

Social Media Guidelines and Considerations

Preface

At the start of 2023, the typical U.S. working-age internet user spent more than 2 ½ hours per day on social media.¹ Senior citizens spent an average of 47 minutes per day, with 75% using Facebook.² Social media in some ways resembles the Agora or marketplace of Paul's time, a gathering point to conduct business and foster democracy, watch performers, and listen to famous philosophers. A Paul-like case could be made for spending daily time on social media:

*"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and also in the marketplace [Agora] every day with those who happened to be there."
(Acts 17:16-17)*

On the other hand, multiple studies identify increased risk of depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts correlating to heavy social media use.³ In addition, up to 10% of the U.S. population are addicted to social media, using it excessively or compulsively.⁴

Purpose

Given the time required and potential downsides, a first, essential, step is to determine the purpose of using social media. Vague ideas like "Someone thinks we ought to be on social media" do not help determine platforms or strategy.

- **What do you want to accomplish?**

Sample answers:

Increase awareness in the local community about our activities.

Provide a place for members to share prayer needs and support each other.

- **Who do you hope to reach?**

Church members or a wider group? Which age group?

Practicalities

Once your purpose and ideal participants are clear, determine which social media tool will best serve.

Examples: When a group needs more privacy, you might create a Facebook group that is closed to the public. Of course, everyone should be aware that nothing online is completely confidential. By contrast, someone can set up a feed on your website from a Facebook page, which will update your site without anyone having to log in or learn a second system.

¹ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-deep-dive-time-spent-on-social-media>

² <https://nypost.com/2023/08/31/most-seniors-spend-this-many-hours-a-year-on-social-media-poll/>

³ <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm>

⁴ <https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/social-media-addiction/>

Essential practices

1. Make sure that at least three people have administrative access to the site (e.g., usernames and passwords) so that access is not lost if someone moves or becomes too busy.
2. Insist on strong passwords. If you use something like “brethren1,” your site is extremely likely to be hacked.
3. Set up guidelines and monitoring strategies before starting.

Privacy, content, and copyright

Carefully consider what information can be posted. For instance, listing birthdays or anniversaries with first and last names may reveal information used as passwords or PIN numbers. Consider what kinds of prayer requests would be appropriate to post with what information (this may vary depending on the platform chosen and how public it is). Decide whether it will be permitted to tag people (or the equivalent).

Together determine what kind of content you prefer. For instance, the Church of the Brethren discourages the use of memes, which are often designed to elicit strong emotions.

Copyright still applies online. Users should only post text or images that are in the public domain (and this is not as common as is sometimes thought), that they have specific permission to post, or that are their own. It is fine to “share” posts since that maintains attribution.

Child protection

Best practices include not posting photos that show children’s faces and not including last names or other identifying information.

Avoid one-on-one social media interactions with children or youth; make sure at least three people are involved in any conversation. Make sure there is a record of what has been said. For instance, texts are saved, whereas at the time of writing, Snapchat disappears after a short time.

Issues for pastors

Can you be a private person on social media, or are you always a representative of the church?

Is it okay to have separate public and private accounts, or does that just create “insiders” and “outsiders”?

Do you have to “friend” everyone in the congregation?

What topics, viewpoints, or wording do you need to avoid? Who has the power to influence this?

What happens if one of your comments causes controversy, misunderstanding, or hurt?

The answers to these questions may depend on your congregation, district, and personal preferences. Privacy, confidentiality, and child protection guidelines must be followed at all times. Correction should be graciously received.

A word to the indignant: You may see a social media post from another pastor or church leader that upsets you. If you are not in a real-life relationship with the person, walk away and pray. If necessary,

hide posts from the person, stop following them, or unfriend them. The Biblical basis for this includes Matthew 7:1-5, Galatians 6:1-5, and James 5, among other passages.

*“Brothers and sisters, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged” ...
“confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” (James 5: 9 and 16)*

The right people to challenge and restore someone in error are the people in an ongoing relationship with that person; note that James talks about confessing sins and praying *for each other*. “The Accuser” throughout the Bible is not Jesus. Is that who we should imitate?

Monitoring

Social media must be monitored so that:

- People are not harmed.
- The “social” aspect happens. Commenters appreciate being recognized and welcomed, getting answers, or receiving support.
- Inappropriate posts or comments are removed or hidden.

The number of moderators needed depends on the frequency, quantity, and content of posts.

Procedures for unwanted content should be determined up front: will the person be notified that their post has been hidden or deleted? Will the offending post be left with comments as a learning tool for others? What factors would influence this?

Unsolicited content

Posts may receive generic and repeated comments from an unknown person expressing a desire to friend the poster; these can be deleted or hidden.

Not every profile on a social media site is an actual person. Fake profiles can be recognized by checking their “about” information, friends, and posts. If they are not in your location and have no obvious connection, you may wish to block them.

Be aware of scams: at the time of writing, one consists of messages telling you that you are out of compliance and must go to a website to enter your information. Beware of entities asking you to provide information (other than when setting up the social media account). Check the profile of the message sender; this should help you figure out whether the message is legitimate or not. Doing a search for something like “[social media site name] message about authentication” may also help.

Appendix A: Church of the Brethren Facebook guidelines

The Church of the Brethren observed a substantial decrease in problematic Facebook comments and posts after creating and publicizing these guidelines. They may be reproduced or altered by local congregations, preferably with a citation such as “Adapted from Church of the Brethren guidelines”.

We are sharing guidelines for the Church of the Brethren Facebook page:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

We would like to see this Facebook page transformed into something new that does not conform to the world’s social media practices. We invite you to consider this page as “holy ground,” a place that contributes to our worship and praise of God, where followers of Jesus Christ connect to learn, discuss, support each other, and pray.

These guidelines help explain what that means:

1. Whenever you come to this page, first join with us in prayer and praise—especially before commenting. Just as our churches may welcome guests and visitors into prayer and praise as they enter the sanctuary, we invite you to praise God and pray with us for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).
2. Consider being on this page like being in a sacred space and speak together with love and care as you would do in person with your own family of faith.
3. We would like this page to become known for a spirit of gentleness. When you encounter someone on this page who appears to you to be mistaken in their views, remember Galatians 6:1: “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”
4. Just as it is unpleasant when one person takes over the conversation in the church fellowship hall, it is off-putting here. Please limit your comments to one or two per post so that others may join in the conversation too.
5. When prayer is requested, just as you would during a time of sharing during worship, we ask you to pray with us. Arguing in response to a prayer request belittles the need and demonstrates a lack of love and concern.
6. We encourage you to reflect and prayerfully search the scriptures, then use your own words to comment. We discourage copying and pasting posts or memes; many of these contain untruths or exaggerations and were created to provoke rather than to encourage and help the body of Christ grow in faith.
7. We understand that our members have many different points of view and we expect loving discussion of our differences. Comments that do not abide by these guidelines may be hidden. Commenters who persist in ignoring these guidelines may be blocked.

Remember Jesus’ conversation with the lawyer in Luke 10:26-28: Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

[#anotherwayofliving](#) [#churchofthebrethren](#) [#betransformed](#)