

## Suggested Digital Ministry Policies and Protocols

This recommended policy is intentionally vague in many places. Advances in technology, changes in ministry needs, personnel, and resources occur routinely. Detailed policies can become outdated very quickly. Policy stipulations may become moot or need significant updating. Your policy needs to be flexible for these reasons.

The policy is meant to guide your congregation but not control its behavior and decisions. Obviously, certain aspects of policy need to be adhered to in order to uphold your covenant and safe congregation practices. Meanwhile, training for digital ministry should be formalized and mandatory for lead settled or senior ministers, designated staff, and lay ministers.

Legal counsel may review and advise your church on its policy. Just remember that legal advice is just that, advice and not law. Use common sense. Also, ask yourselves if your policy statements run counter to our heritage of heretics. They were willing to risk their lives to practice their religion. We are not risking our lives to practice digital ministry.

UU principle #1 about the inherent worth and dignity of everyone is a key filter for addressing alleged violations online of covenants. The deletion or banning of a member from a digital media presence is a last resort - not the first reaction to a problem. The act of "deletion" runs counter to principle #1. Problems should be treated as learning opportunities for ministers, staff, and the congregation; not triggers for disconnection.

UU principle #5, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregations, doesn't define democratic process as being inherently transparent. The REACH program, however, assumes that transparency is worth striving for. It is a key ingredient for sharing ourselves authentically in digital ministry. Transparency enables every church member to have a voice and to express it within the parameters of a church covenant.

A congregation's digital ministry policy should align to its vision, mission, and its covenant. How a church mandates social media usage, however, may unwittingly subvert the effort *because of confusion over the demands of official church communication, or "broadcasting" vs. the content that members post to*

*share and co-create devotional practices.* REACH accepts the conventions of social media and social networking. They assign ownership and responsibility for behavior and content to their authors and not to the entity whose name is in the masthead of a web page or mobile app. Blog posts and comments written by congregants that appear on an official church website or on its Facebook page are understood to be the opinion of the author.

The larger story told by a church that upholds member-created content is that creativity is a devotional practice.

There are congregants who feel threatened by digital ministry. They assume they will be exposed to spam through it, and they might be right. There's always that chance, but it's very slim and is nearly always the result of someone posting their email address or from an email list serve that groups of members use.

Some individuals will assume that any data the church has kept on them – pledge amounts; other donations; credit card numbers etc. – will be exposed to hackers through digital ministry. Chances of this kind of breach are also remote as long as church back-office data is not integrated into the architecture of a platform you're using for digital ministry.

Educate doubters on how your systems work and how they, themselves, can easily mitigate personal risks. Explain to them, as well, that your church follows protocols that proactively make your digital ministry safe.

# REACH Digital Ministry Policy & Protocols

## I. Introduction

The [insert name of your congregation here] is called to practice Unitarian Universalism's seven principles in the digital world. We aspire to reveal a higher good through human relationships online. Digital ministry practice pursues love, safety, peace, compassion, empathy, and security for all who participate in its various manifestations. This policy covers all those who present in digital locations of our congregation. It also covers those who have responsibilities as designated digital ministers, paid staff, and volunteers. The policy is based on the covenant of this church. Everyone who participates in digital church life is to uphold it.

Covenant: [Insert your church covenant here]

### Policy Terms Defined:

- **Church Website**: This is the congregation's domain address, (<http://www.uuclonline.org>, for example). It is where official information about the church is posted online to the general public. It may also include social media that permits members and interested parties to interact and collaborate.
  
- **Content**: It is the expression of ideas and thoughts through text, visual imagery, and sound, among other forms.
  - **Text**: All text created by registered users of a church's website and posted by them to the website or to the church's Facebook Timeline or Facebook group or Twitter account. Text can be comments, blogs, tweets, discussions, and status lines.
  - **Photos and Videos**: Taken by registered users or photos taken by others but shared by registered users
  - **Media**: Content created by third-party news, music, and information providers that is shared or posted by registered members of the church's digital ministry outlets

- Digital Ministry: It is a set of collaborative (social) practices that administer pastoral care, radical hospitality, witnessing, worship, RE, and community. For UUism, it manifests our beliefs, values, and deeds wherever people gather digitally. It is inherently a blended experience of online and offline cultures because each intentionally influences the other. It uses tools and services that collectively are known either as social media or social networking. Digital ministry is not a top-down, one-way communication like traditional broadcast media or traditional preaching.
- Digital Ministry Channels: These are the digital services that a church, ministers, or lay members use to practice faith online. The services, or channels, are, for example, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Patheos, and Foursquare.
- Friends of the Church: Not to be confused with the term “friends” as understood in social network. Individuals who haven’t signed a membership book but who are regular, active church participants, and who may also be pledging.
- Official Church Facebook Page or Official Accounts: The Facebook page, known as a Timeline or as a Group, that a church manages is its official presence on that social network. The church may use volunteers as well as church staff to manage it. It should be named with the official name of the church. However, if the name is long, an abbreviation is recommended but it should be a common abbreviation that is understandable, such as the UU Church of Berkeley.
- Inappropriate Content: This means content that is improper or offensive, but also content that might be suited to the medium but not within the context of a church relational culture.
- Registered Members: These are individuals who have been approved for sign-in credentials for participation in social media and on community tools the church uses.
- Rostered Members: These are church members and friends who are on the church’s books.

- **Seekers**: Individuals who attend services and some church activities but who have yet to commit to “friends of church” or member status. Seekers are sometimes known as Inquiring Friends.
- **Social Media**: It is content that is created by users to intentionally share with other people. Social media is also understood to be both content and software. Without the software, the content wouldn’t be social, meaning sharable. The software is known by users as “features” or “tools.” It is capable of mediating human interaction by offering users the ability to choose privacy and access settings and also by rewarding users when they “like” or “share” content with friends. This content-infused technology makes word-of-mouth influence very easy to do and far more powerful online than offline. Examples of social media: blogs, comments, status updates, tweets, ratings, photos, videos, music, and discussions.
- **Social Networking**: It’s the technology foundation, or platform, that enables social relations among people to be manifest online as “friends.” These individuals have interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections in common but may not have met in-person offline. Social networking platforms are the equivalent to the bricks and mortar that make our physical congregation buildings. Social networking is a compelling experience for users because it enables social media to occur. A physical church does the same thing. We talk to one another after a service in our fellowship halls. The service is content. Our after-service conversations are social media. Social networking uses social media to facilitate interaction. In digital ministry, this social networking enables relational church cultures to grow. Platforms are known to consumers by their brand-named services such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, etc. Social networking platforms are also available as solutions for businesses, non-profits, and government organizations. These solutions can take the names of the organizations that have them. Some examples: Ning, Drupal, Joomla, Wordpress, to name a few.
- **User-Generated Content**: Any form of written words, videos, photos and music that users share with others. Users may literally be the author or artist who creates the content. If they share content created by others, their behavior, in itself, constitutes user-generated content. Here’s an example of offline, in-church, user-generated content: Sermons are content.

When we discuss them in covenant groups, the discussion is also original content inspired by sermons.

**2. Scope of Policy and Protocols:** The policy and procedures in this document apply to all activities that take place within this church's digital ministry. Offline activities that begin online will assume that participants continue to follow the covenant of the church and this policy. The policies and procedures apply to all members, friends, volunteers, staff, and special guests who are given the right to participate in this church's digital ministry. This document is printed and available in the church office. It is also available online at [insert web address here].

### 3. Safe Sanctuary

3.1 What is Safety? Safety means that a person's spiritual, emotional and physical self is protected from injury. Specifically:

3.1.1 *Spiritual safety:* People have the freedom to express their faith appropriately; people's beliefs are treated respectfully.

3.1.2 *Emotional safety:* Kindness, compassion, and civility are the norm; people refrain from personal attacks and gossip; confidentiality is honored.

3.1.3 *Virtual administration safety:* Digital ministers, staff and volunteers agree to abide by: this Digital Ministry Policy; the technology needs to support digital ministry; and the responsibility for updates to the policy.

3.1.4 *Protection of Member Data:* Care must be taken to insure that personal information housed in back-office electronic files are not accessible through the church's digital ministry channels.

3.1.4.1 This means that there is to be no bridge, no integration, of back office software and databases to the platforms that enable digital ministry.

3.1.4.2 The church published member directory may be a downloadable document, but it must be housed in locations that are available only to rostered (on the church's books) members of the church.

3.1.5 *Anonymity is Not Permitted:* The full (first and last) name of the registered user must be used in the tools and services of church's official website and Facebook presence. This requirement is the #1 deterrent to inappropriate behavior. Meanwhile, if we are to be

authentically present, use of our real names is a given. A profile photo is also recommended. A recognizable image of a user's face, and not an image of anything else, is allowed. Some individuals will not want their photo visible on the Internet. Offer a default icon of an image that represents UUism, such as a chalice, that they may use instead of a photo. They still must use their real names to participate.

### 3.2 Access & Participation Rights:

3.2.1 Anyone who is on the official roster of the church is automatically given sign-in credentials to social media or online community tools on the church's official website if they are age 13 or older. Only registrants may blog, start discussions, post photos and videos, start groups, submit calendar items, status updates and comments. Their content will be posted without monitored approval. However, the Digital Ministry Council retains the right to impose monitoring at anytime.

3.2.2 Anyone who is a seeker and has attended for eight weeks consecutively and is known to the membership coordinator or a minister, may be granted sign-in credentials to social media tools or community areas on the church's official website.

3.3 Children and Youth: Individuals age 12 and under will need the approval of their parents to participate in digital ministry that occurs on the church's official site.

3.3.1 Parents must also review how privacy and access controls work on the site to ensure they can help their children use the site. Kids and youth may assume that all of a church's digital ministry manifestations use Facebook standards for functionality – particularly that an individual's profile settings and functionality determine aspects of what the general public and friends can see. Facebook is a standard but many tools and platforms break with its conventions to deliver unique services and experiences.

3.3.2 Parents must insure that children understand the covenant.

3.3.3 Parents may upload or share photos of their kids.

3.3.4 Written permission by parents is required, though, for photos of their children take by other congregants.

3.3.5 All youth and adults should be informed that any communication that is sent via digital means – email, social media, posts and shared content – is not confidential and may be reported or

shared with others. Even if specific pieces of content are set to be “private” and shared with specific individuals, recipients are still able to record it through keyboard triggered screen (photos) shots and other means, and then spread to others.

3.3.6 It is recommended that a setting of “closed” but not “hidden” be used for official youth groups on Facebook.

3.3.7 Facebook, Twitter, YouTube: Social networks allow only ages 13+ on them. However, they use the honor system to check age. If children 12 and under are commenting on church accounts of these third-party social networks, it is generally assumed that parents know of their children’s participation. However, the church may opt to confirm with parents that it is okay for their children to be commenting in church controlled areas of these services.

3.3.8 Facebook Groups: The church may create closed Facebook groups for youth groups. At least one church staffer must be the administrator for the group. At least one youth lay leader should be an administrator. Adults who are not volunteers in official youth activities should not be invited or approved as members of these groups.

3.3.9 Friending: Ministers may friend youth from within their professional minister Facebook accounts, and not accounts that are personal. Staff members other than clergy may friend 13+ ages but they must create a Youth List in their Facebook accounts. The list is to be used to prevent viewing of content that is not related to church life or religious issues.

3.4 Monitoring all photos and videos submitted for inclusion in a church website photo and video gallery must be approved before they are posted, regardless of whether the photos and videos have been set by their creators to be viewable by some registrants and not all or the general public. Photos and videos submitted by ministers must be reviewed as well and not assumed to be okay. Mistakes can be made. If a minister finds a YouTube video that is 10 minutes long but stops watching at minute 8.5, something inappropriate might appear in the remaining 1.5 minutes. Bring it to him or her to make sure the video should be approved.

3.5 Digital Violations of a Church Covenant: Inappropriate language and behavior should be treated as learning moments. The course of action depends on the severity of the transgression.

3.5.1 Disrespectful tone and attitude: A minister should speak by phone or in person to the author of content that disrespects or smacks of an attack on one's inherent worth and dignity. The preferred outcome of the conversation is for the author to make changes to the content or delete it. The minister should make every effort to speak to the individual in a timely manner. If clergy is not available, the lead digital minister should contact, by email, network private messaging, phone, or in person, the author. If a resolution is not agreed upon, the minister and lay digital minister should determine whether to simply "hide" the content from view; delete it; or edit it to remove the disrespectful attitude.

3.5.2 Inappropriate language: For social media based official church websites, a "naughty language filter," or "profanity filter" is recommended. The filter will automatically remove all words that are in its list. If no filter is present, then the language, depending on its severity, may be removed. If the content is changed by anyone other than its creator, the digital minister or a staffer should notify him or her of the change and why action was taken. A naughty word filter is a list of inappropriate words and phrases. It can be edited to fit the needs of the congregation. Wordpress, for example, [offers one](#).

3.5.3 Threats: Clergy is to be notified immediately. The content should be read to the minister if the minister is unable to go online and see it for him or herself. Ministers should then phone and email the author. Phone messages and emails must make it clear that it's urgent for the party to respond by phone. The minister should repeatedly try to reach the individual within a 4-8 hour window. If no conversation has occurred after these attempts, the individual should be suspended, not deleted. The content containing the threats is to be saved by hiding them for public view but retained as proof. Or, screen shots and printouts of them should be made and then the content deleted. Do not delete the author of the threats from your church website community if you are able to suspend his or her activity, meaning prevent him or her from signing in and/or from creating content. Deletion or suspension should occur if clergy or the church administrator feels it is absolutely necessary. A conversation with the lay lead digital minister should occur with them. But the clergy or church administrator's decision should prevail.

#### **4. Oversight & Operations:**

4.1 Digital Ministry Council: It is the oversight body responsible for strategy, planning, design, features, content, and technology decisions regarding the church's website, and its presence in various forms of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Foursquare etc. The council will include one minister, the church administrator, a membership coordinator and/or the person responsible for writing all published communications; and at least three volunteers, one of whom to be designated as the lead lay, digital minister. The council should meet at least monthly. The council presents a report to the Board of Directions and the Congregation at least semi annually. The council is responsible for updating this Digital Ministry Policy and Protocols document.

4.2 Daily Management: Church staff is responsible for publishing content in the name of the church and for first-responses to technology problems. It is responsible for the day-to-day management of the church's Facebook Timeline and Group page(s), but it may rely heavily on volunteer administrators as well. The staff is responsible for the church's official Twitter and YouTube accounts. If no church staff is available for these duties, then at least one trusted lay leader would assume them. At least one minister will be a back up for publishing emergency and urgent information to any or all of the church's digital outlets.

4.3 Featuring or Highlighting Content by Members: If the church's website includes social media and content created by church members, it might feature it on the home page of the site or on its Facebook Timeline. Lay digital ministers should take the lead in making decisions about which content should be featured.

4.4 Style Guide and Content Plan: Editorial guidelines as well as visual design standards are to be created by the Digital Ministry Council. Ministers, staff, and lay digital ministers should do their best to follow the guides. At a minimum, they need to know that one exists; a staffer and lay digital minister, who functions as an editor, are to be responsible for maintaining these standards.

4.5 Political, commercial, and social justice-related content posted by registered users on official church digital locations

4.5.1 Not allowed: endorsements of political candidates or party platforms. The author of them should be given the chance to remove

the content. If not removed within 24 hours, staff, or a lay digital minister will delete them.

4.5.2 Not allowed: posts advertising commercial business. If not removed within 24 hours, staff, or a lay digital minister will delete them.

4.5.3 Allowed: posted events sponsored by non-profit groups that are in good standing with the church or who further its mission and values and as long as they are not in conflict with other aspects of this policy

4.5.4 Allowed: blogs, comments, and videos about social justice issues, in general, are acceptable as long as they pertain to programs and topics discussed in church life; or as long as the individuals who posted the content discusses it in terms of UU values, spiritual growth, or aspects of ministry

#### 4.6 Intellectual Property Rights and Digital Content:

4.6.1 Performing Arts: The church is not a government agency charged with regulating any aspect of the law. The Fair Use Doctrine of the Copyright Act is intentionally vague and places the onus for violations on the owners of copyrights. The UUA [advice on copyright issues](#) clearly states the laws are vague. The passage most relevant to this policy states: "At this point, many congregations are opting to avoid the copyright issues by editing out readings, hymns, projected images, etc. from their videos and podcasts, choosing to post only such content over which they have copyright control – sermons, prayers, original readings and music etc." Regardless of the onus, we care about right relationships with artists. Ethical and moral issues regarding fair compensation for composers may arise in the congregation. However, church performances of music are not done for profit, and therefore royalties are not generated. No one financially profits from our performance. Well-meaning individuals in the congregation may *believe* they know the law and its intent, but the question remains whether we care more about enforcement than about pursuing what is in the best interest of the church. The church may consult with an *intellectual property attorney* who represents the interests of the church *and its goals*. The church is responsible for operating intentionally within the Fair Use Doctrine of the Copyright Act. It is acceptable to assume that, in most cases, YouTube videos may be posted as a link or as an embedded file, into official digital locations or communications.

YouTube and other Internet video sharing sites police their content libraries and pro-actively remove content when requested to do so by the owner of its copyright. Owners are often not the composers. Videos of choirs and musicians performing versions of music that are published in the UU hymnals may be embedded and archived for repeated use without hesitation. YouTube videos of music, or clips from movies and TV shows, may be posted or shared on official church digital channels in conjunction with a timely event, such as a worship service, current RE classes, and other timely topics discussed in the church. It is the responsibility of the music staff to determine whether it must acquire the digital rights to music it will perform and record for sale. The church should get permission to shoot and post video of guest artists who perform their own compositions.

4.6.2 Minister Created Content: All blogs and audio, video, or text sermons by the church's ministers that are posted within the realms of the church's official digital ministry are subject to being archived and available online, at the discretion of the church and/or per the terms of the minister's contract. It is recommended that minister contracts protect the right of the church to retain the right to benefit from the wisdom of its ministers beyond the length of their tenure. For example, the contracts may stipulate a perpetual license for use, which would leave ownership of the content with the minister.

4.7 Emergencies: The Digital Ministry Council bears responsibility for creating and updating a detailed emergency plan that stands on its own but is an integral part of an overall emergency plan of the physical church. The plan should address the following:

4.7.1 Physical church closings due to weather: They are to be reported immediately on the home page of the church website and through all digital means used for ministry and general church communication. One or two individuals working closely together – a staffer and a volunteer, for example, should preferably execute all digital communication. Ministers are to be consulted with for what the message is to be. Updates should be published whenever possible.

4.7.2 Severe storms in community: If power is out in neighborhoods or towns of church members, the church should communicate through its digital channels that members may recharge cell phones and laptops at the church. The church may also make Internet access available.

4.7.3 Technology that supports digital ministry goes down: Help desk information for vendors who supply hosting services should be posted on the church website. Staff and digital ministers should coordinate to resolve the issue and communicate progress through digital channels that haven't been affected such as the church's Facebook Timeline and its Twitter account. Phone tree checklists used to contact members should include directions on where to get updates online.

4.7.4 Posts by members that relay death, critical injury, and other life threatening events: Ministers should be contacted immediately as well as the lay leaders of pastoral care church groups. If ministers aren't reachable or do not respond to phone calls, text messages, and emails within minutes, a call to 911 is likely the prudent course as well as phone calls and/or online replies to the author of the comment. The replies are meant to keep the author typing, to keep the author in conversation until rescuers arrive or clergy becomes available.

4.7.5 National catastrophes: Notices through all digital channels of church responses and information should be repeatedly updated. Staff and lay digital ministers should contact other online community information sites and social media outlets to relay that the church has services and resources for the community at large. The church should provide all who come to it for comfort with Internet access and re-charging stations.

**5. Responding to Requests, Complaints, or Concerns:** Any person who brings an issue or request forward regarding the church's digital ministry will be shown the utmost respect. The process for handling issues should be integrated and in sync with the process the church follows, in general, for such matters.

5.1 Most issues are to be reported directly to the Digital Ministry Council through its church email address. The lead team digital minister is responsible for responding. He or she may need to consult with ministers, the council or specific individuals. If the item is a request for material changes to the look, feel, content, or design of the church's digital channels, it will be brought to the Digital Ministry Council for consideration at its monthly meeting. The individual who made the request should be invited to attend the monthly meeting.

5.2 Complaints about what other members are writing or posting should preferably be positioned as growth moments. A dissenter should comment on the post itself or speak directly to its author if the complaints are a matter of opinion, personal dislike, or possible factual error. Social media is meant to inspire conversation and collaboration between authors and viewers. If the complaint, however, reveals that a violation of the church's covenant has occurred, the lead digital minister should contact clergy and/or the church administrator to help ascertain the severity of the situation and the appropriate course of action.

**6. Departing Ministers:** Access to social media and community areas and to login areas of a church's website will be terminated on a minister's final day of service. If a minister created a profile on a social networking-based official church site, a notice of his or her departure should be displayed prominently on the page. All comments left for the minister should be deleted from the page as well as any other posted content to that page. The password will be changed for the account, if it is still needed to ensure that sermons and blogs by that minister remain available on the site. Ministers who "liked" the church's official Facebook Timeline and who joined its Facebook group(s), may continue to watch activity on them but refrain from participating in them in the future.