

1 **4th DRAFT - GNJUMC Clergy Social Media Guidelines & Best Practices**
2 Submitted by the Offices of the Order of Elders, Order of Deacons, and the Fellowship of
3 Local Pastors & Associate Members
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32 Introduction

33 These guidelines are rooted in the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church,
34 drawing primarily from the Social Principles (§160–166, particularly §162.G: Media and
35 Communication Technologies) and the connectional commitments of all clergy and
36 certified/licensed ministers serving in appointed, assigned, supply, retired, or other
37 authorized ministry settings.

38

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

43

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

47

48 Part I — Foundations for Faithful Digital Ministry

49 *1. General Principles for All Clergy*

50 Clergy are encouraged to:

- 51 • Witness to the gospel with authenticity, integrity, and courage.
- 52 • Promote justice, equity, and inclusion, especially for those marginalized in society
53 (§162–164).
- 54 • Model civility, respect, and pastoral wisdom in all online interactions (§162.G).
- 55 • Engage challenging or controversial topics with humility and care.
- 56 • Move conversations offline when pastoral care, discernment, or reconciliation
57 would be better served face-to-face.
- 58 • Use digital platforms to uplift the Social Principles and reflect United Methodist
59 commitments to community, justice, and the common good.
- 60 • Avoid any misuse of pastoral authority and ensure that words and actions do not
61 harm or coerce.
- 62 • Build relationships, strengthen community, and support mission and ministry
63 through digital engagement.

64

65 *2. The General Rules for Today*

66 An adaptation of John Wesley’s *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United*
67 *Societies* (2020/2024 Book of Discipline, §1104, pp. 79–80)

68

69 **A. First: Do No Harm**

70 By avoiding evil of every kind, including:

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

79

80 **B. Second: Do Good**

81 By practicing mercy, compassion, and justice:

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

89

90 **C. Third: Stay in Love with God**

91 By engaging the means of grace, including:

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

99

100 **Part II — Best Practices for Digital Witness**

101 *3. Rooted in Calling*

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

104

105 *4. An Ethic of Care*

- 106 • Prioritize relationships; respond with empathy and respect.
- 107 • Take responsibility for content shared and acknowledge the influence of the clergy
- 108 role.

- 109 • Discern whether a post will bring healing or harm before sharing.
110 • Consider the diversity and needs of the online audience.
111 • Approach disagreement with humility, pausing or redirecting conversations offline
112 when necessary.
113

114 *5. Promoting the Common Good*

- 115 • Amplify voices that are often marginalized (§162, §164).
116 • Highlight the Social Principles and other denominational commitments.
117 • Verify information before sharing; avoid spreading misinformation (§162.G).
118 • Refrain from hate speech, harassment, or demeaning commentary.
119 • When addressing sensitive topics, aim to inform and encourage dialogue rather
120 than deepen division.
121

122 *6. Civility, Integrity, and the Use of Pastoral Authority*

- 123 • Speak truth in love, even when addressing difficult matters.
124 • Model patience, respect, and accountability.
125 • Transition discussions to offline settings when pastoral presence is more
126 appropriate.
127 • Avoid misuse of pastoral authority; lead with humility and care.
128 • Use influence to protect and support those who are vulnerable.
129 • Use pastoral authority to listen, to hear, and to affirm—never to shame or coerce—
130 especially when engaging with individuals who are vulnerable, angry, or in distress.
131

132 *7. Transparency, Boundaries, and Account Use*

- 133 • Distinguish clearly between personal opinion and the official positions of the
134 church.
135 • Protect confidentiality and honor pastoral trust.
136 • Maintain appropriate boundaries for self, family, and congregation.
137 • Seek consent before posting images or videos of others, particularly minors and
138 vulnerable adults.
139 • Adhere to all Safe Sanctuary policies related to minors and digital communication.
140 • Use a real and recognizable name when engaging online in any ministry capacity.
141

142 *8. Wesleyan Theology and Theological Clarity*

143 When expressing theological views that differ from or go beyond the official teachings of
144 The United Methodist Church (Book of Discipline), clergy should clearly name them as
145 personal theological perspectives rather than representing them as United Methodist
146 doctrine, while affirming the breadth of Wesleyan theology and the freedom of clergy to
147 speak prophetically within our shared covenant.

148

149 *9. Embodied Presence, Boundaries, and Public Witness*

150 When sharing images or videos of oneself on social media—particularly those involving
151 intimate bodily moments, physical activity, or attire—clergy are encouraged to exercise
152 discernment around context, audience, and purpose. Posts should be appropriate to a
153 broad and intergenerational audience and consistent with the trust placed in clergy as
154 spiritual leaders.

155 Clergy are asked to consider:

- 156 • Whether a post centers the message or the individual
- 157 • How images may be received by congregants, survivors of trauma, minors, or those
158 new to the faith
- 159 • Whether content could unintentionally blur pastoral, professional, or relational
160 boundaries

161 This guidance is not intended to shame bodies, reinforce gendered expectations, or
162 restrict body-affirming expression. Rather, it reflects our shared commitment to
163 maintaining healthy boundaries, honoring the dignity of all people, and bearing faithful
164 witness to the gospel in public spaces.

165 When in doubt, clergy are encouraged to seek counsel from trusted colleagues or
166 supervisors and to err on the side of restraint and clarity.

167

168 *10. Witness and Hope*

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

172

173 *11. Digital Safety and Protection of Vulnerable People*

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

180

181 **Part III — The Unique Challenge of Itinerant Ministry Online**

182 The itinerant system creates a tension social media amplifies: we're called to form deep
183 ministerial relationships within appointed or authorized ministry settings while knowing
184 those relationships will eventually shift. Unlike settled pastors who may serve one
185 congregation for decades, UM clergy must manage digital connections that can outlast
186 appointments by years or even decades.

187

188 **Essential Guidelines**

189 *12. Establish Clear Boundary Frameworks Early*

190 **The Challenge You Might Not See:**

191 Every Facebook friend request from a parishioner creates a digital connection that doesn't
192 automatically end when you move. In five years, you could have hundreds of people from
193 multiple appointments following your every post.

194 **Recommended Approaches:**

- 195 • **Professional Page Model:** Maintain a public professional/ministry page rather than
196 personal profile for church connections. When you move appointments, the page
197 transitions with you.
- 198 • **Thoughtful Personal Profile:** If using your personal profile for church connections,
199 be intentional about what you share. Consider: *"Would I be comfortable with*
200 *someone from a church I served 10 years ago seeing this?"*
- 201 • **Define Your Boundaries in Writing:** Create a personal policy (even if only for
202 yourself) about accepting friend requests, responding to messages, and engaging
203 with comments.

204 **Consider:**

205 How will you handle friend requests from confirmands, youth group members, or young
206 adults who may remain connected to you for 20–30 years? This deserves deliberate
207 thought, not default acceptance.

208

209 *13. Distinguish Pastoral Care from Public Engagement*

210 **Principle:**

211 Social media blurs the line between public ministry and private pastoral care. These
212 require different approaches.

213 **In Practice:**

- 214 • **Be cautious about providing pastoral care in public comments or threads.** Even
215 well-meaning responses to someone's struggle can violate confidentiality or
216 appropriate boundaries.
- 217 • **Move pastoral conversations offline quickly:**
218 *"I see you're going through something difficult. Let's find a time to talk this week"*
219 (then message or call privately).
- 220 • **Be cautious about "liking" or commenting on personal life updates:**
221 Your engagement as a pastor carries different weight than engagement from
222 friends. A "like" on someone's relationship status change or job loss might be
223 misinterpreted.

224 **The Itinerant Factor:**

225 Remember that former parishioners may still turn to you online for pastoral care years after
226 you've moved. You'll need strategies for gracefully redirecting them to their current pastor
227 while honoring the relationship you had.

228

229 *14. Navigate the Public Witness Carefully*

230 **The Reality:**

231 Whether you intend it or not, you represent the UMC, your local church, and Christ when
232 you post. But you're also a person with opinions and a life.

233 **Guidelines:**

234 • **On Controversial Topics:**

235 Consider the Book of Discipline's call to *"speak the truth in love."* Ask: *"Am I*
236 *contributing to understanding or just venting?"* The itinerant system means you may
237 serve very different congregations—what you post today may complicate ministry in
238 a future appointment.

239 • **Political Engagement:**

240 You have every right to political views, but consider framing them theologically
241 rather than partisanly. *"I'm concerned about [issue] because of my understanding*
242 *of [scriptural principle]"* invites dialogue differently than partisan declarations.

243 • **Personal Life:**

244 Sharing some personal life humanizes your ministry, but remember: parishioners
245 often project idealized expectations onto clergy. Be authentic without oversharing.

246 **The Question to Ask:**

247 *"Is this post serving my ministry, or am I serving my need to express myself?"*
248

249 *15. Manage Transitions Intentionally*

250 **The Itinerant Reality:**

251 You will leave appointments. How you handle social media during transitions matters.

252 **Best Practices:**

253 • **Announce Transitions Appropriately:**

254 Follow your DS's guidance on timing, but don't let social media announce before
255 official channels.

256 • **Establish Post-Appointment Boundaries:**

257 Consider a policy like:

258 *"After I transition to my new appointment, I'll remain connected with you here, but*
259 *I'll be redirecting pastoral care needs to your new pastor. I hope you'll understand*
260 *this boundary honors both our past relationship and your future one."*

261 • **Resist the Temptation to Stay Overly Involved:**

262 Liking every post from a former church, commenting on their new pastor's sermons,
263 or maintaining the same level of engagement can undermine your successor. Let go
264 with grace.

265 **Consider a "Digital Goodbye":**

266 When leaving an appointment, you might post:

267 *"As I prepare to transition, I want you to know I'll treasure our shared ministry. I'll stay*
268 *connected to many of you here, but I'm also excited for you to build relationships with your*
269 *new pastoral leadership."*
270

271 *16. Protect Privacy—Yours and Others'*

272 **Critical Points:**

- 273 • **Never share pastoral information online**, even in disguised "prayer request"
274 formats or stories *"from my ministry."*
- 275 • **Be cautious about photos:**
276 Get permission before tagging parishioners, especially children. Consider who
277 might be in the background of your photos.
- 278 • **Your family's privacy matters:**
279 Your spouse and children didn't choose pastoral ministry. Discuss boundaries with
280 them about what you'll share.

281 **The Long Game:**

282 Information shared online is permanent. That funny anecdote about a church member
283 might seem harmless today but could cause pain years later.

284

285 *17. Model Healthy Digital Discipleship*

286 **The Opportunity:**

287 Social media isn't just a hazard—it's a mission field and community-building tool.

288 **Positive Engagement:**

- 289 • **Share theological reflection, not just promotion:**
290 Post about what you're learning, questions you're wrestling with, meaningful
291 quotes.
- 292 • **Celebrate ministry without exploitation:**
293 Share general joys (*"Confirmation class was so meaningful today!"*) without turning
294 people into content.
- 295 • **Engage with others' posts pastorally:**
296 Sometimes a genuine *"thinking of you"* comment on someone's post is meaningful
297 ministry.
- 298 • **Model civil discourse:**
299 How you engage in online disagreements teaches your congregation about
300 Christian community.

301

302 **Part IV — Practical Implementation**

303 *18. Start Here*

- 304 • Audit your current social media presence.
- 305 • Write your personal policy.
- 306 • Discuss with SPRC or trusted colleagues.
- 307 • Review annually.

308

309 **Part V — A Covenant for Faithful Digital Witness**

310 *Companion to the GNJUMC Clergy Social Media Guidelines & Best Practices*

311 As clergy of the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church,
312 we live in covenant with God, with one another, and with the congregations and
313 communities we serve. This covenant extends into digital spaces, where our words,
314 images, and interactions carry pastoral authority, theological meaning, and public witness.
315 Grounded in the Book of Discipline, the Social Principles, and John Wesley’s General
316 Rules—to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God—we affirm the GNJUMC Clergy
317 Social Media Guidelines & Best Practices as our shared framework for faithful digital
318 engagement. This covenant expresses our commitment to live into those guidelines with
319 integrity, humility, and care.

320 **Our Commitments**

- 321 • We commit to using social media as an extension of our calling, bearing witness to
322 Christ, nurturing community, and seeking justice with authenticity and courage.
- 323 • We commit to an ethic of care, pausing to discern whether our words and actions
324 will bring healing or harm, and moving conversations offline when pastoral
325 presence is more appropriate.
- 326 • We commit to theological integrity by clearly distinguishing personal perspectives
327 from official United Methodist teaching, and by naming differences without
328 disparaging the Church or those who hold other views, recognizing our shared
329 covenant, responsibility, and public witness.
- 330 • We commit to the responsible use of pastoral authority, refusing to shame, coerce,
331 or harm, and instead using our influence to protect the vulnerable and foster
332 understanding.
- 333 • We commit to healthy boundaries and transparency, honoring confidentiality,
334 following Safe Sanctuary policies, seeking consent before sharing images or stories,
335 and using recognizable identities in ministry contexts.
- 336 • We commit to embodied wisdom and public witness, exercising discernment about
337 how our bodies, images, and personal lives are shared in digital spaces.
- 338 • We commit to care within an itinerant system, managing transitions with grace,
339 avoiding actions that undermine successor clergy, and redirecting pastoral care
340 appropriately after appointments change.
- 341 • We commit to protecting minors and vulnerable people, including fulfilling our
342 responsibilities as mandated reporters.
- 343 • We commit to staying in love with God, grounding our digital presence in prayer,
344 Scripture, worship, sacrament, accountability, and self-examination.

345 **Living the Covenant**

346 We enter this covenant knowing we are not perfect and that growth, repentance, and grace
347 are part of our shared life. We commit to ongoing reflection, mutual accountability, and
348 faithful practice, trusting that our digital witness shapes not only our ministry, but the life
349 and witness of the Church.

350

