



## DEALING WITH TROLLS AND ANGRY USERS: What to do when your page receives negative comments

If you are the manager of a church-affiliated Facebook, Twitter or Instagram account, it is likely you will come across negative comments on your page.

Creating a Facebook page means you are a publisher. Because of this, you must take reasonable steps to remove or moderate comments that constitute as defamation, harassment or bullying. You therefore have a responsibility to make sure defamatory and offensive comments are hidden or deleted.

It is important to have a social media moderation policy in place somewhere on your Facebook page/website that you can refer people to. Feel free to adopt the synod's [social media moderation policy](#) for your congregation. You can write this in your About section.

*Note: we recommend that you notify the synod if your page is targeted by negative comments. We can offer guidance on the best way to respond as well as monitor other social media channels. Email Communications Officer Tim Lam at [tim.lam@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:tim.lam@victas.uca.org.au).*

### What comments should be deleted or hidden?

Comments that may need to be deleted or hidden from your page include:

- Defamatory statements
- Personal attacks
- Profanity
- Sexist comments
- Racist comments
- Ageist comments
- Attacks against other religions
- Threats against other users
- Bullying and harassment
- Spam
- Comments that are irrelevant to the discussion
- Comments that are repetitive from the same poster

If the comments are directed at an entity (like the Uniting Church), we generally do not delete or hide the comments unless they breach the above rules. But if the attacks are directed at a specific or identifiable staff member/minister or at another user, then we may delete the comment.

It is important to differentiate between complaints and offensive comments that breach your social media policy. Negative complaints that are aggressive in tone may not necessarily be offensive. Deleting legitimate concerns from other users can lead to further backlash as it can be seen as censorship.



You can also check if the poster has many followers. Sometimes people set up fake accounts just to troll you and they don't actually have any followers. It is also good to check how many times the negative comment has been shared/liked. It could be that people have totally ignored what the poster has said anyway.

*Example 1:*

*All the Uniting Church does is push a leftist agenda. You have forgotten the true words of the Gospel.*

While the tone of this comment is hostile, it is acceptable as it does not directly attack any person and does not discriminate a person on the basis of religion, age, gender or race.

*Example 2:*

*All Muslims should be deported. We can't have terrorists threatening our way of life.*

This comment should be deleted because it is attacking a group of people on the basis of religion.

*Example 3:*

*I tried contacting my local Uniting Church to book the hall for a charity concert but a lady on the phone told that we could not book. When I asked why, she rudely said that it's because we were not regular churchgoers and hung up the phone before I had a chance to explain. So much for 'Christian' kindness!*

This is a legitimate grievance, should not be deleted and should be followed-up.

## Differences between hiding and deleting

When you hide a comment, it will disappear from public view but will still show up for the user who posted the comment, as well as their Facebook friends. Hiding a comment can help diffuse a potentially inflammatory situation as the comment is still visible to the person who posted it.

When you delete a comment, the comment is no longer visible to anyone. The person who posted the comment will know you have deleted it if they go back to the page, as they will see that their comment is missing.



*So when should you hide a comment and when should you delete?*

Generally speaking, hiding is for more minor infringements such as irrelevant comments or spam.

You should delete comments that are clearly in breach of your moderation standards, such as personal attacks on other users, threatening behaviour, racist and sexist comments etc.

If you are unsure, it is best to hide the comment as you can always unhide it later. Once a comment has been deleted, it is gone forever.

## STAGES OF RESPONSE

We adopt three stages of warnings for users who infringe our social media moderation policy.

### Stage 1: Delete comment and issue a general warning

If a user posts a comment that violates our social media moderation policy, we delete the comment and issue a general warning without directly mentioning their name.

The response below was posted in response to a comment in which a user made disparaging remarks about another user based on her age.

*Example response: We would like to remind everyone that while we encourage constructive opinions and interaction, attacks on other users on the basis of personal characteristics will not be tolerated. We ask all our users to adhere to our moderation policy (in the 'about' section) by not using language that is: threatening; abusive; defamatory; indecent; offensive or constitutes harassment. Any posts or comments which breach these guidelines will be deleted.*

### Stage 2: Delete and issue a specific warning that any further infringements will lead to a ban.

If the issue escalates and the offender continues to post abusive comments, we will delete the comment and issue a specific warning to them.

*Example response: (name), your comment was deleted because it breached our moderation policy. While we encourage constructive discussions, comments that are (name specific infringement) will not be tolerated. Continual breach of these guidelines will result in a ban from the page.*



### Stage 3: Ban user from page

If the abuse continues, we will ban the user from our page.

#### Tips

- Take the conversation offline when a complaint becomes heated or personal information needs to be shared. By politely asking the user to private message/call/email you, they are aware that you are following up their issue and not ignoring them.
- Differentiate between a complaint and an offensive comment.
- Always maintain a calm tone when responding.
- Sometimes the best way to respond is to not respond at all.
- Try to see from the perspective of the person posting the negative comment. Are they genuinely concerned about something? Or are they deliberately being provocative and offensive?
- A complaint can be an opportunity to engage in a conversation. The commenter may have misconceptions or misinformation about your church that you can clarify.
- Apologise if you have made a mistake.
- Do not delete comments unless you are absolutely sure that the comment contravenes community standards.
- Have a social media moderation policy on your page.
- Blocking and banning a user should be a measure of last resort.
- There is no universal way of handling negative comments. If you are unsure how to respond, contact the Communications Officer at [tim.lam@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:tim.lam@victas.uca.org.au).