

A Simple Guide to Safe Social Media Use

Basic safety guidelines for the most popular types of social media.

The amount of information available online continues to expand. While most online communication once took place through email or instant messaging services—which were only visible to those to whom the messages were sent—now more and more content is being shared publicly, visible to all.

Facebook, Twitter, and blogs are among the most frequented sites online. Which means these sites can provide considerable benefits for churches. These social networking services do come with certain risks—for individuals, businesses, and churches. Understanding how these websites work—and how they should be used—is the key to avoiding the pitfalls of social media.

Facebook

Don't provide too much information.

Facebook might seem like a place to interact with friends (and it is), but Facebook also attracts deviants, predators, and those hoping to steal the identities of others. Some information is necessary, but revealing too much is dangerous.

Understand the privacy settings.

Facebook's default privacy settings are not private. As a church, there is some information you will want to make available to all (who you are, what you believe in, where you are located, etc.), and other information you will want to keep private. Customise the privacy settings to get the right balance.

Protect your photos.

Sharing photo albums is one of the features that attracts many users to Facebook. But as a church, you should be extremely careful what pictures you post—and who you allow to view them. If minors are pictured, do not include their names in the captions. And do not make these photo albums available to everyone. Doing so could open up your church family to potential predators.

Twitter - Think before you Tweet

Be leery of shortened URLs.

Because of the 140-character limit for tweets, Twitter sparked the popularity of url-shortening services like bit.ly and TinyURL which reduce the number of characters in lengthy web addresses—making it possible to include these links in tweets. The problem with these shortened urls, however, is that they're ambiguous, and you can't be certain where the link will take you when you click on it. Never click one of these links unless you know and trust the person providing it. And do not "re-tweet" someone else's link unless you have verified that it indeed directs users to the destination the tweeter claims. The last thing you want to do is accidentally link to scandalous content from the church's Twitter feed.

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Use common sense.

Those tweeting from a church Twitter account need to remember that they are representing the church, not themselves. The best piece of advice for safe use of Twitter is this: think before you tweet. A little common sense can go a long way. For example, don't tweet the location where the youth group is going for a campout. If you want to tweet something about the event after the youth group has returned, then do that, but never broadcast the location of your students in advance of an event.

Blogs and Websites

Be careful to avoid copyright violations.

On both, church blogs and church websites, churches will want to be careful about violating copyright law.