith community have an internet use policy or procedure that addresses employee and leadership engagement in social networks?
- If so, does it speak to professional and private/individual communications, disclaimers and the faith community’s expectations?
- Are the community’s rules on public speech and private speech clear?
- Have relationship dynamics been considered in relationship to leadership “friending,” “unfriending” or seeking access to other members of the leadership team or members of the community within the social networks?
- Can the information gained by leadership via a social network be used to make employment decisions such as hiring, firing, promotions and demotions?
- What is the community’s liability exposure for the actions, statements, or oversight of its leadership that is engaged in social networks on the internet?
- Is there a checks and balances for how supervision will be conducted?
- How does the policy deal with supervision of the leadership that is responsible for vulnerable populations?
- Are there safeguards in place to identify predatory leaders who may have unfettered access to not only your population, but to their social networks by virtue of their position and the community’s virtual presence?

Practical Applications: Social Networks

Objective: The fostering of accountable and responsible leadership and healthy communities.

1. Regularly monitored by Senior Leadership for:

- How is the site being utilized?
- What is being posted?
- How is assigned leadership
 - Responding to the post
 - Interacting with the community
 - Managing the site, and
 - Utilizing the internet
- Guidance opportunities
 - Training
 - Reflection
 - Corrective action

Objective: Management and Accountability

2. Friend request and Site Management:

- Does every requestor receive copy of the code of conduct that expressly states the expectations for post, a covenant of understanding, and a clear explanation of how violations, offensive and objectionable material will be addressed?
- Are requestor pages reviewed before being approved?
- Does the site moderator have sole discretion to determine what material is objectionable or offensive and when a violation has taken place?
- Does the site explicitly state that any and all posts are public information and that there are no expectations of privacy or confidentiality of any party utilizing this method of communication?
- Is it clear that no information posted on the site maybe used without the written permission of the author?

Objective: When working with vulnerable populations in an arena that is changing daily, accountability, responsibility, and transparency are foundational.

3. Community's screening policy:

- What is the policy for screening anyone outside the target demographic that is unknown to the community before allowing them access to the site?
- Is it prudent to only accept friend requests and to prohibit solicitation of them?
- If parents or guardians of the target population are welcomed at actual meetings or gatherings, is the same true with regards to any virtual meeting place?
- What other measure are available to create a transparent atmosphere?

Individual Assessment

- Does the establishment of a public page and a private page solve the dilemma of the line being blurred between the personal and the professional?
- What challenges arise from mixing public and private time, or public and private space?
- What are the implications of some members/students/followers/ spouses being friended or are granted access to your private page while others are excluded?
- Regardless of the character of the virtual identity, how do you manage content on your site, both your own content and the content that others post on your site and its dissemination?
- What are the parameters for political speech on your page?
- How might the increase of your knowledge of about your congregants' private lives through social networking be detrimental to your ability to serve effectively as a spiritual leader?
- Conversely, what happens to your ability to lead when the protective boundary between the leadership and followers has been effectively removed?
- What can you share and what pushes or violates appropriate boundaries, and how will you know when it happens?
- Is there anything about your engagement that could lead another to believe her/his communications to be confidential in nature?
- Are there legal implications for your community that can flow from what you do and say in the virtual world?
- Does your presence in the virtual world alter the realistic expectations of your community about your availability and or responsibility to the community?
- How do you handle former congregants when you are no longer their pastor but they are part of your virtual community?
- How much of your time is devoted to the utilization of technology demands and what is being sacrificed because of it?