

# Cape Synod

## Social Media Guidelines

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# Social Media Guidelines

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*“To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others – even our enemies – is a denial of our common humanity.”*

**- Charter for Compassion**

## **Introduction and purpose**

The Cape Synod regards social media as an important component for creating and strengthening relationships with members of the congregation and the world. Social media offers the opportunity to be in touch with members and interlocutors way of life; it creates the opportunity for listening and talking. For the church /congregations to be relevant, its voice must be audible where people live and work and live. Social media is a testimony opportunity, it allows for conversation about church /faith /religion (which, moreover, is already continuing with or without the church), responding first-hand and timely and addressing perceptions.

We believe it is in the best interests of our synod, our URCSA Church family (and the religious community in the broader sense) to participate in social media in order to receive the good news about Jesus Christ on this medium, e.g. by sharing Facebook, Twitter, blogs, online discussion groups and any other website or internet platform where comments can be shared and posted.

The Cape Synod supports freedom of expression and the right of association. However, users must exercise these rights in a responsible manner so that the synod, colleagues and others that are associated with the synod, is not be harmed at all. Social media users should bear in mind that they have responsibilities as representatives of the synod and that their actions may have a constructive or destructive effect on the synod's public image and reputation.

The following tips and guidelines aim to provide the synod / congregations / ministers with useful, practical advice. These guidelines serve as a tool for positive participation in social media. Through these guidelines, both the interest of the Cape Synod and the individual social media user are protected at the same time. Note, however, that this document should not be treated as enforceable rules or lawful legal proceedings. It complements the Synod's wish that its employees will use social media in a moral and ethical manner.

These guidelines are complementary to the synod's internet and email policies, as well as the standard code of conduct for staff members of the Synod of the Cape. The document is regularly updated as needed.

## 1. Tips

### 1. Set the values of the synod / congregation

- ✓ Base your participation in social media respectfully and communicate with good taste.
- ✓ Be sensitive about links to external content. If you refer your followers / readers, it may be considered that you / the church / congregation endorse that content and source support.
- ✓ Do not belittle or humiliate others.
- ✓ Do not detract from the integrity of others.

### 2. Be open

- ✓ State who you are and who you work for / what your role is.
- ✓ It is difficult to make a clear distinction between yourself and yourself professional life (profession). If you, as an individual, make statements about the church / faith / religion, make it clear that you, although employed by / connected to the church / congregation, are following opinion and viewpoint as an individual and that it is not necessarily the views of the church / congregation.
- ✓ Do not contribute to possible confusion by using the church / congregation display logo / seal / slogan on your personal comments / profile

### 3. Protect confidential information and relationships

- ✓ Media is private; it can (and probably will) be shared and spread by others. Therefore:
- ✓ Avoid identifying or discussing others (colleagues / members / clients / acquaintances and others) without their permission.
- ✓ Get permission for posting copyrighted information as far as possible.
- ✓ Avoid discussing confidential information at all times, whether in your personal capacity or otherwise.

### 4. Speak the truth

- ✓ Make sure of your facts before writing them and submitting them to the world via social media.
- ✓ Make sure references and sources are recent and updated regularly.

### 5. Keep calm

- ✓ Give your opinion clear and logical.
- ✓ Correct errors where necessary.
- ✓ Ignore provocative comments, instead of responding to it and placing more attention on them.
- ✓ Act in a Christian manner with others so as to build up the church of Jesus Christ.

### 6. Stay relevant

- ✓ If you want to engage and be part of a meaningful conversation, you need to make time to work on your social media content, answer questions and post new information.

7. Be careful about how much **personal information you share**.
8. **Do not be fooled**
  - ✓ Stay away from unknown / suspicious links you need to click on.
  - ✓ An offer that is too good to believe is just that: too good to believe.
9. **Effectively manage settings / functions / options** on your social media or account so that anyone cannot just put any information there.
10. Beware of security alerts and messages sent to you via anti-virus software.
  - ✓ Do not react to messages or clicks on links.
  - ✓ Ensure effective security software.
  - ✓ Make sure that the office bearer / minister (with the communication team or others proxy) has access to the administration of the synod / congregation's social media at all times and that he / she signs in on social media platforms from time to time. In doing so, you increase the legitimacy of the "voice" of social media.

## 2. Guidelines

### 1. Christian values

- 1.1. The Season of Human Dignity's Values: Respect, listen, love and embrace, lead our conversations and participation in social media.
- 1.2. Test words, opinions, and attitudes to the Word of God.
- 1.3. Strive to make the fruit of the Spirit visible in the Synod of the Western Cape's social media presence and contributions.

### 2. Care and accuracy

- 2.1. As far as possible, be mindful of language use, general language editing and spelling for clear communication.
- 2.2. No crude or blasphemous language or statements are allowed.
- 2.3. Check facts before information is published, shared or forwarded, even if the source seems reliable.
- 2.4. Do not present allegations, hearsay information, insinuations or personal interpretations as truth.
- 2.5. Avoid stereotyping and generalization.
- 2.6. Do not claim or imply that you speak on behalf of the synod / congregation unless you are properly authorized to do so.

### 3. Quotes

- 3.1. Use your own words as far as possible.
- 3.2. Where quotes are essential, limit them to 100 words. In such a case, the quote needs to be accompanied with correct references - and preferably with a link (URL).

#### **4. Healthy debate**

- 4.1. Every person is entitled to respect and human dignity.
- 4.2. Different from others without any form of personal insult, ridicule or suspicion.
- 4.3. Criticize views and not people.
- 4.4. Avoid commenting on others' faith or personal life.
- 4.5. Avoid any form of threats and hate speech.
- 4.6. Reacts rationally and not emotionally.
- 4.7. Social media users still need to comply with national laws, e.g. laws regarding copyright, privacy, defamation, discrimination and harassment laws.

#### **5. Confidentiality**

- 5.1. NEVER disclose non-public information about the synod / congregation (including confidential information), and be aware that it may cause conflict to publicly view standpoints contrary to the interests of the synod / congregation.
- 5.2. Do not share any information that has not yet been officially announced in public.
- 5.3. Do not share your log-in or passwords with anyone.
- 5.4. Do not disclose your colleagues' personal information via social media (and without their permission).
- 5.5. Refrain from any comments on legal issues, lawsuits, or any parties with which the Synod / congregation is bringing legal proceedings.

#### **6. Visual material**

- 6.1. Works with great care and sensitivity before posting identifiable footage or videos; preferably (where applicable and where possible) get prior permission to do so.
- 6.2. Work especially sensitively and cautiously on certain vulnerable groups such as minors, patients and the elderly.
- 6.3. Legislation relating to the protection of minors' identity and safety should be given particular consideration when sharing photos and other information on social media.
- 6.4. Where minors' photos are shared with the legal guardian / parent's consent, the minor may not be identified. Any such visual material may not be provided to a third party or used for financial gain.
- 6.5. The use of "geo-tagging" (which indicates the coordinates of a person's location) as part of especially minors' photos must be avoided due to the inherent danger of traceability that it may entail. Users' sound judgment when it comes to indicating the location of an event is important here.

#### **7. Moderation of contributions**

It is impossible to constantly moderate and control individual comments on social media. Individuals who do not adhere to the guidelines will be banned from the Synod of the Cape's social media platforms to allow others to continue conversing within the values of the Church. We accept that conversations cannot be restricted to a single platform, and recommend that conversations that fall outside these guidelines be conducted elsewhere.

The synod further deletes comments and conversation partners according to the following guidelines:

- Insinuations that pastors, individually or as a group, do not meet the requirements of being ministers. It includes accusations of heresy, lack of faith, and incapacity to do their job. There are official channels through which complaints can be made; our own platforms may not be used to spread these rumours.
- Discussionists taking over the page to enforce their own agenda, repeatedly insisting that certain topics be discussed or commenting on marketing links to other sites.
- Comments that offend others - even when it is described as a form of religious admonition - or defamatory remarks to others, which include both untruths as well as remarks aimed at damaging others.
- Commenting on others' beliefs and Christianity on the basis of different interpretations of certain aspects of the Christian tradition.
- Comments that, in the opinion of the administrator, do not contribute to respectful dialogue.

## **8. Official comment**

8.1. The Social Media of the Synod of the Cape (Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and Instagram) serves as a forum for communicating information and listening to opinions. However, this does not serve as the official mouthpiece of the synod.

8.2. Media statements must first be approved by the designated persons - never say anything on behalf of the synod if it is not approved.

8.3. Contact the moderator's secretary for handling the synod's official response: [scribe@vgksa.org.za](mailto:scribe@vgksa.org.za) or call the office at 021 9522151.

## **9. Social media during church meetings**

9.1. The use of social media during meetings should not be the primary focus.

9.2. The use of social media during meetings must be handled sensitively so that everyone present can still listen attentively and be fully "present" at the meeting - without the use of social media being distracting.

## **10. Indemnity**

Users of the Synod of the Cape's social media should note that the synod, its employees, office bearers and representatives will not be liable for any loss, damage or expense of whatever nature, directly or indirectly caused by the use of the information on the different social media platforms of the synod.

The synod cannot guarantee the accuracy of any contact information or link on any part of our social media platforms, and assumes no responsibility whatsoever for the services or advice that may be provided by third parties identified on the synod's social media or not recommended.

## **11. Last word from (law) experts**

This Code of Conduct does not attempt to make any statements about the legal aspects of sharing information on social media. Legal experts advise social media users to use their sound judgment and generally accepted norms of ethical behaviour when it comes to sharing information or commenting on it.

Emma Sadleir and Tamsyn De Beer highlight some of the inherent problems with social media communication in their book *Don't film and having sex and other legal advice for the age of social media*.

"Social media lacks context; social media lacks tone; On social media you have no control over your audience.

"... liberating potential of technology often reveals an unfortunate fact of human nature: when given the opportunity to hide behind a veneer of anonymity, and removed from the consequences of our actions, we somehow find license within ourselves to have in and less entirely contrary to what we know about acceptable social behaviour.

"... there is no separate set of 'social media laws' or 'cyber laws' that apply exclusively to the online world. The same laws that apply to your conduct in the real world apply in your conduct (and content) in cyberspace.

"...the reputational consequences of getting it wrong on social media have the potential to be so much more serious and life changing than any legal or disciplinary consequences could ever be. And that is because in the digital age it doesn't take five minutes to ruin your reputation, it takes five seconds. Your reputation can be ruined at the push of a button. And you'll never get it back.

"Much as a newspaper takes responsibility for the content of its pages, the creator or administrator of a Facebook page has an obligation to take down unlawful postings that appear on that page. He is answerable for anything that remains. The administrator of a Facebook page (or any other online platform) can be held liable for content appearing on that page. It doesn't matter if it is the business page of a multinational company or the private page of a little old lady."

- Don't film yourself having sex and other legal advice for the age of social media by Emma Sadleir and Tamsyn de Beer, Penguin 2014