DIGITAL, ONLINE, AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

Policies and principles for those serving youth in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph

"In the area of communication too, we need a Church capable of bringing warmth and stirring hearts."

— Pope Francis, Message for the 48th World Communication Day, 2014

Digital, Online and Social Media Communication with Youth Policy

All digital, online, and social media communications with youth shall uphold the principle of transparency. All individuals communicating with youth (under 18 years of age or enrolled in high school) will do so in a prudent and professional manner to ensure compliance with the principles and procedures outlined in the Digital, Online and Social Media Communications with Youth manual.

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Digital, Online, and Social Media Communication: Essential Tools for All Who Minister in this Diocese

As our world moves into an increasingly digital and online environment, so have our ministries and extra-curricular activities. This is particularly true for those instructing, coaching and ministering to youth as more young Catholics utilize a wide variety of online, digital and social media platforms as their preferred methods of communication. Indeed, these media are essential tools for effective interaction with young people.

As ministers to young people, it is incumbent upon us to engage these new media in our efforts to communicate, evangelize, and share the Gospel with the next generation. However, new media involve challenges for both youth and those who minister to them. Thus, transparency, prudence and professionalism must guide our digital communication and online interactions with young people. In this way, we can improve ministry effectiveness while ensuring the privacy and safety of everyone involved.

To this end it is the policy of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph that:

> **All digital, online, and social media communications with youth shall uphold the principle of transparency. All individuals communicating with youth will do so in a prudent and professional manner and will ensure compliance with the principles and procedures outlined in this document.**

Due to the ever-evolving nature of this subject, this document will require periodic revision and updating. That said, the general policies and principles outlined herein shall be applied prudently and judiciously in the event an update has not occurred.

In this document:

Church Personnel includes all clerics, seminarians, religious, diocesan, parish and school employees and adult volunteers who work or volunteer on a regular or part-time basis within any organization designated as a diocesan entity.

Youth refers to young people below the age of 18 as well as those who are 18 and still in high school.

Transparency

It is vital that all electronic communications with youth be as transparent as possible. Communication shall be open and accessible to multiple parties. Personal, private, one-on-one communications between church personnel and individual youth through electronic or social media are prohibited. To this end:

1. Parents/guardians shall be made fully aware of all the media used to communicate with youth for ministerial, educational or extra-curricular activity purposes. Notification of these media shall be communicated to parents/guardians in a formal way (i.e., parent letter, parent meeting, etc.).
2. Written consent to post photographs or video of youth shall be gathered from parents/guardians (see Appendix).

3. Transparency imperatives:
    3.1. Church personnel shall not collect email addresses, phone numbers, or any other media of communication from youth without written permission from parents/guardians.
    3.2. Church personnel and volunteers should use approved social media sites and/or apps to communicate with youth.
    3.3. With the exception of trusted communications with youth involving a sensitive pastoral situation as detailed in this document, parents/guardians shall have full access to all media used in communicating with their children. They shall have access to the same information that their children are receiving, though this information need not be shared through the same media (i.e., email sent to parents/guardians about an upcoming event versus a Twitter post to youth about the upcoming event).
4. Individual, private, one-on-one communication is prohibited.
    4.1. In the event church personnel need to communicate directly with a youth, that youth's parent or other adult ministry leader shall be included in that message (i.e., a text message to youth which includes the parent/guardian or other adult).
5. More than one adult shall always be included when communicating with an individual youth in any digital, online, or social media forum. In educational settings the use of google classroom or similar program for communication between a teacher and two or more students is an acceptable means of communication as parents/guardians may view it anytime.
6. Passwords and names of all sites/apps/accounts shall be registered in a central location at the parish or school additionally accessible to Pastor, Principal (if school) or ministry administrator.

Prudent and Professional Parameters of Use

Both the virtue of prudence as well as standards of professional conduct ought to guide the boundaries and parameters of use. Appropriate boundaries that must be respected in any face-to-face or verbal communications also apply to electronic communications with minors and adults. The following parameters shall always be undertaken when communicating through digital, online, or social media:

1. All communications between church personnel and youth shall be appropriate, professional, and in conformity with teachings of the Catholic Church as well as the Diocesan Code of Conduct, *Ethics and Integrity in Ministry*.
2. The primary purpose of all communications with youth shall be to provide information related to education, a ministry, a school or parish event/activity or for evangelization efforts.
3. Acceptable hours for direct communication with youth are between 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. Church personnel are encouraged to use "scheduled sending" features should they choose to compose communications outside of acceptable hours (i.e., compose an email or Facebook post at 9:30 p.m. and schedule it to go out to the group at 7am the next morning).
    3.1. Communication outside of acceptable hours may be warranted to communicate important information during a ministry related event whose hours extend

beyond those hours (i.e., an overnight retreat, mission trip, youth conference, etc.). Parents/guardians and/or other chaperoning adults must be included in any communication outside of acceptable hours.

Ownership of Digital Communication

1. All information and messages that are created, sent, received or stored using diocesan, parish or school communication assets are the sole property of the entity, and no user has any ownership interest or expectation of privacy in such communications.
2. The diocese, parish and/or school retains the right, in its sole discretion, to review all information or communications sent, received, stored, or posted using diocesan, parish and/or school communication assets.
3. The diocese, parish and/or school also retains the right to track internet sites, chat rooms, social media activity, as well as file downloads, for compliance with diocesan, parish and/or school policies, and for other business and ministerial reasons.
4. Church personnel using a private, personal device to communicate with youth for ministry related purposes must agree to make the contents of their device available upon request to the appropriate diocesan oversight office should there be suspicion of inappropriate communication. The continued position of church personnel using a private, personal device is contingent upon cooperation with this request.

Reporting inappropriate communication

If at any time church personnel receive personal communication that is deemed inappropriate in any form, from a youth or from other individuals participating in or overseeing a program, the following steps shall be taken:

1. Maintain an electronic copy of the communication and print a hard copy.
2. Document the details of the communication in writing (especially if it was a verbal interaction).
3. Notify the Ombudsman, Office of Child and Youth Protection, or appropriate oversight supervisor immediately.

Trusted communication with youth involving sensitive pastoral situations

As ministers to young people we recognize that situations may arise which require us to withhold notifying a parent/guardian about our direct communication with their child. For example, a youth may disclose a situation of alleged abuse in the home that must be kept temporarily confidential to protect the safety of the child. Or, a youth may disclose a personal struggle or "safety at risk" information which they don't want their parents to immediately know about. If a youth shares these types of sensitive pastoral situations either directly or through digital forms of communication, the following must be followed without exception:

1. Nearly all Church personnel are not trained therapists or certified counselors and must learn to recognize the difference between a circumstance that requires patient listening and proper pastoral care, and a circumstance that requires professional help. They should serve as a bridge to resources and encourage youth to seek the help they need. Digital platforms should never become personal therapy sessions.
2. Church personnel who work directly with youth are **mandated reporters** and must report any suspected or direct revelation of physical or sexual abuse of a youth, or if a youth is a safety risk to themselves or others, to the Missouri Department of Social Services Child Abuse Hotline; to local law enforcement or 911 if the child is believed to be in immediate danger; to the Ombudsman if the report involves a diocesan employee, cleric or volunteer, and to the personnel's direct supervisor.
3. If a youth discloses sensitive, "safety at risk" information (i.e., drug or alcohol abuse, struggles with promiscuity, cutting, depression, bullying/harassment, etc.) and has requested confidentiality:
   3.1. Reassure the youth you as Church personnel are a trusted source to share with, but cannot promise confidentiality. While they will try their best to protect the youth's privacy and trust, they need to share this information with another adult to get the youth aid and assistance.
   3.2. Maintain transparency by bringing this information to the attention of another supervising adult (such as a Principal, Pastor, DRE, or other supervisor) so that someone else is aware that you are engaging in trusted communication with a youth on a sensitive pastoral situation.
   3.3. Include the Principal, Pastor, DRE, or other supervisor on any further electronic communication with the youth.
   3.4. Keep written documentation of the details of your communications noting the dates, times, and nature of the communication.
   3.5. Encourage and accompany the youth to seek assistance from and share their situation with their parent/guardian and help connect them to appropriate resources and/or professional counseling.

Specific Application

1. **Cell Phone, Text and Instant Messaging**
One-on-one text messaging with youth is prohibited. Preference shall always be given to group texting. Group texts shall include more than one adult in the group and shall be sent only from official accounts/phone numbers/apps associated with the parish or school.

2. **Personal Social Networking Sites**
   2.1. Church personnel shall not use personal social networking accounts to communicate with youth. Social media communication shall always be done from a group account associated with the parish, school or affiliate.
      2.2. If church personnel choose to have a personal social networking account, it shall be private and not accessible to youth. Non-familial youth shall not be "friends", "followers" or have any association with church personnel via their personal social media account.

3. **School, Parish/Youth Ministry Social Networking Sites**
    3.1. Any social networking site used in school and/or parish ministry shall be administered by the school/parish. This means the account is approved in advance by the principal/pastor, registered in the name of the school/parish, and labeled to reflect the official character of the site. School/parish administrators and their designees have the ability to control content and access the communications history of the social media account.
    3.2. Privacy Settings: Groups/sites intended for specific communication with youth shall be set to maximize privacy. Groups/sites intended for wide publication would not require restricted privacy, depending upon the purpose and target audience.
    3.3. More than one adult shall have access to and oversight of the account.
    3.4. All content and activity shall be in compliance with the teachings of the Catholic Church and the standards for pastoral practice as outlined in the Diocesan Code of Conduct – *Ethics and Integrity in Ministry*.
    3.5. School/parish/youth ministry/sports or other activity Facebook or other social media groups shall be "closed" or private groups. The group administrator shall retain permissions to add new users to the group. Settings should be reviewed often to ensure that they remain private and closed.
    3.6. Identifying youth, e.g., "tagging" photos or videos posted on social media, is only allowed with written parental permission. It is preferred to use only first names of youth in photo captions for newsletters, articles, etc.
    3.7. Principals, ministry leaders and parish administrators must monitor social networking activity and quickly respond to any inappropriate content that occurs.

4. **Email**
    4.1. Every effort should be made by the school/parish to provide church personnel with a school/parish email account for use in their respective ministry/classroom. Church personnel shall not use a personal e-mail account for their ministry/classroom work and shall keep separate accounts for personal use and ministry/classroom use.
        4.1.1. If a school/parish account is not available, then church personnel shall open a separate account for ministry and provide the principal/pastor or appropriate supervisor access to the account.
        4.2. Church personnel shall cc: parents/guardians on all email communication with youth. In the event this is not possible or is a sensitive pastoral situation, the appropriate supervisor shall be copied.

5. **Video Calling, Chat Rooms, Hangouts, and online video game forums**
    5.1. At no time shall one-on-one communication take place between youth and church personnel in chat rooms, private online hangouts, online video gaming forums, or through video call services such as Skype or Google Chat.

5.2. If church or school personnel want to establish an online group hangout or conduct a live group video call for purposes of ministry or education, parents shall be notified and written permission shall be granted for those to participate (if not already done so). These media shall always be done in a group with more than one adult helping to administer the communication.

6. **Blogging and Vlogging (video blogs)**
   6.1. Professional, school or ministry-based blogs (written or video based) may be utilized for catechesis, event promotions, sharing resources, education or evangelization. Blogs shall not be used to conduct personal business and shall never divulge personal information of youth being educated or ministered to.
   6.2. Professional, school or ministry-based blogs (written or video based) shall be in conformity with the teachings of the Catholic Church as well as the standards for pastoral practice as outlined in the Diocesan Code of Conduct – *Ethics and Integrity in Ministry*.
   6.3. Professional, school or ministry-based blogs (written or video based) shall be administered by the school/parish and monitored by at least two adults.
   6.4. If a blog has a "comment" function enabled, administrators shall monitor comments closely and react quickly should any comment turn inappropriate.

7. **School or Youth Ministry Webpage or Website**
   7.1. School or youth ministry webpages or websites shall be related to or an extension of the school or parish website. In the event that a parish website is not available, the school or youth ministry website shall be registered in the name of the parish or school.
   7.2. A minimum of 2 adults functioning with an official organizational capacity shall have full access to the website account.
   7.3. Public websites shall not contain personal information, or contact information about youth.
   7.4. Written permission from a parent/guardian shall be obtained prior to posting any photographs, videos, or other identifying information about youth on a webpage or site. (See Appendix) It is preferred to use only first names of youth in photo captions for online videos or photographs.

Please direct questions or requests for more information to:

Digital/Social Media Coordinator   Catholic Schools Office

Director of Youth Ministry   Office of Child and Youth Protection

Director of Catechesis and Faith Formation

For information from the State of Missouri, regarding reporting Child Abuse and Neglect, please visit http://dss.mo.gov/cd/can.htm or call:

The Missouri Child Abuse & Neglect Hotline: 1.800.392.3738

The Missouri Adult Abuse and Neglect Hotline: 1.800.392.0210

Parent/Guardian Consent for use of Photographs And Similar Recordings

Name(s) of Student(s) and Child(ren):

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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I hereby grant permission to The Catholic Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph ("the Diocese") for this/these student(s)/child(ren) to be included and identified in photographs, images, audio, video, and activity-related statistics (collectively, "photographs") made in connection with

_____ Parish/School/Center and/or the Diocese. I also grant the Diocese the right to use, publish, exhibit or distribute such photographs for purposes of advertising, promoting or marketing the Diocese, its parishes, schools, other institutions and/or any funding program or other program affiliated with the Diocese. I understand that I have no copyright interest in such photographs, and that the Diocese need not obtain any further approval from me to use the photographs.

_____

Name of parent/guardian (print)

_____

Signature   Date

Forms will be kept on file in the parish/school/center for a period of three years

Available Apps and Services

The following apps and services are possible programs that the Office of Youth Ministry, Catholic Schools Office and the Office of Child and Youth Protection have found to be helpful communication tools for ministry that comply with the policy and procedures of this document. The use of these applications and others like them should always be used in accordance with the policy and procedures outlined in this document. As other applications and services are reviewed they will be added to this list. Questions about a particular app or service should be directed to any of the offices listed above.

Flock Note

Flocknote is a communications application designed specifically for Catholic church ministry. The app helps communicate with groups of people through text and email messaging. Type one message and it is sent to the group through each person's preferred method of communication. It can be used by individual groups or the entire parish. By organizing your church into different groups and ministries on Flocknote, the message gets to exactly who needs it, and to no one who doesn't. Plus members can reply directly to any email or text message, vote in polls, RSVP to events and more.

Flocknote has emerged as one of the most preferred and reputable communications apps for church ministry. Its features ensure compliance with safe environment standards, and make it easy to comply with the principles and procedures outlined in this document. Groups 40 and under are free. Groups over 40 members pay a monthly fee beginning at $5 per month.

Learn more: www.flocknote.com

Remind

Remind is a communications application designed for school and classroom use, yet is easily adaptable to a parish youth ministry or catechetical setting. Through Remind youth as well as parents are invited to join an online forum where they can receive announcements, reminders, documents, and other communications via text or email or both. Like Flock Note, one note is sent to the group and they can receive it and reply through their own preferred method of communication.

Because it is designed for classroom use its features easily conform to the principles and policies outlined in this document. Individual accounts are free. Plans are available for entire parishes for a modest monthly fee.

Learn more: www.remind.com

Group Me

Group Me is a text messaging application that enables one to text a large group of people at the same time from the phone or computer. Participants are invited to join a group and all can receive a group text from everyone in the group. This app is ideal for events or trips where one might have to communicate a quick message to a large group in an efficient manner. By adding adult chaperones or parents to the group chat the principle of transparency is upheld.

Learn more: www.groupme.com

Google Voice

Google Voice is a free telecommunications service provided by Google wherein users can obtain a single phone number through their Google account that can be synced to all of one's electronic devices. No longer do you have to give out an office, cell and home number – with Google Voice, whenever the Google Voice number is dialed it will ring each phone and device synced to the service. Moreover, phone calls and text messages can be sent and tracked through a computer making it easy for multiple users to have access account activity.

Google Voice is helpful for church personnel because it enables you to communicate with youth and families in a transparent way. All phone calls, texts, and messages are accessible through one's google voice account, and you can protect your privacy by not giving your private number to youth.

Learn More: www.google.com/voice