Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLANNING AND PROCEDURES: BEST PRACTICES FOR CONGREGATIONS

Introduction to social media

Social media is a tool for ministry. Engaging with your congregation's members on social media extends the community that gathers for worship into the rest of the week and integrates "church life" into daily life. Social media is a way to share your congregation's announcements, photos, videos and prayers in a relevant and timely way. It is a way to tell the story of your church and a way for your congregation to be regularly reminded of Christ's love for them.

There are a number of great social media tutorials on **YouTube** and **Slideshare.net**. A simple view is that social media are web- and mobile device-based tools used for sharing, engagement and building relationships. Some basic functions of social media include the ability to:

- *Listen* to what members and others are saying, about their congregation, the ELCA as a denomination, "being Lutheran" and about what is going on in their lives. Members are able to post text, images, sound and video in easily accessible ways, so following them online can provide helpful community insights.
- *Post* useful, inspiring text, images, audio and video on a regular basis.
- *Comment* on the posts of others.
- *Share*, point others to information and resources that may be of help to them.

Some congregations abandon traditional websites and do all their online communication through social media sites like Facebook; others use their website as the place where they bring all their social media initiatives together in one spot: announcements from Twitter, calendar from Google, photos from Instagram, posts from a blog and videos from YouTube.

Elements of a social media strategy

Below you will find a number of references to help you develop a comprehensive social media strategy. Ideally this strategy will be one component of an overall communication plan for your congregation that includes all the ways you interact with your members and the community. A good strategy provides a rationale, plus some structure and foundation for this aspect of ministry. Basic strategy elements should address some of these questions:

What's the plan? Involve key leaders in planning a strategy. What is your congregation's communications strategy? Where does social media fit in? Help the group answer the basic question of: What are your objectives? Evangelism and outreach? Information for members? Inspiration?

Who is your target audience? Are you primarily trying to reach and connect members, or do you hope to reach out to the community and prospective members? Most congregations try to reach both, but you should still describe your audience as thoroughly as possible, since you want to target your efforts and possibly use different social platforms to reach different audience segments.

Why are you considering this means of communication? Outline your reasons for this initiative. Social media offers the possibility of communicating with your members and community outside of the church walls.

Where? When choosing a social media platform, the most effective and successful approach is usually to go where your members are. Are your members active on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc.? This may mean setting aside your personal preference for a social media platform in favor of reaching your members where they are. When choosing a platform, it's best to try using one very well before opting to add another. Grow as your online community grows.

Public vs. private space? Social media platforms offer public pages and private groups. Eventually you will probably need both. It's useful to have a public space where people seeking a congregation can find basic information about yours. You can also build private spaces (like a private group on Facebook) for specific ministry teams or groups within your congregation. Start with where people are. If you outgrow that, consult with key users before branching out.

Who will implement the strategy? Are you willing to shift your thinking about congregational communication and shift your time from other tasks to feed and monitor a social media presence? This work is a great opportunity for lay leadership, but staff oversight and some level of participation is needed. Your strategy needs to identify the human resources that will be applied to setting up and maintaining a social media presence. Social media is always active, so it's important that you have some people committed to monitoring the account regularly.

How will the strategy be implemented? Transforming into a networked organization involves trust and getting more people involved. This is easier when you have a policy to empower staff and volunteers to communicate freely in a responsible way. Develop work flows for how information will be shared over time and a schedule of who will monitor and support this virtual community on a regular basis.

How will the communication needs of all members continue to be met? It is important to avoid creating a "technology gap" in your overall communication strategy, where members without the means or desire for digital connections are left out. Continue sharing content from your social media platforms in your bulletin, newsletter and announcements during worship. Make printing available for some essential communications for those who indicate that preference.

Developing a social media policy

Having an agreed-upon policy for congregation staff and volunteer leader use of social media platforms will set guidelines for responsible participation online and will also help reduce risk to the congregation. Social media policies generally address two areas of concern, **guidelines** for appropriate use, and **procedures** documenting work flow, roles and activities that support your congregation's communication strategy.

Social media guidelines

Social media guidelines are important for your organization. Some policies have been developed specifically for **congregations**.

When staff use social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc., it is important to have safeguards and understanding about use. Such sites are usually not private, and even if privacy settings are used, sometimes information becomes public. Because of the widespread use and the ease of copying and forwarding electronic materials, it is very important to make sure that your staff is not exposing the congregation to liability or bad publicity due to improper or unwise social media content.

This discussion with staff relates to on-the-job social networking. However, it is important that all staff remember that they are holding out a public witness in their personal life, so they should be careful and prudent on their personal social networking communications. As appropriate, particularly when discussing ministry related issues, staff should let it be known that private personal posts are their own opinions and not that of the congregation.

In the blue column to the right are suggested guidelines and policy samples. It is important to carefully consider all such documents and review these with your congregation's legal counsel.

Decide whether you will disseminate such a policy as part of a meeting, include it in your employee handbook or actually have staff sign. In any event, if your congregation has an employee handbook, personnel policy or orientation for new workers, it is a good idea to make this topic clear in those resources. While this discussion deals mainly with staff, it is wise to also share these concerns and safeguards with leadership and volunteers who are communicating on behalf of the congregation.

Social media procedures

Now that you've established guidelines for staff and volunteer leader participation online, this portion of your social media policy can describe *how* you hope to support and sustain a social media outlet. Here are some topics you may want to discuss and document in your social media plan:

> *Publication schedule.* Establish a plan for how often posts will appear in your various social media platforms (e.g. one picture per week on Instagram, two posts per week on Facebook, a Twitter update every other day). This ensures that the areas don't become stale, and by spreading out posts you make "space" for member comments and contributions.

CONGREGATION STAFF GUIDELINES ON USING SOCIAL MEDIA

When I am representing the congregation on any social networking site, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, or similar sites, I understand and agree to comply with the following:

- I understand I represent the congregation's ministry and my postings will be appropriate to the mission.

- I will keep all confidential and sensitive information private and will not post such information.

- (insert if applicable) I have read the congregation's policies on use of the internet and social media.

- If I have a question, uncertainty or concern about the proper nature of a posting, I will consult with my supervisor and leadership before posting.

_____

Signature of employee

Moderator schedule. If you are successful, members and prospective members will participate with posts, comment on your content, and share links, photos and videos with other members. Part of the responsibility of having a social media presence is to monitor what goes on. Establish and schedule a social media team to monitor your site seven days a week. Not all members of the team need administrator rights to remove posts that are spam or offensive, but they need to know how to contact an administrator if intervention is needed.

Helpful tools. If you're lucky enough to have several congregation staff members interested in participating online, tools like **HootSuite** can help coordinate and manage your social media presence by letting you schedule posts and establish a work flow. You can also **schedule posts** **through your Facebook page** or schedule tweets through **Tweetdeck**.

Talk about your approach. Social media is a convenient way to get announcements out to members in a place where they already visit, and posts can be used to drive people to more information on your congregation's website. As soon as you hear about some event, deadline, news item, update, etc., post on the congregation's social media platforms. The best posts are ones that also invite members' engagement. And the ideal site has members posting announcements and reminders themselves.

Develop a place for members to engage and reflect on their faith. Is there a "member care" or "fellowship" group who could post reflections, event photos and videos, and questions for member response? Approach members of your adult education or learning committee to develop regular questions to post online. Make sure other committee members are ready to respond with comments, in order to encourage participation from others.

Follow other congregations and ELCA ministries. Follow the accounts of congregations that do social media well so you can learn from example or share their content to your social platforms. Be sure to follow the official ELCA platforms and your synod's social media presence for national and regional news. One example of a congregation with well-developed e-communication tools is **Zion Lutheran Church in Buffalo**, **Minn**. A congregation staff person does regular social media posts and members occasionally comment (**facebook.com/ZionBuffalo**; **Instagram.com/ZionBuffalo**; **twitter.com/ZionBuffalo**). Zion has built up a robust social media presence that helps provide a window into congregational life.

COMMON SENSE CONCERNS:

The main concerns are for privacy issues and appropriate behavior. When you are representing your congregation on public social media platforms, monitor the posts to make sure that member privacy is respected. This involves common sense concerns:

- Don't post **images** of children without the consent of a parent or guardian.

- Use a **photo release form** to allow people to opt out of having their picture used.

- Don't caption photos with full names of children (even if there is consent).

- Don't post member email addresses or phone numbers.

- Make sure that staff and volunteer leaders are using the congregation's computers appropriately.

Social media procedures (cont'd)

Evaluate your posts using analytics. Most social media platforms have analytics included so you can easily see how many people were reached by your post, how many engaged with it and generally how the post performed. Use these analytics to evaluate what's working well for your page and what type of content is popular with your audience.

Sample resources on congregational communication and social media for non-profits

- Articles on congregational use of social media from *Living Lutheran*:
    - **Social Media Commandments** by Nora Brathol
    - **Go social – Facebook basics** by David Hansen
    - **Snapchat 101** by David Hansen
    - **Church on the go** by David Hansen
    - **Prayer – there's an app for that** by David Hansen
    - **Media in Ministry: Luther's Small Catechism App** by David Hansen
    - **How to use your phone for evangelism** by David Hansen
    - **Worship on Live-stream** by David Hansen
- "**The Social Media Gospel**," book by Meredith Gould, July 9, 2013
- **#ChSocM** (ch-sock-em) is a Twitter-based chat about using social media to build church and faith. Welcoming, informative, ecumenical. Commentary, interviews, transcripts and fun stuff on their **Facebook page**. Find their content on Twitter using #ChSOCM.
- Articles about Facebook from the **Church Marketing Sucks** website
- Social media-related articles on **ChurchMag**

Social media is a constantly changing landscape. As new platforms are developed and new features are created within existing platforms, the "Help" pages on the platforms themselves often have tips for best use. Any questions you may have that have not been covered here can probably be found by conducting your own online research or asking tech-savvy members of your congregation.

The best congregation social media presence is one with congregation members and staff contributing regularly in ways that enhance community and engage members. This helps make visible the real community that gathers on Sunday morning and during the week and allows others the opportunity to get involved or consider joining.

FOLLOW US

- **Facebook.com/ Lutherans**

- **Twitter.com/ELCA**

- **Instagram.com/ELCA**

- **YouTube.com/ELCA**

Ready for the next step? This resource is intended to accompany "Social media platforms and content: Best practices for congregations." Find more on congregational communications at **ELCA.org/CongTools**.