COMMUNICATION POLICIES

For Those Working with Minors or Vulnerable Adults

"Communication is a means of expressing the missionary vocation of the entire Church; today the social networks are one way to experience this call to discover the beauty of faith, the beauty of encountering Christ. In the area of communications too, we need a Church capable of bringing warmth and of stirring hearts" (Pope Francis' Message for the 48th World Communications Day [WCD], 2014).

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ARCHDIOCESE OF OKLAHOMA CITY
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Church can use social media to encourage respect, dialogue, and honest relationships—in other words, "true friendship" (Pope Benedict XVI's Message for the 43rd World Communications Day, 2009). To do so requires us to recognize social media as a powerful means of evangelization and to consider the Church's role in providing a Christian perspective on digital literacy. Those who minister and work in pastoral settings with minors, e.g. youth ministers and catechetical leaders, pastors, teachers, school staff, tutors, volunteers in athletic and other youth programs, catechists, etc. and those who work with vulnerable adults, e.g., spiritual directors, pastors, elder care staff and volunteers, etc., have long understood that our ministerial efforts are to be relational. In “Evangelii Nuntiandi: Evangelization in the Modern World,” Pope Paul VI emphasized that prosperous ministry with adolescents is built on relationships. For evangelization to be effective, it must “use their language, their signs and symbols [and] answer the questions they ask, and [have impact] on their concrete life” (EN 63).

These policies are intended to encourage healthy communication with minors and vulnerable adults within parishes and other ministries or organizations within the Church. It is imperative in keeping with our goal of creating and teaching a safe technological environment that our communication with minors and vulnerable adults stay within appropriate boundaries that maintain a professional ministry relationship. These policies will foster a safe environment for our young people, teach them prudence when using means of electronic communication, and protect the reputations of employees/volunteers and the Catholic Church as well as protect vulnerable adults.

School personnel, religious educators, and youth ministry leaders will need to keep pace with the latest tools and potential threats as the Internet continues to evolve. It is ultimately their responsibility to be educated in this field of technology used by our youth. These comprehensive policies are meant to strike a balance between safety and pastoral effectiveness. All communication with minors should be prudent, reasonable, and transparent. These principles also apply to ministry with vulnerable adults.

These guidelines were first adopted by Archbishop Coakley on February 20, 2017. These revisions, dated June 30, 2020, supersede and replace that document.

KEY TERMS

“Social Media” means any form of digital electronic communication, websites or applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

“Church personnel” means clergy, vowed religious, seminarians, candidates for the diaconate and lay employees or volunteers serving the Archdiocese, a parish, a school, or other Archdiocesan entity, including, but not limited to, Parish Council members, Parish Finance Council members, Catholic School Advisory Council members, Archdiocesan Finance Council members.
“Young Adult” means any person age 18-39.

“Minor” means any person under age 18.

“Vulnerable Adults” means persons with physical, mental, emotional, developmental, social, financial, or other conditions that render them unable to defend or protect themselves or get help when at risk of harm.

“Mandated Reporter” - Under Oklahoma State law, all individuals MUST report known or suspected sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect or exploitation of a minor to the civil authorities. The Oklahoma Department of Human Services has established a statewide abuse hotline for reporting: 800-522-3511.

BOUNDARIES

1. Church personnel who minister and work in pastoral settings should be vigilant regarding healthy boundaries with everyone they serve, but especially, minors and vulnerable adults. Minors and vulnerable adults are not the peers of an adult serving within a ministry capacity. It is inappropriate for Church personnel to include minors or vulnerable adults within their own social circle, online or otherwise. All employees and volunteers must adhere to the Archdiocesan Code of Conduct.

2. Church personnel should not be accessible to the minors and vulnerable adults they serve on a constant on-call or regular social basis. Clear communication and respect for boundaries is needed at any level of contact with minors and vulnerable adults. As a representative of the Church, those who minister to minors and vulnerable adults should be diligent in avoiding situations that might be a source of scandal for themselves or others. This includes the 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.

PRIMACY OF PARENTS/GUARDIANS

3. Parents and guardians are the primary educators and the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. Those who minister in pastoral settings must recognize the importance of the role of parents and guardians when dealing with all forms of communication with minors and vulnerable adults. As always, we seek a partnership with parents and guardians in the faith formation of their children and with those ministering to vulnerable adults.

4. Parents and guardians should be informed in writing and agree to the communication tools that will be used in ministry with their youth or vulnerable adults. It is recommended that clear guidelines and parameters be established with regard to times of communication between Church personnel and young people and vulnerable adults. 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 e-mail, call or text, except in the case of serious urgency.

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WEBSITES AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

GUIDELINES

5. Catholic parishes and schools should make every effort to establish an organizational website and commit to regularly updating the content. Web content should consistently represent the teachings of the Catholic Church. Social networking sites, if used, should be set up as a separate site for dedicated parish or school use, and the site name should reflect this.

6. Parents/Guardians should be informed that a social networking site is being utilized as a standard part of the ministry, and should be invited to join so they can be aware of all communication being sent to their children. The same should be required with respect to guardians or other persons having responsibility for the well-being of vulnerable adults.

7. Those in ministry should be aware of the terms of use, age restrictions, and privacy options and controls for each site prior to establishing a ministry presence. The “no tagging” option should be set to ensure no one’s privacy is breached.

8. Written permission must be obtained from the parent or guardian of a minor 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 names. Public websites should not contain personal and/or contact information of young people. Written permission of a vulnerable adult or legal representative, if applicable, must be obtained before similar posting similar material.

9. A minimum of two adults functioning in an official organizational capacity should have full access to all organizational account/site(s). Each parish/school administrator should decide who those people should be. 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.

10. No personal photographs or personal information of parish, school or organizational staff or volunteers should appear on any ministry related page/site. This includes family pictures, social events, phone numbers, addresses and personal e-mail accounts.

11. Communication with visitors to the site should be done through official organizational e-mail whenever possible.

12. Because of the potential for teen or adult crises or time-relevant information, the page/site should be monitored frequently by official organizational personnel. A plea for help that goes unanswered can be dangerous for teens, vulnerable adults, and their families and legally damaging to the parish, school, and/or organization.

13. The official logo of the organization should appear on the webpage/site.

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14. If Church personnel use social media for personal use, they should establish separate sites and pages for personal and ministerial use. Personal pages and information should be neither advertised nor accessible to young people.

15. Church personnel utilizing social networking sites for ministry must be vigilant in presenting themselves as ministers of the Catholic Church in all interactions that can be viewed publicly. Anything that could cause scandal to the ministry must be avoided.

16. Church personnel should neither send a “friend request” to, nor accept a “friend request” from a minor on any personal social media platform. There are other acceptable means for communication.

**E-MAIL, TEXTING, VIDEO CHATTING, VIDEO CONFERENCING, ETC.**

Keep in mind that new forms of social media and communication are constantly being created and developed. Apply procedures and policies to any and all forms of communication.

17. All conversations should be kept in line with Archdiocesan Safe Environment policies, including the Code of Conduct.

18. If e-mail or text messaging is used as a form of communication with minors in the parish/organization, parents should be informed. Messages sent to minors should normally have parents copied so they are aware of what is being communicated. If direct messages are sent to minors and parents are not included, they always should include another safe environment trained adult who is not related to the adult sending the message. Group messages always should include another safe environment trained adult. If a vulnerable adult is in the care of another by virtue of guardianship, power of attorney, etc., the same principles should be followed.

19. Church personnel receiving a message of an inappropriate personal nature from a minor or vulnerable adult should not respond to the message. To prevent any appearance of impropriety, the employee/volunteer should notify his/her supervisor or pastor of this incident immediately. The parent/guardian or legal representative should be contacted immediately by the supervisor or pastor unless the parent/guardian is suspected of wrongdoing regarding the content or transmission of the inappropriate message. The message should be retained by the recipient until the matter is resolved, but it should not be forwarded or copied. Law enforcement should be notified where warranted or required by law.

20. Church personnel receiving a message from a minor or vulnerable adult indicating an emergency situation must immediately attempt to contact a parent or legal guardian and/or call 9-1-1 when necessary. Church personnel must exercise caution if they have sufficient reason to fear that notifying the parent(s) or guardian could put the minor or vulnerable adult in serious danger. In such a situation, consultation with a supervisor, pastor, principal, youth minister or other responsible adult should be arranged as soon as possible. In an extreme situation, it may be necessary for the Archdiocese to
provide legal consultation. Church personnel also must inform the pastor or supervisor unless the pastor or supervisor is implicated in the emergency.

21. It is recommended that ministers and volunteers should maintain separate e-mail accounts for professional and personal communication.

22. Avoid engaging in any postings or communication that can be misconstrued or misinterpreted. When in doubt, ask another employee or volunteer leader to review content before posting or sending.

23. Church personnel should save copies of communications whenever possible, especially those that concern the personal sharing of a minor, young adult, or vulnerable adult.

24. Church personnel should not use forms of digital communication that cannot be saved.

25. Encourage the young people not to use their phones to communicate with others concerning illness or injury at youth events/activities until appropriate contacts, including parents or guardians, have been made by those in charge.

26. Care should be taken to maintain professionalism and appropriate boundaries in all communication. Do not overstep the boundaries that should exist between adults in pastoral ministry and minors and vulnerable adults.

27. Remember that messages easily can be shared or forwarded with students and others. There is no such thing as a private message.

28. E-mails and other forms of digital communication can be misread. Always double check messages, including spell-check if possible, to make sure that your message is clear and won’t be misinterpreted. Do not send messages in haste or when angry.

**BLOGGING, CHAT ROOMS, ONLINE VIDEO AND GAMING**

Keep in mind that new forms of social media and communication are constantly being created and developed. Apply procedures and policies to any and all forms of communication.

29. Ensure that blogs are being used for ministry purposes such as for promoting events, disseminating sacramental preparation information, or sharing resources. The content must be in compliance with Catholic Church teachings.

30. Any use of live-streaming or chat rooms that encourages private, exclusive youth-adult relationships is never appropriate. The content must be in compliance with Catholic Church teachings.

31. When posting videos online, extreme care must be taken to protect the privacy of minors and vulnerable adults and such videos should only be used to advertise ministry related events and activities with parental permission or the permission of the vulnerable adult or his/her legal representative.

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IN CONCLUSION

Prudence always should guide Church personnel in working with minors and vulnerable adults. Common sense should be the guide in all circumstances. Those who minister and work in pastoral settings must take great care to be consistent in representing the values and teachings of the Catholic Church.

REPORTING

In the State of Oklahoma, all individuals are Mandatory Reporters. The abuse, neglect or exploitation of a minor, including abuse, neglect or exploitation involving electronic communications or the use of electronic or social media must be reported using the Oklahoma Department of Human Services statewide abuse reporting hotline: 800-522-3511.

In addition, if Archdiocesan or Parish personnel (priests, deacons, religious, employees, volunteers) are involved, the abuse, neglect or exploitation must be reported through the Archdiocesan Hotline: 405-720-9878.

To report abuse of these guidelines, contact the appropriate diocesan office. Catholic School employees and volunteers should call 405-721-5651 and ask for the Catholic Schools Office. Religious Education employees and volunteers should call 405-721-5651 and ask for the Children’s Evangelization Office. Youth Ministry employees or volunteers should call 405-721-5651 and ask for the Youth Evangelization Office.

These Communication Policies for those Working with Minors and Vulnerable Adults was accepted and approved on June 30, 2020.

+ Paul S. Coakley
Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley, Archbishop of Oklahoma City

Very Rev. William L. Novak, V.O.
Very Reverend William L. Novak, Vicar General

Michael A. Scaperlanda
Michael A. Scaperlanda, Chancellor

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COMMUNICATION POLICIES FOR THOSE WORKING WITH MINORS OR VULNERABLE ADULTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am employed or volunteer at _________________ within the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. I have read these Communication Policies for those Working with Minors or Vulnerable Adults and promise to abide by it.

I understand and agree that I am subject to periodic background checks and am required to participate in Archdiocesan safe environment training commensurate with my role. I also understand that I may face consequences or discipline, up to and including termination of my employment or other relationship with the Church, for violations of these policies.

_______________________________
Printed Name

_______________________________  ______________
Signature                      Date

_______________________________
Position and Location of Primary Employment or Service

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