

When the Pastor's Study Moves to Cyberspace:
An Examination of Ecclesial Social Media Policies

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Abstract

In recent years, as the use of Internet-based social media has proliferated, the Christian Church and its clergy have considered how to minister appropriately with (and despite) social media. Clergy struggle with questions of privacy, how to balance personal and private social media use, how to manage Internet relations with minors, and other questions of pastoral sensitivity. Though not common, several churches and ecclesial governing bodies have developed social media policies for their clergy and broader ministries. A close reading of four policies (Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic) reveals guidelines towards privacy, social convergence, and appropriate ministries with youth, the broad strokes of which are held in common. However, the policies studied display no overall consensus, showing the evolving nature of the Church's response to social media.

keywords: social media, Christian Church, ministry, pastoral care, Facebook, Twitter, clergy, policy

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Introduction

I begin this paper in the first-person because my research interests develop out of my current practice as a Presbytery pastor. Though I seek to write and research as much as possible in an unbiased way, I want to be open and clear that my interests are not merely academic but practical as well. Many friends and pastoral colleagues use social media (including Twitter, Facebook, Ning, and blogs) in the church (see Copeland, 2010). On the whole, their approach to social media has developed organically, without great reflection or intentionality. The old adage that the church must “go where the people are” now means pastoral ministry has moved to social media in new and exciting ways. Presumably because this move is recent and has occurred naturally, my research has found a relative dearth of ecclesial social media policies. However, when analyzing those that have been developed, research reveals several interesting connections, indications, considerations, and areas of future dialogue for both Christian ministry in particular and cultural exchange in general.

When I graduated from a Presbyterian seminary and took my first position as a part-time pastor in a small rural church, I expected my days of heavy social media use would soon end. Before I arrived, the congregation rejected my request for a smart-phone, and when I finally did move into my office I found a large stack of ancient cassette tapes on my desk. Surely my days of frequent networking on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs were over. Surely I would soon experience the loneliness many rural pastors feel, disconnected from their colleagues due to geography and lack of communication. But, to my surprise and joy, I was dead wrong.

Within a few months of beginning my time as pastor at a small rural church, I had found a supportive and very helpful community on Twitter with which I interacted daily. I explored Facebook groups and several online chat platforms with ministry colleagues. My blog became a valuable ministry tool for conversation and collaboration. Even a status update on Facebook could bring comments of support and encouragement (e.g. a book suggestion, a website recommendation, a word of caution or calm, even a prayer). I also found, to my surprise, that my congregation had a Facebook page of its own that I could update and use to connect to those in our community (Facebook, 2010). Furthermore, as I continued my practice of blogging on the church, ministry, and contemporary issues, as well as posting any sermons I preached, I slowly found that members of my congregation enjoyed reading my blog -- and especially consulting the sermons they heard on Sunday mornings. Though they would rarely comment on posts online, many members have told me in person that they peruse my website often. In person, then, we discuss my blog posts or the comment of another read posted online.

Some large churches in recent years have moved to employing “Digital Pastors” or Social Media Coordinators (Wise, 2009). These staff members are on the cutting-edge of technology use in congregational ministry. Such persons are important to Christian ministry, however, my interests are more directed at smaller congregations with just a few staff members. Those in this traditional and more general pastoral ministry, as the policies I examine show, are using social media as one component of a larger ministry just like many companies today are incorporating technology and social media in new ways that augment their larger goals. These Digital Pastors whose work primarily consists of social media are certainly called-for in some contexts, but generalist pastors are much more common and, as my experience can attest, even pastors of small congregations in rural America are using social media as an integral component to

contemporary ministry. This paper is primarily concerned with how this generalist notion of pastoral ministry approaches social media policies.

The possibilities for using social media in conjunction with this generalist Christian ministry are quite expansive, but they might be categorized in three ways. First, social media enables pastors to connect with members in new ways. For example, I have a Facebook friend “list” set up on my personal account that includes all the members of my congregation on Facebook. With one click I can see all their recent status updates. Often, I take the time to respond to an update, as I did recently when a member announced the birth of a granddaughter. Social media allows me the opportunity to celebrate with the member and her friends in a meaningful way, but one unimaginable in previous generations. Bruce Epperly, noting the ease of similar actions on Facebook, claims that Christians can make these connections as a theological claim in addition to a more mundane social claim. He writes, “we are connected with one another in an intricate web of relationships. Each moment of our lives matters and is holy, whether I am blogging, commenting on what I ate for breakfast, sharing wisdom, or responding to a friends’ status report” (Epperly, 2010). The connections pastors and their parishioners make on Facebook are a way to live out and respond to God’s presence in people’s lives

Second, social media enables pastors to connect members to other members in new ways. For instance, a member of our congregation is currently receiving cancer treatments at a hospital many hours away. Even so, when she updates her status from the hospital, members can support her with prayers and well wishes. Epperly argues such instances can be a place of “spiritual awakening” in which people can “pray others’ status updates.” He goes on to praise how Facebook calls believers to begin, “Noticing your interconnectedness with [others] and the

holiness of their lives. Looking for the Word moving through their words.” (Epperly, 2010).

Similarly, in my congregation’s own experience, a member was once out of town during a special event at church. Hours after the event, members posted pictures of the festivities on Facebook. The member who missed the event (and was still out of town) commented on how much she enjoyed the photos and wishes she could have attended in person. Further, people in town (or even those who live elsewhere) can connect to each other through our Facebook page. Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) call this experience “connected presence,” a phenomenon becoming more ubiquitous as social media use on mobile devices proliferates. As a pastor, I experience this when a youth group member makes a status update while she is at school (yes, it happens), or church members who follow me on Twitter may feel connected to me even as I update Twitter while attending an out-of-town church conference.

Third, social media enables ministry beyond the church walls. For example, Miriam’s Kitchen, a non-profit connected to Western Presbyterian Church and United Church in Washington D.C. provides free, homemade meals and support to homeless people in the D.C. area. Their social media ministry is quite extensive, as Carol Howard Merritt explains in a post on her popular blog *Tribal Church*:

Miriam’s Twitter feed is fun and insightful. They tweet the menu of the day, statistics on homelessness, needs of the guests, and appreciation for volunteers. They retweet what people say about them, and they quote funny things that the chefs say. They let people know about fundraising events, and the tweets have spurred other organizations to hold events for them. One day, our guests received a box of socks from California, because someone on Twitter read that they needed them. Twitter, as silly as it seems for those who are not active with social media, is an important tool in social justice work. (2010)

Similarly, the Roman Catholic Bishop Ronald Herzog reports that, mere months after the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) created a Facebook page they had 25,000 ‘fans’ connected to the community. Herzog says, “Every day, USCCB staff provides at least four items of information to those 25,000 people: the daily Scripture readings, news releases, links to information on our marriage and vocation websites, and other information” (2010). Clergy are using social media in ways to enhance their traditional ministry, and in new ways to connect and care through means not available to previous generations.

But social media also offers new challenges and dangers for pastors. It’s now common, at a gathering of clergy who use social media and particularly Facebook, to share anecdotes of Facebook gone wild. Pastors’ Facebook status updates can cause strife or arguments within a congregation. Church members and clergy can “over-share” about their private lives in a public way. Similarly, some congregation members hold pastors accountable for the Facebook wall posts of pastor’s friends. (I have certainly deleted pointed political debate from my Facebook wall to avoid agitating members in my congregation.) For this reason, some pastors have created two different Facebook profiles for themselves, one for public communications including with one’s congregation, and another for interactions with close friends and colleagues outside one’s congregation. And while it’s nearly impossible for me to imagine a time when pastoral ministry could occur without some human element, it should be noted that questions of clergy’s dependency on technology, what Hayles calls a “symbiotic relationship with intelligent machines” calls one to wonder if face-to-face ministry will one day require technology to be effective (Hayles, 1999).

As more and more romantic relationships move forward with the help of social media, pastors find themselves navigating this new and treacherous territory as well. Should pictures of

pastor's girlfriends or boyfriends be shared on Facebook? What are appropriate ways to counsel parishioners exploring online dating (Lawson & Leck, 2006)? How should pastors respond to the reality that in some marriages, spouses are physically present with one another even as their mind is off in cyberspace (Ludden, 2010). And, as popular press stories make all too clear, pastors are not immune to affairs made possible—or at least made easier—by social media.

Social Media and Face-to-Face Relationships

As Kim et. al. notes, “In general, studies of new media use over the past 20 years have shifted from a more technological to a more social context perspective” (2007). This move, in part, is due to the fact that social use of technology has greatly expanded. Nayar cites SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997, as an early example of a social networking site, but it was not until 2003 that such platforms proliferated and became mainstream (2010). Boyd and Ellison (2008) construct a figure tracing the development of such sites, from (to name a few) SixDegrees.com, to LiveJournal, Friendster, MySpace, YouTube, BeBo, Facebook, Ning, and Twitter.

While I prefer the broader term “social media” for my work, Nayar uses the terminology “social networking sites (SNSs)” to describe web-based services which allow for social outlets online (2010). Nayar (2010) uses Boyd and Ellison (2008) to describe SNS function to “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” Such SNSs emphasize comments and (quite often)

brief friend interactions, but they also work to build social capital, trust, and relationships (see Ellison et al, 2007).

Boyd and Ellison distinguish between social networking and social network sites by claiming the latter allows for the former, but according to Nayar “in the case of SNSs, while networking is possible, it is *not* the primary practice of many of them (2010, emphasis original). In this paper, I tend to use the term “social media” as a broader term that encompasses SNSs. While the term “social media” is perhaps redundant since all media is social, it has become the catchall phrase for new communication technologies including SNSs but also cell phone text messaging, smart-phone use, email, and instant messaging. The term “social media” also allows for the way technology adapts to form new hybrids (Facebook for example, accessed on a smart-phone or iPad, functions differently than from a desktop-based web browser. Social media adapts and changes swiftly, and different social groups employ social media in different (and always changing) ways. A recent Pew study found, “In focus groups, teens described their new [social technological] environment. To them, email is increasingly seen as a tool for communicating with ‘adults’ such as teachers, institutions like schools, and as a way to convey lengthy and detailed information to large groups. Meanwhile, IM is used for everyday conversations with multiple friends that range from casual to more serious and private exchanges” (Lenhart et al., 2005). Kim et al. finds that while college students do communicate with their friends at college via instant messaging they are more likely to instant message with their old high school friends than with college friends (2007). And as Facebook has evolved from its original college-oriented design to become a more expansive SNS, “questions have been raised about the use and appropriateness of information on Facebook as parties other than college students have gained access or have used information to make decision that have negatively

impacted students” (Peluchette et al., 2008). Finally, Sonja Livingstone argues that for today’s teenagers the social process of self-actualization increasingly is mediated by online experiences (2008). The rapidly-changing ways social media is used makes it difficult to understand and study, but the fact that social media so rapidly changes the way we communicate makes such endeavors essential.

Social media affects face-to-face interactions as online “friending,” text and instant messaging, even observing changes on people’s social profiles makes face-to-face interactions different than they would have been otherwise. New privacy questions arise that simply did not exist before the advent of social media. Boyd explains:

Offline, people are accustomed to having architecturally defined boundaries. Physical features like walls and limited audio range help people have a sense of just how public their actions are. The digital world has different properties and these can be easily altered through the development of new technologies, radically altering the assumptions that people have when they interact online. As a result of new technological developments, social convergence is becoming the norm online, but people are still uncomfortable with the changes. (2008)

Boyd goes on to chronicle the evolution of both Facebook’s privacy policies and user’s acceptance of them. Understandings of privacy, just as changes in social media use, Boyd shows to be constantly evolving and unpredictable.

As Nayar summarizes the relationship of social media and face-to-face interactions, “There is a *recursive* relation between offline and online relations. Offline relationships inform online ones, and vice versa...” (2010, emphasis original). So how has the Church dealt with this relationship? How do written policies (ironically or not, mainly published online) inform

concerning what ways church institutions are welcoming social media, and where they are drawing lines of inappropriate and even unfaithful behavior?

Analyzing Ecclesial Social Media Policies

John Saddington, in a post on his Church Crunch website writes of church social media policies, “Having a Social Networking Policy and Usage Guideline for your Church is only needed if the ministry decides that it is needed; there are a number of churches that don’t have one and they’re doing just fine without...it’s up to you” (2009). It appears that many churches and organizations of churches concur with this perspective that such a social media policy is not essential, as only a small portion of churches that use social media have developed and distributed such policies¹. However, this paper explores four such policies from four different denominations including the Presbyterian Church (USA), Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Washington, D.C., the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, and the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut. The Presbyterian policy is the shortest policy and was developed specifically for the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), a national meeting of the denomination. The other policies run several pages in length and mainly address social media use connected to their respective ministries. It should be noted that the mere titles of the policies suggest different intentions and approaches of the authors—including

¹ It is, of course, very difficult to prove a negative, so I make such assertions regarding a dearth of policies with caution. However, extensive research involving academic database searches, Google and other internet searches, social media networking, and personal correspondence with leaders in the US church social media field found very few such policies. Such research also included an open call for information on social media policies posted on the website of the most widely read magazine of the mainline protestant church (see Copeland, 2010). My suspicion is that more such policies will be developed in the next few years as social media continues to be used positively – and also negatively – in the church.

“Suggested Practices and Guidelines...” “Internet Safety Guidelines,” “Social Media Policy,” and “Using social media at the General Assembly.” Some policies lean towards making stark rules of appropriate conduct while others suggest broad principles for social media use in the church.

Introducing the Policies

All four policies included in this study begin by describing social media and its connection to Christian ministry in today’s culture. The Presbyterian policy puts it this way:

Social media has become a normal and integral part of our lives as a society. It covers an ever-evolving collection of programs and devices like Twitter, email, texting and Facebook. It might be tempting to dismiss these new technologies as tangential to a meeting of the General Assembly. They can be ignored, banned, or acknowledged. What we can’t do is to expect that social media is not a normal part of life for many commissioners, advisory delegates, and visitors. (PCUSA, 2010)

The Presbyterian policy does not quite define social media more than it describes the way it affects the members of the Presbyterian Church: “Location no longer defines the number or immediacy of those with whom we are in communication” (PCUSA, 2010). Partly for this reason, the statement notes what many parents and teachers know too well: “being present with someone engaging in social media does not necessarily mean that you are the person getting their primary attention” (PCUSA, 2010). The policy does not use words of judgment or claim anything about social media as “good” or “bad.” Instead, it carefully describes how church members attending the General Assembly may already use social media, taking it as given that members of the church use social media in their daily lives and will do so at the General Assembly as well.

The Introduction of the United Church of Christ (UCC) Policy is the most extensive of the group. Again, the policy speaks of social media in a descriptive rather than prescriptive manner at the outset, but offering slightly more statements of positive value than the PCUSA policy: “The emerging ‘digital age’ has presented the Church with a new and evolving set of communication tools which offer great promise for developing and deepening ministries of relationship” (UCC, n.d.). Such value-laden language of “great promise” is absent from the PCUSA policy. The document is offered “as a guidepost to emerging technologies” rather than a blunt tool, and the word “relationship” and a theology of connectedness in the Body of Christ drives the introduction. Furthermore, the language of “covenant” suggests social media guidelines might reflect the Biblical practice of partnering in a loving mutually beneficial contract or “covenant.” Finally, the UCC document concludes with scripture once more, citing the apostle Paul as one who “embraced the technologies of his day to spread the gospel” (n.d.).

The Holy Trinity Catholic Church policy reads more like a legal document than the other policies, so the introduction makes clear of what and whom the policy is speaking:

This Social Media Policy (the “policy”) applies to all online or mobile-based tools for sharing content and discussing information, whether controlled by Holy Trinity or hosted on other platforms (such as Facebook), on which members of the Holy Trinity community engage in activities relating to Holy Trinity Catholic Church or Holy Trinity School. (Holy Trinity, 2010)

It then very clearly defines “social media” as “activities that integrate technology, telecommunications and social interaction through the use of words, images, video or audio tools.” But the policy cautions as well, “Because this is a constantly evolving area, this policy applies to all new social media platforms whether or not they are specifically mentioned in this

policy.” The tone of the Holy Trinity policy lacks the reflective or open approach of the PCUSA and UCC policies, instead communicating a more formal approach with corresponding legal guidelines.

The introduction of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut policy claims that as an increasing number of people use Internet-based communication, “it is essential that the church be present in this mission field” (Office, n.d.). The Episcopal policy cites the UCC policy as a source, but differs slightly in its covenant theology approach by using principles of “healthy boundaries and safe church to the virtual world” (Office, n.d.). For instance, the policies begins with “Commonly Accepted Principles of Healthy Boundaries and Safe Church” which emphasize understanding of power in society—adults have more power than children, clergy have more power than church members, and mutual friendship cannot exist when a power disparity is present. It then makes some stunning general claims about digital communications including “all communication sent digitally is NOT CONFIDENTIAL and may be shared or reposted by others” (Office, n.d., emphasis original). And, reminiscent Nayar’s claims of the virtual and in-person world connecting, the document concludes: “In the virtual healthy boundaries and safe church practices must be adhered to as they are in the physical world” (Office, n.d.). Though some distinction is made between electronic and virtual media (such as a different definition of “friend”) the policy, on the whole, seeks to apply existing standards of healthy boundaries for clergy and church members to the digital world.

Privacy

Each of the church social media policies addressed in this paper addresses concerns of privacy. Overall, most of the policies are aware of the openness and transparency social media

makes possible and so suggest warnings and ways forward. For example, the PCUSA policy specifically calls on social media users at the PCUSA General Assembly meeting to identify themselves in their username, but also that “profile information or the username should represent who you are and your affiliation with the General Assembly” (2010). Since it’s imaginable that a member at the national meeting could tweet on behalf of someone else, or in favor of certain church policies or positions in debates and do so without divulging one’s identity, the policy seeks to make sure such postings are transparent rather than secretive.

Interestingly, the UCC and Episcopal policies both explicitly state that use of digital communications nullifies confidentiality. They make clear: items that one would like kept private should not be discussed online (this is, presumably, not because social media users are bound to divulge electronic communications, but because the medium itself makes confidentiality impossible to ensure). Both UCC and Episcopal policies also encourage communication with youth to be by way of closed groups (most likely on Facebook, judging from the time the policies were developed) rather than one-to-one contact. The UCC policy also notes that any “inappropriate behavior” which occurs at a church sponsored event and then is posted online by youth “should be addressed by authorized youth workers and parents” (n.d.). Even if an event or happening was considered private at the time, if shared via social media then the church workers no longer consider the happening private.

The Catholic policy addresses privacy directly in a short section declaring, “all users of social media within the Holy Trinity community should take care to safeguard the privacy interests of other community members” (2010). The policy states that persons’ contact information should not be shared without prior written consent, and encourages the use of privacy settings online.

Overall, privacy concerns are named in each of the policies and are a substantial portion of the documents. That said, some policies address privacy concerns with more specificity than others. However, no particularly unique or noteworthy approach to privacy exists among the documents that stands-out beyond commonly-held privacy concerns common to general (non-Church-related) use of social media.

Social Convergence

Social Convergence occurs when different social contexts are brought together into one. This may happen when, via one's Facebook profile for instance, one becomes friends with a colleagues from work, family members, neighbors, and fellow church members. Boyd writes, "Social convergence requires people to handle disparate audiences simultaneously without a social script. While social convergence allows information to be spread more efficiently, it is not always what people desire" (2008). Judging from the social media policies, social convergence is of particular concern to clergy and Churches.

The Episcopal policy suggests clergy set up separate accounts, one for networking with parishioners, and another for keeping in touch with friends, family, and close colleagues. While the policy does not require it, the Episcopal policy "strongly encourages" as much. The UCC policy, on which the Episcopal policy is based, does not make such stark suggestions. While noting the possibility of maintaining separate profiles (the wording is, "when and where available, clergy are encouraged to consider creating a personal and a professional account"), but the UCC policy also has many suggestions for pastors who do not choose to do so (n.d.). Assuming then that some (even many?) pastors will have a single profile, the UCC policy gives suggestions of how clergy should navigate social convergence. For instance, "clergy should

consider the impact of declining a ‘friend’ request from their church members. These encounters may create tension in ‘real world’ relationships” (UCC, n.d.). Good advice for any pastor.

The PCUSA policy does not address social convergence in the same way as these above, but it does note that those who use social media during a large church meeting such as the General Assembly may be communicating to those in other social settings outside the meeting: “location no longer defines the number or immediacy of those with whom we are in communication” (PCUSA, 2010). It then makes some Presbyterian claims about those chosen to attend the General Assembly meeting, saying that the particular delegates to the meeting are gathered together so that they might decide in community. In fact, the PCUSA policy holds up the particular social convergence of the meeting delegates as instrumental to making decisions according to “the voice of the Holy Spirit” (2010). With that in mind, “the guiding principle for social media at a General Assembly is to be attentive and present to the community gathered immediately around us...” (2010). The PCUSA policy, while accepting social media as unavoidable and even normative, emphasizes the importance of being present with one other when working together at a meeting.

The Catholic policy fails to address social convergence in the above ways, but it does note a version particular to the church: “Even when engaging in social media for personal use, the comments of a member of the Holy Trinity community may be viewed as a reflection on Holy Trinity” (2010). Perhaps more an issue for those connected with churches than with those connected with other social organizations, members and especially clergy can be viewed as representing their church even when they intend to be speaking from a posture apart from the congregation. Online social convergence makes such circumstances more likely to occur, as social media gives more opportunity for clergy and church members to comment and connect.

The Catholic policy specifically calls for sound judgment and awareness regarding this aspect of social convergence while the other policies do not mention this particular issue. That said, such concerns seem inline with the overall hermeneutic of all the policies.

Finally, the UCC and Episcopal policy suggest that clergy, upon leaving a ministry setting, should refrain from social media support with members in their old setting. Again, the UCC policy takes the soft approach while the Episcopal policy is more hard-line. In the UCC policy, clergy are “recommended” to “refrain from offering pastoral care through digital communications after the end of their contract” but the Episcopal approach is for the clergyperson to remove former parishioners as “friends” or contacts in all forms of digital communications (n.d.).

Social convergence, by its very nature, is both unavoidable and helpful for pastoral ministry. These policies address mainly the downsides and dangers of social convergence, but most do so with a suggestive rather than punitive approach.

Youth Issues

While the PCUSA policy does not address youth issues specifically, the other three policies do mention ministry with youth, the Catholic policy briefly and the UCC and Episcopal policies at length. While youth ministry does not seem to be the main reason for the policies, questions of openness, privacy, power, and appropriate Internet relationships are essential to a well thought-out ministry with minors. That said, it should be noted that the policies are written with adult audiences in mind so they do not address peer-to-peer social media use by minors.

The UCC policy attends to “Minor to Adult Relationships” with a separate header. It begins, “Adults should not submit ‘friend’ requests to minors or youth” though youth may

request them of adults (n.d.). While the UCC policy does not explain the reasoning behind this rule, the Episcopal policy, which shares the same standard, makes it more clear: “Youth may not be able to decline such [‘friend’] requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults” (Office, 2010). Both policies insist that if an adult accepts a friend request from a youth, that person’s profile page is required to be accessible to other adult leaders. Presumably this is to cut down on the possibility of private interactions. Interestingly, the covenant model of the UCC policy holds that youth groups should decide among themselves (within their “covenant group”) whether a social media group should be accessible to parents. Even so, all groups should “have both youth and adult administrators” and operate under the assumption that all communication sent via digital means is not confidential. On the other hand, the Episcopal policy states that “social networking groups for youth should be open to parents of current members” (Office, 2010). Finally, both UCC and Episcopal policies require that, when youth or leaders depart from the ministry they should be removed from the group. Such policies are straightforward and clear, seemingly attempting to address the power imbalance associated with all of youth ministry while also keeping social media as a possible area for positive interactions as long as they are not too private.

The Catholic policy, keeping with its more legal framework, is the only policy to define the age of youth allowed to use social media: “Social media maintained by Holy Trinity are not intended for the use of children under the age of 13” (2010). The other guidelines seem to address internal communications and Internet database administration rather than social media (and especially Facebook groups) as do the UCC and Episcopal policies.

It is noteworthy that all three more substantial policies address youth issues specifically, so it seems that we might infer from the policies what is certainly true from my ministry

experience: ministry with youth via social media has great potential for positive interactions, but its also an area in which abuse and inappropriate relationships might easily be fostered.

Final Thoughts and Future Considerations

The sample size of four church social media policies is quite small, so it's dangerous to make any significant or wide-ranging claims based on the documents studied in this paper. That said, each document clearly shows a denomination, church, or regional body wrestling with how the Church should be relevant but safe in a world increasingly concerned with social media. While stereotypes are dangerous, it could be argued that each policy reflects some of the frequently-noted character of the denomination with which it's associated—the PCUSA policy is attuned to community discernment, the UCC policy is full of covenant language, the Episcopal policy builds upon the UCC one but does so with a slightly more formal and top-down way, and the language of the Catholic policy (just like spoken liturgy) is very careful and precise. Of course, it makes sense that social media policies, like all theological documents, would reflect the character of a denomination.

Perhaps the challenge of writing such policies is best summed-up in the glossary of the UCC policy. In it, “inappropriate content” is defined, but with a caveat. Inappropriate content “refers both to content that is improper or offensive, but also content that might be suited to the medium but not to the relationship” (n.d.). The challenge, of course, is that both relationships and social media change every single day, so judging propriety with a static written policy is a challenging task. But, from this pastor's point of view, at least, it's a task that should be tackled since social media, like all forms of human communication, is being and will be abused. The situations are vast and varied—pastors wondering if they should “un-friend” old congregation

members once they move to a new call, youth pushing the bounds of appropriate Facebook rapport, youth leaders text-messaging youth daily with notes of support and suggestion, pastors counseling couples whose relationships began (or ended) by way of the Internet.

As the Church wrestles with the changing social media ministry context, more social media policies will surely develop. Such policies present ideal documents for study and analysis, but scholarship will need to evolve as constantly as the context and policies. For, if my experience as a pastor of a small rural congregation is any indication at all, the pastor's study has *already* moved to cyberspace.

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