GUIDANCE DOCUMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUR CHURCH WEBSITE

The Connexion website serves to provide information on the Connexion itself and the churches that make up the connexion. In this regard, information visible to the casual enquirer or researcher to the website has no risk for individuals, churches, or the Connexion itself. Information that is not for public disclosure (Church administrator or Trustee documents) is password protected.

As many churches now have their own websites, searches on pages for Connexion churches will show up to date links to those sites. By clicking on those links, the enquirer will go directly to the church website.

Some discussion dialogue is provided below, adapted to our UK church environment, followed by the recommended policy:

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Many more helpful opinions are available on the web.

Today there is a growing trend towards blogging (personal websites or online diaries) where others can comment on what you post. Facebook is one of the most well known social media sites with others such as Linkedin, Bebo, Ning, Myspace, Tumblr and so on, each having particular focuses, freedoms but also pitfalls. Twitter is a micro blogging site (140 characters) that can also be linked to pictures and other sites. Flickr, YouTube and Vimeo allow sharing of pictures but also have the risk of others commenting on uploaded material.

Whether for professional or personal reasons, it can be wise to take advantage of these social networking opportunities. However, there can be serious disadvantages to these mediums. Like most good tools they are effective when used properly ... but they will cause damage if used incorrectly.

Unfortunately there are cautionary tales. People have been dismissed for careless Facebook posts. Others have not been employed because potential employers saw disconnect between a candidate's resume and their Facebook profile. Closer to home, members of the congregation can be hurt (sometimes unintentionally) by Tweets and writings on Facebook walls.

Learning to deal with new communications tools is nothing new. When the phone was first invented, it took people a while to figure out proper etiquette. How early or how late can you call someone? What subjects were okay to discuss on the phone and what should wait for in-person dialog? We've long since worked through these things and are now very comfortable with the phone.

It was the same with e-mail. How long should you take to reply to an e-mail? CAN YOU WRITE IN ALL CAPS OR IS THAT SHOUTING? Just like with the phone, we have worked through these things and e-mail is now second nature.

There is no doubt that use of social media is also becoming second nature. However, it is changing all the time. Etiquette and best practices are still being determined. In the meantime, how do we get the benefits of social media and avoid its pitfalls? The following guiding principles can help.

Be the same person you are online as you are in real life.

Sites like Second Life and the general anonymity of the internet can be a trap. There really can't be an "online you" and a "real you." This is the very definition of phony. People pick up on this quickly. Being the same person online and in real life gives your relationships consistency and integrity.

Remember the limitations of the written word.

How many times have you written an e-mail, only to have the person on the other end misinterpret what you wrote? We all learned pretty quickly that e-mails don't come with non-verbal communication and voice inflection ... important things needed to impart meaning. Whoever invented the e-mail happy face J is brilliant. At least we can flag our own sarcasm or humor before it gets misinterpreted. Now with social media, the shortcomings of what you write can be seen by not just one e-mail recipient but the whole world. Extra attention to clarity can help avoid unnecessary hurt or offense. The unfortunate reality of social media is that if something can be misinterpreted it probably will be.

If they will say it to you, they will say it about you.

There is wisdom in determining the point at which the usefulness of sharing personal information ends and gossip begins. Information appropriately shared can build personal connection and encourage relationships. When information is inappropriately shared, it instantly tears down relationships. Be careful when sharing information about yourself or others ... and beware of people who inappropriately share information with you (they will inappropriately share your information with others).

Wait ten seconds before pressing "send".

Never write when you are angry, tired or distracted. Re-read what you write and wait ten seconds before posting.

The bad guys are watching.

If you post information that you are on vacation, robbers know your house is unguarded. If you post your birth date and year of high school graduation, identity thieves have a key piece of information. If you are in the public eye and make a vulnerable post, an ill-intentioned blogger will take advantage. While we don't always like to think of it this way, as people of faith we know there are bigger forces at work. Satan's favorite tools are personal offense and deception ... both of which easily come into play with social media (Ephesians 6:12).

Photos posted online particularly create areas of vulnerability to peer pressure and this area should be treated with caution, particularly where children are involved.

Have a Church Policy.

While these guiding principles help, you should consider putting a formal church Facebook policy and church blogging policy in place. The time to consider having guidelines is before trouble begins. Churches have to answer some important questions:
- • Is a church leader's blog personal or part of their work at the church?
- • In the real world, do congregation members understand the differences between a personal blog or
  Facebook page and one done professionally?
- • Should a church leader blog or Facebook about political views?
- • Is the church open to criticism when a leader writes about movies, music, relationships or experiences
  that may not be universally agreed upon as appropriate? Is there broad understanding in your church about what is "not negotiable" or "negotiable" in a believer's life? Where is there to be unity and where is there to be liberty?
- • Do church limitations on written expression drive leaders away?
- • If blogging or updating Facebook is part of ministry should it be done on work time? Is the line between
  personal and professional social networking too blurry to define?
- • Should staff members or lay leaders put church logos and materials their personal blogs or social media pages?

Social media Policy " xxx The Connexion Church"

The church values the potential good that comes from personal web pages, social networking pages, blogs, texting, instant messaging, e-mail and other forms of electronic social networking/communication.

At the same time it is recognized that misunderstanding, personal offense, hurt, legal exposure and damage to the church community can potentially accompany use of these mediums.

The Apostle Paul instructs that "Everything is permissible but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others." With the principles of 1 Corinthians 10:23-33 in mind, all church employees and lay leaders should abide by the following communication guidelines:

Ensure Integrity: Your electronic communications should be consistent with the teaching of scripture and the values of the Christian Church. Do not say anything

online that you wouldn't say face to face as a representative of the church (Proverbs 10:9). If a public dialog gets heated, stop using a public forum and make the conversation private (Matthew 18:15-17).Ministry leaders are expected to have the foresight to anticipate, within reason, how their words and/or actions may be perceived by their audience and to those under their care.

Offer a Disclaimer: When you are in a position of church leadership, people don't easily distinguish between your personal and professional behaviors. Your name and the church are always linked in people's minds. As such, all personal web pages, social networking pages and blogs (in which you are personally identifiable) should feature the following disclaimer: "Please know that these are my personal views and not necessarily those of a xxx The Connexion Church

Promote Credibility: Make sure your facts are correct, in proper context and that your positions are justifiable (1 Corinthians 13:5-7). Respond to those who disagree in a spirit of love and grace (Luke 6:28-30). Avoid using a "stream of consciousness" writing style (as it can easily be misinterpreted or taken out of context). Do not use electronic communications to resolve interpersonal conflicts that are best handled face-to-face.

Keep Confidences and Avoid Libel: Be extra careful that your communications do not inadvertently share confidential information (we sometimes deal with a lot of confidences in church work). Know that with any public postings you are legally liable for what you say. Laws governing slander, libel, defamation and copyright apply. Outside parties actually can pursue legal action against you for your postings.

Don't Engage in Polarizing Political Speech: In order to be effective, xxx The Connexion Church must maintain a position of being able to speak into people's lives. If people in the community view xxx The ConnexionChurch as expressing a political view, we lose that platform. Some teaching of scripture may occasionally line up with the platforms of various political parties. However, as a church we are not to take a viewpoint aligned purely with a political ideology. Further, we are to be careful not to act in a way where we are perceived as being aligned with one party politically.

As a charity, we benefit from rebates as part of charitable giving, and our accounts, reports and other information are available to enquirers at the charity commission website. So it is important that nothing in your public communications should lead people to believe that any church in The Connexion is endorsing a political viewpoint, our opinions must relate to moral issues where appropriate and a Christian viewpoint.

Respect the Church and its Staff: Since electronic communications are public (or easily made public), we expect you to be respectful to the church and our leaders, employees, volunteers and members. Any employee who uses electronic communications to disparage the name or reputation of the church, its practices, or its pastors, officers, employees, volunteers or members may be subject to disciplinary procedures as defined by the xxx C of H Church employee policy.

Respect Your Time: All time and effort spent on your personal communications (blogs) should be done on your personal time and should not interfere with your job duties or work commitments to xxx The Connexion Church.

Respect Our Beliefs: When working for xxx The Connexion Church or as a member of the church, it is important to remember that employment decisions and formal church membership will be made based upon our Christian beliefs. If your personal blog or website displays inappropriate images or reflects personal opinions or life-style choices that are contrary to xxx The Connexion Church beliefs or the teaching of scripture, you should expect this to be discussed with you by the Leadership within the church in order that the reputation of the church and the Christian message may be protected. For this reason, we encourage you to first seek guidance from your supervisor if you have any questions.

Electronic Communications are Teachings: The pastor* is under the authority of, and accountable to, the Elders* with respect to teachings and the teaching calendar. For other leaders*, "Life group", "Home group", "Youth group", and teachers, electronic communications can also be church teachings. As such, they too have accountability to Church leadership* to ensure all teachings are true and doctrinally sound.
*(*Leadership structures may vary from church to church)*

Limited Expression in Written Words: Remember that written words can easily convey the wrong message. Written words do not have the "non-verbal" channels that accompany face-to-face communication. Missing are body language, facial expressions and tone of voice that can help ensure proper context. As such, re-read everything prior to sending. See if there is any possibility of misunderstanding. Think before you press "send!"or hit the "publish" button

Church Logos: Do not use xxx The Connexion Church logos/slogans on your communications or reproduce church material without first obtaining written permission from the person responsible for Data protection in xxx C of H Church . Communicate as if Your Words are to Be Published in the Local Newspaper: A good tool for determining what is correct communication is to behave as if the local newspaper were printing your electronic communication for all to see. If you wouldn't want your actions/words to be seen on the front page, you may not be handling the situation properly.

Footnote
xxx The Connexion Church understands in the modern world of social media that good can come from electronic communications and social networking and indeed some people may be reached by its correct and well thought out use. It is not our desire to create consternation or dampen creativity when it comes to the use of these mediums. At the same time we recognize the tremendous potential for hurt and misunderstanding that go with these mediums. We trust that by following these guidelines and common sense, you are able to both reap the rewards of electronic communications ... and avoid their potential pitfalls.

End Formal issue 25 August 2014