

Recommended Technology Guidelines for Pastoral Work with Young People



Developed by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry
In Consultation with the USCCB
Secretariat for Child and Youth Protection
and the Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth

About This Document

Numerous dioceses, parishes, and ministry organizations have formulated guidelines and policies based on their particular needs. Others are in the process of doing so, and many others have no written guidelines.

In the interest of making the use of technology safe for young people and ministry leaders, the NFCYM offers the following guidelines, recommendations, and best practices as a supplement to what may already exist, or as a template for formulating policies.

This document provides guidance to pastoral ministers on the use of various technologies, and as an aid to pastoral ministers and diocesan, parish, and/or school personnel in determining appropriate boundaries in their use of technology within their professional relationships with others. These are merely guidelines and suggestions for use, and are not meant to be interpreted as definitive policy.

Additional information is also available through the NFCYM website: NFCYM.org/resources/technology



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Acknowledgements

Compiled by Matthew Robaszekiewicz for the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. The NFCYM is grateful to the arch/dioceses of Baltimore, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dubuque, Orlando, Fort Wayne-South Bend, and San Jose for the use of their policies and guidelines.



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Background and Introduction

“THE NEW COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA, IF ADEQUATELY UNDERSTOOD AND EXPLOITED, CAN OFFER PRIESTS AND ALL PASTORAL CARE WORKERS A WEALTH OF DATA WHICH WAS DIFFICULT TO ACCESS BEFORE, AND FACILITATE FORMS OF COLLABORATION AND INCREASED COMMUNION THAT WERE PREVIOUSLY UNTHINKABLE. IF WISELY USED, WITH THE HELP OF EXPERTS IN TECHNOLOGY AND THE COMMUNICATIONS CULTURE, THE NEW MEDIA CAN BECOME—FOR PRIESTS AND FOR ALL PASTORAL CARE WORKERS—A VALID AND EFFECTIVE INSTRUMENT FOR AUTHENTIC AND PROFOUND EVANGELIZATION AND COMMUNION.”

Pope Benedict XVI

*The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World:
New Media at the Service of the Word*
Message for the 2010 World Communications Day

Communicating the Gospel Message

Those who minister and work in pastoral settings with adolescents—youth ministry and catechetical leaders, pastors, teachers, school staff, and catechists—have long understood that our ministerial efforts are to be relational. In *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Youth Ministry*, it is expressed that, prosperous ministry with adolescents is, and has always been, built on relationships and effective communication.

The vision for youth ministry as identified by the U.S. bishops and others, clearly calls for the evangelization and catechesis of the young. The inculturation of the Gospel—in language and forms accessible to younger generations—is a complex, but essential task. For evangelization to be effective, it must “use their language, their signs and symbols, . . . answer the



questions they ask, and . . . [have impact] on their concrete life” (EN 63).

Church leaders, including Pope Benedict XVI, articulate the clear need to use new technologies to express the Word of God to all people in all generations. This is articulated as well in the *National Directory for Catechesis* as it states that, “using the media correctly and competently can lead to a genuine inculturation of the Gospel” (NDC 21). It further calls for:

- ☐ Training of pastoral ministers to be specialists in communications technology
- ☐ State-of-the-art productions centers
- ☐ Communication networks (NDC 21).

Media Usage

In this day and age, relationships, and communication within those relationships, are changing at a rapidly increasing rate. Consider the following statistics from a 2009 study by the PEW INTERNET AND AMERICAN LIFE PROJECT (*Teens and Social Media, April 2009*). It is reported that:

- 93% of teenagers, ages twelve to seventeen, are online
- 60% of teenagers have their own desktop or laptop computer
- 89% of teenagers get online from home
- 77% go online at school
- 71% go online from a friend’s or relative’s house
- 60% go online from a library
- 66% of households with teenagers go online via broadband, 22% via dial up, and 10% do not have access at home
- 63% of teenagers go online daily.

Teenage daily communication occurs in the following ways:

- 71% of teenagers own a cell phone
- 51% of teens use their cell phones regularly
- 42% of teens send messages through social networking sites
- 38% of teens send text messages to each other
- 32% of teens talk to friends on a landline phone
- 29% spend time with friends in person outside of school
- 26% send instant messages
- 16% send e-mail regularly.

As evidenced above, the majority of young people today utilize new technologies and social networking sites with much greater regularity than traditional e-mail accounts. In fact, the use of such sites is so popular among teenagers that it is increasingly difficult to reach a significant demographic in that population without using this technology. Therefore, out of pastoral and practical necessity, youth ministry and catechetical leaders, pastors, teachers, school staff, and catechists use this technology to communicate with young people and their parents.

Values to Guide Pastoral Practice

As ministry leaders employ new ways to reach out to young people (and others), questions may arise as to the proper use of such technology and social networking media. Additionally, communication technologies and the Internet will continue to evolve and school personnel, religious educators, and youth ministry leaders will need to keep pace with the latest tools and potential threats. The development of comprehensive policies that strike a balance between safety and pastoral effectiveness must be guided by three essential values. We must ask ourselves if the use of such technology is prudent, reasonable, and transparent.

Prudence encourages forethought and weighs the merit of the technology and its attending policies in light of pastoral effectiveness and potential risks. Policies and certain technologies may be deemed *reasonable* if the use is practical, sound, and considered a normative practice or standard. Lastly, being *transparent* requires that all we do is open to the scrutiny of others and that the use of technology and subsequent policies be clear, intelligible, and observable.

With this balance the ability to train, share new ministry techniques, communicate, and evangelize will be enhanced and continue to be an advantage for our parishes, schools, and ministries.

“THE NEW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ARE, INDEED, BRINGING ABOUT FUNDAMENTAL SHIFTS IN PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS. THE DESIRE FOR CONNECTEDNESS AND THE INSTINCT FOR COMMUNICATION THAT ARE SO OBVIOUS IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE ARE BEST UNDERSTOOD AS MODERN MANIFESTATIONS OF THE BASIC AND ENDURING PROPENSITY OF HUMANS TO REACH BEYOND THEMSELVES AND TO SEEK COMMUNION WITH OTHERS. IN REALITY, WHEN WE OPEN OURSELVES TO OTHERS, WE ARE FULFILLING OUR DEEPEST NEED AND BECOMING MORE FULLY HUMAN. LOVING IS, IN FACT, WHAT WE ARE DESIGNED FOR BY OUR CREATOR.”

Pope Benedict XVI
Message for the 2010 World Communications Day



Church and Ministry Websites

Recommendations

- ☐ Catholic parishes, schools, and organizations should make every effort to establish an organizational website and commit to regularly updating the content.
- ☐ Web content should consistently represent the views/teachings of the Catholic Church.
- ☐ Public websites should not contain personal and/or contact information about young people.
- ☐ Written permission must be attained prior to posting photographs, or other identifying information, of minors/young people on websites. When posting photographs of minors/young people, it is advisable to caption the photographs using only the individuals' first name.



Suggested Best Practices

- ☐ A minimum of two adults functioning with an official organizational capacity should have full access to all organizational account/site(s).
- ☐ No personal photographs or information of parish, school or organizational staff or volunteers should appear on any page/site. This includes family pictures, social events, home phone numbers and addresses, and personal e-mail accounts, etc.
- ☐ The official organizational logo or standard images should appear on the site to distinguish it as the organization's official site, and not that of a specific person.
- ☐ Communication with visitors to the site should be done through official organizational e-mail whenever possible.

Social Networking Websites

Recommendations

- ☐ Adult ministers should establish separate sites and pages for personal and professional use. Personal pages and information should be neither advertised nor accessible to young people.
- ☐ Ministry leaders utilizing social networking sites, either for ministerial or personal use, must be vigilant in representing themselves as ministers of the Catholic Church in all interactions that can be viewed publicly. Anything that could cause scandal to the ministry should be avoided. Such may include mention of inappropriate use of alcohol, advocacy of inappropriate music/movies, inappropriate language, inappropriate dress, or the expression of opinions that are contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church.
- ☐ Parents should be informed that a social networking site is being utilized as a standard part of the ministry.

Suggested Best Practices

- ☐ The most popular sites for social networking have been Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. Be aware of the terms of use, age restrictions, and privacy options and controls for each site prior to establishing a ministry presence.
- ☐ A minimum of two adults functioning with an official parish, school, and/or organizational capacity should have full administrative access to the account/site(s).
- ☐ Both adults should be registered to have e-mail alerts of page activity sent to their official organizational e-mail addresses. This allows for a quicker response time to urgent requests and helps to ensure that all postings are appropriate.
- ☐ There is a difference between initiating a "friend request" and accepting one. Friend/connection requests should be initiated by the young people, not the adult representative of the parish, school, and/or organization.
- ☐ In photographs of youth activities, youth should not be "tagged," or identified by name in the photograph.
- ☐ On the original social networking site, it is recommended that the "no tagging" option be set.
- ☐ Because of the potential of teen crises or time relevant information, the page should be monitored frequently by official organizational personnel. A plea for help that goes unanswered can be legally damaging to the parish, school, and/or organization and dangerous for teens and their families.
- ☐ No personal photographs or information of parish, school or organizational staff or volunteers should appear on any page/site. This includes family pictures, social events, home phone numbers and addresses, personal e-mail accounts, etc.

- ☐ The official organizational logo or standard images should appear on the site to distinguish it as the organization's official site, and not that of a specific person.

E-Mail and Text/Instant Messaging

Recommendations

- ☐ Good judgment should always be used with text based communication tools.
- ☐ Parents should be informed of the use of e-mail or instant messaging for communications purposes with minors, and that it is a standard part of youth ministry.
- ☐ It is recommended that ministers and volunteers should maintain separate e-mail accounts for professional/church and personal communications.
- ☐ The same boundaries observed in oral/personal communication should be adhered to when communicating via e-mail/text messages. E-mail, text messages, and instant messages can be logged, archived, and forwarded to other parties. Avoid engaging in any postings/communications that could be misconstrued or misinterpreted.
- ☐ It is recommended that clear guidelines or parameters be established with regard to times of communication between adults and young people. While young people may be on the phone/texting in the late evening hours, those who minister with young people should pre-determine a timeframe when it is too late to take a professional call, except in the case of serious urgency.

Suggested Best Practices

- ☐ Use a parish, school, or organizational e-mail account when communicating parish, school, or organizational business; not home or personal accounts.
- ☐ Communications should be professional and are being rendered on behalf of the parish, school, or organization to young people.
- ☐ E-mail and instant messaging should only be used with the matters that deal with one's professional relationship. Communicate only about matters relative to the ministry (i.e., parish, school, or organizational matters or pastoral care matters that are appropriate for discussion.)
- ☐ Care should be taken to maintain professionalism and appropriate boundaries in all communication. Do not overstep the boundaries of adult/student relationships.
- ☐ Avoid any communication which might be construed as having sexual overtones. Do not reply to any such e-mail received from teens; make and keep a copy of any such inappropriate communication and notify an administrator/pastor/supervisor if necessary.
- ☐ Write as though others will read what is written. Messages may easily be shared or forwarded with students and others.
- ☐ There is no such thing as a private e-mail/instant message.

All such communications are organizational in nature, may be viewed by the organization at any time, and may be subject to legal action.

- ☐ Ask, "If my bishop/pastor/principal asked to see this communication, would I be embarrassed by what I have written?" If the answer is "yes," do not send the message.
- ☐ Finally, e-mail can be misinterpreted. Always double check messages to see if someone reading it might read something into it that is not intended or if your message might be misinterpreted. If you think an e-mail might somehow be misunderstood, do not send it. Do not send messages in haste or when emotions are involved.

Blogging

Recommendations

- ☐ Professional, ministry based blogs should only be utilized to promote upcoming events or programs and for the purpose of evangelization and providing resources and information within the ministry setting. Such blogs should not be used to conduct or promote outside business and/or personal activities, and should not divulge any personal information regarding those being ministered to.
- ☐ Extreme care should be taken that information regarding personal blogs not be made available to young people.

Suggested Best Practices

- ☐ As in all professional/ministerial settings, posted information, opinions, references, and resources should reflect the teachings of the Catholic Church.
- ☐ Communications should be professional and are being rendered on behalf of the parish, school, or organization to young people.
- ☐ Blogs are an efficient method for disseminating fliers for upcoming activities, permission/consent forms, calendars, and ministerial updates.
- ☐ Other possible uses include: posting links and references for faith formation; communicating sacramental preparation information or parent resources; communicating daily Scripture passages, prayers, or spiritual links/resources.
- ☐ If youth are to engage in blogging as a part of an officially sanctioned organizational activity; such activity must be monitored by at least 2 adults, no youth should be identified by name or other personal information, and the content of such a blog must be in compliance with Catholic Church teaching and values.



Online Video and Chat Rooms

Recommendations

- It is recommended that streaming video be used for education, communication, and promotional purposes.
- Any use of live streaming or chat rooms that leads to, supports, or encourages exclusive youth-adult relationships is not recommended.
- When posting videos online, extreme care must be taken to protect the privacy of young people, and such videos should only be utilized to showcase/advertise ministry related events and activities.

Suggested Best Practices

- At no time is one-on-one video or chat room interaction appropriate between adults and minors.
- When presenting personal opinions and engaging in chats/discussions, it is essential for pastoral ministers to remember that even on the World Wide Web, others may recognize them as representing the values of the Catholic Church.

Registration Technologies and Securing Private Information

Capturing information on registration forms, surveys, etc. involves a higher degree of technical understanding and implementation than simple websites or blogs. Forms on webpages can use any number of technologies to record and transmit information, and the transmission of that information can be made more or less secure through the technical decisions and requirements used to develop that form. In simplest terms, no sensitive information should be transmitted through basic web interactions (“http://” in the URL). Only secure, encrypted transmissions (“https://” also known as “SSL” or “Secure Sockets Layer”) should be used.

In addition, though secure transmissions (“https://”) can happen through any web server, most modern browsers will display strongly worded warnings when the identity of the web server cannot be verified (particularly through third party verification services like Verisign or GeoTrust). Therefore, registration processes that will capture sensitive data usually involve the additional expense of securing a third-party secure certificate.

Recommendations

- No sensitive personal information—particularly financial information (credit card numbers, checking account numbers) and secure identifiers (e.g., social security numbers) should ever be transmitted through e-mail, web pages that convert form information into e-mail, or web forms using regular hypertext transmission (“http://” pages).
- No sensitive personal information should be transmitted over SSL (“https://”) unless the user can receive assurance that the communication with the server can be verified through third party services (Verisign, etc.)
- If the explanation of these technologies and the recommendations accompanying them are beyond the technical competence of the webmaster or staff person responsible for registration forms, that should be taken as a sign that the parish or organization should not be creating such forms. Those leaders should contact a technology/web solution provider for assistance.

Suggested Best Practices

- Leave the creation and management of secure web forms to a qualified web solution provider unless you understand the demands of secure transmissions and can assure that your website can accommodate such security.
- If possible, handle all financial transactions “in real time;” that is, on a commerce website that can process credit card transactions online, thus assuring that no financial data needs to be communicated to the parish/organization.
- Even if a form will not include financial information, all security protocols described above are to be followed if other sensitive personal data is transmitted (such as social security numbers, passwords, unlisted phone numbers, etc.).
- Acquire a third party secure certificate (for example, Verisign, GeoTrust, etc.) for any web server that will handle SSL (“https://”) transmissions.

