

GNJUMC Clergy Social Media Guidelines & Best Practices

Submitted by the Offices of the Order of Elders, Order of Deacons, and the Fellowship of Local Pastors & Associate Members - DRAFT

Introduction

These guidelines are rooted in the *Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church, drawing primarily from the Social Principles (§160–166, particularly §162.G: *Media and Communication Technologies*) and the shared ministry commitments of all clergy serving under appointment.

Grounded in our covenantal life together, clergy of the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference are encouraged to use social media as an extension of their ministry—proclaiming Christ, fostering community, embodying justice, and offering pastoral presence in digital spaces.

These guidelines are advisory in nature. They outline best practices for faithful and responsible online engagement and do **not** constitute enforceable policy or disciplinary procedure.

I. General Principles for All Appointed Clergy

Clergy are encouraged to:

1. Witness to the gospel with authenticity, integrity, and courage.
2. Promote justice, equity, and inclusion, especially for those marginalized in society (§162–164).
3. Model civility, respect, and pastoral wisdom in all online interactions (§162.G).
4. Engage challenging or controversial topics with humility and care.
5. Move conversations offline when pastoral care, discernment, or reconciliation would be better served face-to-face.
6. Use digital platforms to uplift the Social Principles and reflect United Methodist commitments to community, justice, and the common good.
7. Avoid any misuse of pastoral authority and ensure that words and actions do not harm or coerce.
8. Build relationships, strengthen community, and support mission and ministry through digital engagement.

II. Best Practices: An Ethic of Care for Social Media

1. Rooted in Calling

Clergy are encouraged to use digital platforms as expressions of their calling—teaching, guiding, and witnessing to the love and justice of God.

2. Ethic of Care

- Prioritize relationships; respond with empathy and respect.
- Take responsibility for content shared and acknowledge the influence of the clergy role.
- Discern whether a post will bring healing or harm before sharing.
- Consider the diversity and needs of the online audience.

- Approach disagreement with humility, pausing or redirecting conversations offline when necessary.

3. Promoting the Common Good

- Amplify voices that are often marginalized (§162, §164).
- Highlight the Social Principles and other denominational commitments.
- Verify information before sharing; avoid spreading misinformation (§162.G).
- Refrain from hate speech, harassment, or demeaning commentary.
- When addressing sensitive topics, aim to inform and encourage dialogue rather than deepen division.

4. Civility, Integrity, and the Use of Pastoral Authority

- Speak truth in love, even when addressing difficult matters.
- Model patience, respect, and accountability.
- Transition discussions to offline settings when pastoral presence is more appropriate.
- Avoid misuse of pastoral authority; lead with humility and care.
- Use influence to protect and support those who are vulnerable.
- Use pastoral authority to listen, to hear, and to affirm—never to shame or coerce—especially when engaging with individuals who are vulnerable, angry, or in distress.

5. Transparency, Boundaries, and Account Use

- Distinguish clearly between personal opinion and the official positions of the church.
- Protect confidentiality and honor pastoral trust.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries for self, family, and congregation.
- Seek consent before posting images or videos of others, particularly minors and vulnerable adults.
- Adhere to all Safe Sanctuary policies related to minors and digital communication.
- Use a real and recognizable name when engaging online in any ministry capacity.

6. Witness and Hope

Clergy are encouraged to share stories of grace, justice, and transformation; to foster dialogue and build up the Body of Christ; and to use digital platforms to offer hope rooted in Christ, especially in times of crisis or fear.

7. Digital Safety and Protection of Vulnerable People

- Apply Safe Sanctuary principles to digital ministry.
- Avoid one-on-one private messaging with minors.
- Only post or livestream minors with verified parental/guardian consent.
- Clergy are mandated reporters for suspected abuse, including concerns arising online.
- Follow all local church Safe Sanctuary policies.

III. The General Rules for Today

An adaptation of John Wesley's *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies* (2020/2024 *Book of Discipline*, §104, pp. 79–80)

A. First: Do No Harm

By avoiding evil of every kind, including:

- Spreading misinformation or hate online.
- Practices that harm creation or perpetuate injustice.
- Participation in systems of exploitation, racism, or discrimination.
- Behaviors that lead to addiction or harm.
- Gossip, bullying, or character defamation.
- Supporting policies that deny dignity or rights.
- Living beyond one's means or engaging in dishonesty.
- Retaliatory or escalatory behavior ("returning evil for evil").

B. Second: Do Good

By practicing mercy, compassion, and justice:

- Serving the poor, unhoused, ill, imprisoned, and those in recovery.
- Supporting just laws, fair wages, and human dignity.
- Speaking on behalf of those who are silenced or ignored.
- Practicing generosity and ethical stewardship.
- Offering mentorship and support within the community of faith.
- Living with humility, protecting the witness of the gospel.
- Bearing the cost of discipleship even when challenging.

C. Third: Stay in Love with God

By engaging the means of grace, including:

- Regular worship, corporate and personal.
- Reading and reflecting on Scripture.
- Participation in the Sacraments.
- Daily prayer and spiritual discipline.
- Fasting, simplicity, and self-examination.
- Sharing faith and seeking accountability.
- Practicing gratitude and seeking God's presence in daily life.