

## **A Primer for Minister “Presence”**

Social media offers numerous ways for you to practice digital ministry. A combination of blogging, Facebook, and Twitter might be right for you. Or, Twitter and YouTube might accomplish your goals.

You’ll have to figure out what is right for you. [Worksheet #1](#) will help you do that. [Worksheet #2](#) will help you and your congregation figure out its digital ministry strategy. This primer focuses on how you manage your Minister presence online.

In this primer, you’ll find tips on

- 1. Part One: Your Well Being Online**
- 2. Part Two: A Tactical Plan for Your Minister Presence on Facebook**
3. Part Three: What is Unique About Your Voice Online? Shaping Stories vs. Telling Stories - What makes for compelling content? How do you plan for it?
4. Part Four: How to do REACH – The what, when, why, where, and how is explained. They are summed up in three tables, one for ministers, one for staff and lay members, and one specifically for Facebook in the [Summary Tables of Core REACH Practices](#)
5. Part Five: Time management
6. Part Six: New considerations in the search/call/departure process

## **Part One: Your Well Being Online**

The same professional guidelines you follow are the same ones for the online world – but more so.

Social networking can complicate your ability to maintain boundaries, manage church relationships, advise governance, and protect the sanctity of pastoral care. Damage to any of these can occur in a blink of an eye because of the viral nature of social media, meaning the speed at which comments spread in a digital world.

It's difficult enough that you may have to face serious situations offline because your loving heart and open arms can become targets for abuse, mental illness, and mean spiritedness. You all work too hard, and give so much of yourselves, that you must take care of your online reputation.

*Reality check:* Given retirees represent large percentages of our congregations, the chance of malicious church gossip getting online and blowing up might be slightly lower now because many are not yet on Facebook and Twitter. In a couple of years, there will not be a generation gap. However, some examples of inappropriate behavior in digital UU spaces have emerged.

For instance, a disagreement between a congregation and a UU minister in the Midwest ended in separation. It was leaked through a Facebook official church page before the appropriate offline communications were even planned. The administrator for the Facebook page immediately removed the offending comments. But damage was done nonetheless.

Because our online presence is religious, how we handle difficult situations has unique considerations. Part of the promise of a religious community is that we try our best to stay in relationship with difficult and challenging individuals. Suspension and deletion of someone online is the absolute last resort for handling violations of covenants. Limiting their participation is the second to last resort and also has consequences that may be unfair for the community may shun someone who has obviously be restricted in church life.

If you take one of those steps, ask yourself if you are running away from someone, or disconnecting from a human being, because it's much easier to do so online than it is in face-to-face offline church life.

The number one objection to digital ministry I hear is that embarrassing posts will appear on church sites if blogging and commenting are allowed. Adults assume the worst, and in nearly all cases it's adults who act out. Not members of Youth Groups. You can prevent the chance for bad behavior by requiring that people use their real names when posting to your church's website.

For some church goers though, social media won't be the right context for ministry. Some authors of inappropriate content may not understand why their posts are. Meanwhile, their activity will also be exposed to the church community's gaze. And the community probably won't know – though you do – that the individual just suffered terrible losses; has new medication that is altering brain function; is recovering from significant trauma; is breaking down from 24/7 care giving to a parent with Alzheimers etc.

The community's reaction may not be one of compassion, and it may ostracize the individual, right at the very moment when that person needs it, and you the most.

Social media can also exacerbate misunderstandings into serious accusations that members bring to your attention. You have to take what they tell you seriously, but you also have to realize that they may have misinterpreted what someone said or did online. They also might have been manipulated by online dialogue from commentators who learn of the situation second hand but know nothing about it. Swhirl, occasionally known as gossip, online is very dangerous to the inherent worth and dignity of all involved. If you believe it's necessary to help your congregation get past an incident, you must ask questions offline, first, of all those involved and not assume anything. Otherwise you run the risk of accepting the accusation and causing, not healing, tremendous pain.

There are extreme cases when it is necessary to unfriend, block, or use technology to limit someone's ability to participate. But again, drastic measures should be a last resort to ensure principle #1 is upheld for all those involved. REACH addresses this issue more in its Safety and Privacy section.

UU professionals should consider the consequences of dismissing social media because of potential confrontation. If you aren't present online, many people will interpret your absence as an unwillingness to understand how human beings relate to one another. You will seem out of touch with reality to many. How can you minister to them, if you don't know where and why they investing so much of their time in community relationships?

You face issues online that are similar for teachers in how they appear in social media. Some union contracts prohibit them from being on Facebook. Interaction with students there is problematic for many reasons. Social media, however, is so obviously beneficial to fostering curiosity (a foundational component for learning), collaboration, literacy, discernment, global citizenship, and communication skills that educators can't dismiss it.

School districts have begun using private social networks that are "walled gardens." No one is allowed in unless they are students and faculty, or special guests. And then once inside, there are layers of privacy controls meant to emphasize learning. They keep the activity focused on school life. Social networking, in these cases, is manifest as a community of practice and purpose. That's akin to what a congregation is, isn't it?

Practice digital ministry in a way that safeguards your reputation. Try to leave very little room for misunderstandings and hurt feelings. At the same time, though, you need to share parts of "you." If you are experienced at this, the following plan may be too confining for you, but it's a good way to start if you are new to Facebook.

## **Part Two: A Default Tactical Plan for Your Facebook Presence.**

Note it might be helpful for you to have the [Facebook Features Overview document](#) when reading the below plan.

Professional Presence vs Personal Presence: Keep them completely separate. Notice I say “presence,” as in, how you manifest online. Your professional presence can be expressed in blogs; official minister accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn; and through the official page of your church.

If you are using one Facebook account for both professional and personal use, you will always run the risk of encountering a problem.

Managing two accounts on any one particular service, such as Facebook, will be frustrating if you do not strictly adhere to the separation of the two. Some ministers online disagree and think that two accounts are [futile and result in even more confusion](#). I don't agree. Even the most social network savvy among ministers can make mistakes very easily when stressed, distracted, and pressed for time.

A two-account practice doesn't have to be hard: *House* all church-member relationships past and present, in your official Minister account.

If you're concerned you will fall out of touch with people in either account, here are a few ways to manage that:

- Notifications: Set one or both accounts so that you are notified when there's news from “friends” in them. You can choose whether to get a summary email of updates or individual email notifications as they happen. Go to “Account Settings > Notifications.”
- Minister vs. The Private You: One Account at a Time
  1. Refrain from trying to work in both accounts at the same time. It's very risky. You'll be tempted to open

two separate browser windows (egg: one in Safari, one in Chrome; or one in Firefox and one in Explorer) with your personal account in one and the minister account in the other. You will get them confused in toggling back and forth. You will likely put a comment in one that was meant for the other. Sign into one account at a time and sign off before you open another.

2. Use Facebook's list tool and privacy controls *judiciously and sparingly*. Lists are used when you choose who can see what. The more lists you create, the more exceptions to privacy settings you make for individuals, the more you are going to be confused.

- One Account Ministers: For those who are advanced users of Facebook settings, you may choose to have one Facebook account and operate this way:
  - Assume all of your activity on Facebook is public. Regardless of how you use Lists and settings, only behave as you would in public.
  - Create a list that enables you to block anyone but your family and close personal friends. Name it: Personal Only, or some such. When you post content meant for only this list, make sure you choose the Personal Only list for each posting of personal content.
  - Actively participate in comments and postings on your church's official Facebook page. By doing so, you'll help to emphasize the importance of developing church community online. If your church has a Facebook page but you only are active out of

your one account, then church traffic will actively gravitate to your page. It's important to hold the official church Facebook page up because it will most likely continue on after you have moved on. Help it develop community on Facebook.

- If you have a separate digital ministry that you started and it is not related to your church, you can manifest that ministry on your one account or in a page you create from that account for the separate ministry. Rev. John T. Crestwell is doing just that on Facebook with [AWAKE Ministries](#). Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein is also great example of a church-based minister with a separate ministry online. Under the name of PeaceBang, she ministers using the blog-based platform of WordPress.

### **Account #1 Personal = Your Professional Contacts & Personal Friends**

- **Use Lists:** Put your professional contacts into a list or lists and all personal contacts into their own list or lists. Examples of list names:

- Family
- Northwestern Alumni
- Seminary

### **Account #2 = Minister Professional Presence for Congregations**

- **Use Your Title:** Put Rev. in front of your name on your Minister account. If it's not there now, you can add it anytime.

- **Don't Clam Up:** The REACH core principles include sharing personal interests and parts of your life that are not intimate. Do this through your Minister timeline/profile. Talking about pets; social causes; theology; what it's like to be a mom – the feelings and thoughts; and food or sports are good examples of appropriate sharing.
- **Refrain From Pulpit-Like Preaching: Listen & Witness:** Social networking is participatory and sermonizing; spouting words of wisdom and inspiration are okay but don't make them the only expression of your presence. If you do, your friends and followers will think you are only interested in your own voice and that you aren't recognizing their presence and valuing it. Remember, digital ministry is about engagement and not about just you, the minister.
- **Practice Discipline:** Block 15 minutes of your day, every day, to respond to Facebook comments, messages, and postings by congregants. You do not have to respond to all inquiries as they happen just because they come 24/7. You practice intentional mindfulness. You need mental stamina and emotional intelligence for pastoral care. You need intentional time to do that. All things digital can drain intentionality away from those critical needs to minister if you let them.
- **Look at The News Feed:** Scan your News Feed for friend activities. You can simply "like" an activity as it appears there. That takes a split second and it's an act of witnessing.
- **Check Stuff Not in The News Feed:** Click on the little globe icon in the blue bar atop any Facebook page. It's to the left of the Facebook search cell. A box of notifications will drop down. The box may, contain items that don't

- appear in your News Feed. Scan those and decide whether to act on any.
- **Comment Back & Send Private Messages:** Make it a practice to comment back a couple of times a week, if not more. If you don't get through everything in 15 minutes. Don't sweat it. Go back to it later in the day. You write comments to add your thoughts to content posted by others or for open conversations you want to start. In general, don't post comments that are thoughts or information that are meant only for one person. Send them private messages through your minister account.
  - **Respect The Profile/Timelines of Other Ministers:** Do not write comments of a purely professional nature on the Minister timelines/profiles your colleagues unless it's obvious that they welcome them there.
  - **Put Staff in List:** Create a list of your current church's staff and use it to share and communicate information that is appropriate for them. Remember, there is a chance that one of them might share what you let them see. If you want to keep shared staff items limited to staff, then create a Group and designate it as "secrete." See below bullet on Groups.
  - **Get The Facebook Mobile App:** If you have a mobile phone, get the free app. You can respond to comments in it wherever you are.
  - **Be Friendly/Welcoming:** Accept friend requests from members of congregations in your past and also from anyone interested in your ministry.
  - **Manage Offline Time, Emergencies, and Delegate:** You do not have to always be on Facebook. It is very seductive. Reserve your energy and protect your practice of mindfulness. If something important is reported, such as a death or emergency room event, somebody will see

it, and you'll get a call. Just as you delegate ministry to volunteers at church, think of your ministry's online presence as having volunteers online.

- **Following The One-Year-No-Contact-Rule and Previous Calls**
  1. If you adhere to this rule and friended people from the church your leaving, put them all in a list that you title with that church's name.
  2. Set the viewing rights of that list so that it cannot see your activity or participate in conversations. This means what you do will not show up in their News Feeds, nor will they see your activity if you comment on the profiles of mutual friends.
  3. If you receive friend requests from members of the former church within the one year of silence, you can decide whether to accept them. If you do, put those friends into the church List you created for that previous call. They will not see your activity anywhere until you change the list's viewing rights a year later.
- **Use Groups for Minister-Only or Staff-Only Groups For Professional Collaboration:** A minister who creates a religious professionals group should do so *from his or her personal account*. Set the access controls for the group to "Secrete," which means only people in the group can see and interact with posts. Content can't be "shared" outside of the group.
  - Why Choose to Be "Secrete?" It will prevent comments in the group from being shared with others who shouldn't see the group's interactions.

- E.g.: You share a Huffington Post religion story in the “secrete” group. Your colleagues start to comment on it. Someone else wants his or her congregation to see the story but the group’s comments are not appropriate for anyone who is not a minister. The only way the minister can offer the story to his or her congregation in Facebook is to copy paste the Huffington Post story url into a different place on Facebook that the congregation can view.
- **Groups For Collaboration between Lay & Religious**
  - Collaborative Ministers & Lay Groups: For collaboration, public or closed, groups can be created. Keep the group closed if you want to ensure that the conversation is focused. If you open it up to the public, the conversation in the group will get off track. But if you’re okay with that, then a public group would be the most welcoming for all UUs to join the discussion.

For additional advice, especially, on how to interact with youth online: Rev. Naomi King and colleague Barbara Friedland, the director of Lifespan Religious Exploration at the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church, offer their recommendations in, [“Safe Congregations & Social Media,”](#) a document that posted to the [UU Social Media Lab group](#) on Facebook.

