

# Ministers social media policy

## 1 Policy Statement

The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (the Synod) is committed to ensuring that anyone who has a formal relationship with the Church, including ministers, undertakes to publish internal and external communications - including social media communications - that are responsible, respectful, and lawful.

## 2 Scope

This policy applies to all ministers, as defined in the Church's *Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice*, within the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

## 3 Objective

To provide direction to ministers for the responsible, respectful, and lawful publication of, and commentary on, social media.

## 4 Definitions

Definitions for the purposes of this policy are provided below.

'Social media' means any facility for online publication and commentary, including without limitation, blogs, forums/online communities, social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Vimeo, Periscope and You Tube.

'Minister' means candidates, community ministers, deacons, deaconesses, interns, lay pastors, ministers of the Word, pastors, youth workers and ministers from another denomination serving in an approved placement (Reg 2.9.5).

'Church' means the Uniting Church in Australia.

'Synod' means the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

## 5 Conditions of publishing or commenting via social media

If ministers adhere to the conditions of this policy they are free to comment on, publish or otherwise engage in social media activities.

Conditions are as follows:

- a) that the reputation of the Church is not brought into disrepute;
- b) that the minister makes it clear they are not speaking on behalf of the Church;
- c) that compliance is maintained with relevant legislation including copyright, privacy, and anti-discrimination legislation;
- d) that no person is defamed. Defamation comprises intentional false communication, either written or spoken, that harms a person's reputation; decreases the respect, regard, or confidence in which a person is held; or induces disparaging, hostile, or disagreeable opinions or feelings against a person;
- e) that information which is not in the public domain and/or confidential is not published;
- f) that use of social media is in accordance with responsibilities and obligations outlined in the Church's *Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice*.

# Social media guidelines

(to be used in conjunction with the Ministers social media policy)

## 1. Disclaimers

To help reduce the potential for confusion, if ministers are using their personal name account it is recommended they prominently display and make it clear to readers they are a UCA minister, and the views expressed are the minister's – whilst reflecting the standards for ministerial practice in the Code of Ethics.

Ministers should be aware that even though they have made it clear that views are personal, the public may automatically assume they are speaking on behalf of the Church, particularly if the minister is in a leadership role. The public may also incorrectly interpret what is being said as Church policy when posts on topical issues are made.

## 2. Protect privacy

Ministers should be mindful of posting information they would not want the public to see.

## 3. Respect confidentiality

It is perfectly acceptable for ministers to share content about their ministry and have a dialogue with the community, but it is not acceptable to publish confidential information. Proper care must be taken to not purposefully or inadvertently disclose any information that is confidential. If ministers are unsure about the confidentiality of any information, they should consult their supervisor and/or relevant presbytery officer.

## 4. Respect the audience

Ministers should always use social media respectfully. This includes not only the obvious (no ethnic slurs, offensive comments, defamatory comments, personal insults, obscenity, etc.) but also proper consideration of privacy and of topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory. Remember that social media is read internationally and topics and views that are acceptable in Australia may have cultural sensitivities for audiences in other countries. This does not mean relevant subjects should be avoided, more that it is good practice to think about everyone who may have access to posts.

## 5. Respect copyright laws

It is critical that ministers show proper respect for the laws governing copyright and fair use or fair dealing of copyrighted material owned by others, including the Church's own copyrights and brands. Ministers should always attribute quotes or work to the original author/source. It is good general practice to link to others' work rather than reproduce it.

## 6. Be honest

Do not blog anonymously, using pseudonyms, or false screen names. Transparency and honesty are paramount in social media use. Ministers should use their real name and be clear about who they are. Ministers should not say anything that is dishonest, untrue, or misleading.

## 7. Controversial issues

If ministers see misrepresentations made about the Church in the media and wish to point that out, always do so with respect and with facts. If ministers speak about others, they should ensure what is said is factual and it does not disparage that party.

## **8. Be the first to respond to and own mistakes**

If a minister makes an error, they should be up front about their mistake and correct it quickly. If someone accuses a minister of posting something improper (such as their copyrighted material or a defamatory comment about them), the minister should deal with it quickly, and remove/change it immediately. Being transparent and honest regarding mistakes is the only good way to practice social media.

## **9. Moving on**

If a minister is changing their placement they should ensure that updates are made to personal social media profiles to reflect this.

## **10. The law**

The Synod requires all ministers to respect Australian and State laws relating to cyber bullying, cyber stalking, cybercrime, and child abuse and sexual grooming. Grooming can include conduct online, for example via interaction through social media, web forums and emails. Many perpetrators of sexual offences against children purposely create relationships with victims, their families or carers in order to create a situation where abuse could occur.

<https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/safer-communities/protecting-children-and-families/grooming-offence>

Approved by: VicTas Synod Standing Committee: *1 December 2018*

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