

## **Appendix E: RECOMMENDED PRACTICES AND GUIDELINES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

Social media posts and electronic communications are not confidential. Many can be shared or reposted to others. All interactions should be transparent with healthy boundaries. Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation of children and youth applies in the digital world just as they do in the physical world.

### **Recommended Practices and Guidelines:**

- The diocese should create and “own” the social media accounts representing the diocese, and have multiple administrators and/or supervisors with access. If personal accounts are used, a system of monitoring should be established.
- The diocese should not identify or “tag” individuals. The “tagging” of children and youth should be prohibited. When written permission is provided by a parent/guardian, the captioning of photos or videos of minors may be permitted. The caption should not include the minor’s full name, nor should it create a clickable link to someone’s personal profile. Self tagging or tag requests from youth are allowable within closed groups.
- The diocese does not have a responsibility to review or monitor the personal pages or groups that are not sponsored by the diocese.
- If a digital communication raises health or safety concerns, leaders should respond pastorally and notify the supervisor.
- When using photos and videos for ministry purposes, obtain a media release for each person and only post images that respect the dignity of every person depicted. The diocese, must inform participants when they are being videoed because church buildings are not considered public space. Signs should be posted that indicate a service or activity will be broadcast when worship services or activities are streamed or distributed on the web or via other broadcast media.
- Consider the following best practices
  - Have at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth administrators for groups that are designed for youth;
  - Use closed groups, but not “hidden” or “secret” groups, for youth;
  - Have only youth administrators invite other youth to join the online group, unless a youth previously asked an adult administrator to invite them to join;
  - Remove any content that shows or describes inappropriate behavior outside the bounds of the established behavioral covenant;
  - Open social networking groups for youth to parents of current members;
  - Remove adult leaders of youth groups and youth who are no longer members, due to departure, removal from position, or are ineligible because they “aged-out” of a program from social networking sites, list serves, etc;
  - Observe mandated reporting laws regarding suspected abuse, neglect, and exploitation

### **Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Interactions with Children and Youth:**

- Prudent judgement should be used in the time of day a child or youth is contacted through social media. Under normal circumstances, refrain from contact or exchanging texts, chats, or emails before 8:00 am or after 10:00 pm, unless it's an emergency.
- Privacy settings and personal boundaries should be implemented.
  - Create and use profiles on social networking sites that meet professional and institutional standards.
  - Do not submit connection requests to children or youth for personal interactions. Youth may not be able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults. Youth may ask to be “friends,” adults should discern the nature of contact appropriate for healthy ministry.
  - Apply privacy settings that are consistent with all children and youth, across all social networking sites and platforms. Avoid playing favorites or the appearance of playing favorites.
  - Administrators of social media accounts and digital communications must periodically review settings, accessible content, photos, and videos to ensure compliance with professional and institutional standards.
  - Parents of children and youth shall be informed of social networking sites and platforms used within the ministry.
  - When possible, send communication (1) to entire groups, (2) on an individual's “wall,” or (3) in public areas, rather than in private messages. This includes photos, images and videos.
  - When sending emails to a child or youth that contain personal or private information regarding that child or youth, a copy should be sent to the parents or guardians as well. Examples of these types of emails include: payment due information, specific medical requests or questions, etc. Mass emails sent to an entire group are not required to be copied to parents or guardians.
  - Disclose ongoing digital pastoral communications (i.e.: e-mails, Facebook messages, texting, etc.) with children and youth to a parent and/or a supervisor to determine when a referral to a professional provider or resource is needed.
- Delete inappropriate material posted in digital groups, address the behavior and report it, if necessary, in accordance with legal and institutional requirements.
- In video calls, follow the same criteria used in telephone calls. In addition, prudent judgement regarding attire and surroundings should be observed.

### **Covenant to Govern Digital Groups**

- Inappropriate behavior by ANY individual in any group (e.g., Facebook group, Snapchat group, email, text or Twitter group) will not be tolerated. This includes bullying, posting pictures that depict abuse, violence, illegal activities, sexual acts or any other behavior deemed inappropriate by group administrators. Inappropriate behavior will result in the immediate removal of the offender from the group, and further action as necessary.
- Groups may be joined by individuals who actually are a part of the group (youth group, parish group, event group, etc.) as closed groups with administrative review.
- Settings for groups will be “closed” or “private” so that group activity is not public.

**Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Interactions with Children and Youth:**

- Participants will be removed from the digital group when they are no longer a part of the group in the real world.
- Groups will be disbanded when there is no longer a need for digital communication within the group.
- Only content that is appropriate and pertinent to the group may be posted. Content will be monitored by the administrators or the group settings can be such that only approved communications are actually posted.
- Adults may not tag photos, videos, snaps, tweets, etc. without the written permission from parents of youth under the age of 18. Self-tagging or tag requests by youth or their parents is permissible.
- Mandatory reporting laws will be followed.
- Consequences for breaking the covenant will include removal from the group, loss of any administrative privileges and further action.