

## Assembly Mennonite Church- Safe Church Digital Communications

Assembly Mennonite Church covenants to be a safe place for all of God's people. Social networking sites, on-the-spot communication devices and email are an integral part of our society and culture now. In our faith community, they can enhance communication, faith sharing and deepen relationships. In efforts to apply healthy boundaries and our commitments to safe church to the world of digital communications, we commit to the following practices.

### General Information about Digital Communications

- All communication sent digitally (e.g. email, social networking sites, notes or posts, texting) is NOT CONFIDENTIAL and may be shared or reposted to others beyond our control.
- Interactions in the virtual world need to be transparent, as a window in a door provides transparency in the physical world.
- In the virtual world, healthy boundaries and safe church practices must be adhered to as they are in the physical world.
- Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse/neglect/exploitation of children, youth, elders and vulnerable adults apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.

### Social Networking Sites Relationships

Adults working with children and youth are strongly encouraged to set very stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile. Bear in mind that the content posted to a public profile can be viewed by anyone without your consent.

- Adults should not initiate social media contact with children or youth. Youth may not be able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults.
- Youth may initiate social media contact and adults should discern the level of contact they want to maintain with youth prior to responding to these requests.
- Any material on any site that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to the Department of Child and family services or the police (see Appendix I) If the material is on an Assembly affiliated site, that material should be documented for Assembly's records and then removed from the site after consultation with the department of child and family services and/or police.
- Inappropriate material that does not raise suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should immediately be removed from the site.
- Social networking groups for MYF/JYF should be open to parents/guardians of current members.

- Unsupervised internet access by children is not permitted during Assembly sponsored events.
- When the need for a digital communication platform is identified, a group of people should be tasked with leading it. They should create a behavioural covenant to govern what content is appropriate and inappropriate for any social media group created on behalf of Assembly.
  - *Recommendations for Behavioural Covenants*
    - Covenants should acknowledge that materials posted on Assembly affiliated sites (and/or group pages) are NOT CONFIDENTIAL.
    - Covenants should acknowledge that content deemed inappropriate will be removed from the site or group page.
    - Covenants for Assembly-related social media groups should address the following:
      - Appropriate language
      - Eligibility of membership to join a social networking group.
      - Whether you have to be part of the congregation and whether there are age requirements/restrictions for participation.
      - Loss of eligibility of membership and removal from the social networking group. (Consider how and when members will be removed from the group due to moving away, leaving the faith community, becoming too old for youth group, pastors leaving to minister elsewhere)
      - Who, how and when members may be identified by name in text or in photos.
      - Appropriate and inappropriate behaviour of members (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, sexual acts, etc.) and the consequence for inappropriate behaviour.
      - Compliance with mandated reporting laws regarding suspected abuse.

#### Recommendations for Video Chats, Blogs or Video Blogs

- Adults should refrain from initiating social text or video chats with youth
- Participants in a video chat or blog should consider what will be shown in the video such as their surroundings, their clothing/state of dress, etc.
- All public posts and communication with youth should be saved when possible.
- All Pastors and other adults engaged in ministry with Youth should consider the content and nature of any post that will be read by or visible to Youth. Your voice is often considered the voice of the church, even when youth are not your intended audience.

#### Recommendations for Publishing/Posting Content

- Photos published on Assembly sponsored sites/publications, should not include name or contact information for children or youth.

#### Recommendations for Use of Email/text/Instant Messaging

- Emails to Junior or Senior Youth should be copied to a Parent/Guardian and/or an Assembly leader. Content should be brief and pertain to the logistical details of connecting.
- Prior written permission for youth to connect digitally (signed paper, or email reply by Parent/Guardian) is required.
- Assembly employees and volunteers may use text messaging to communicate with Junior or Senior Youth, if and only if, they have the formal written consent or parents/guardians. Content should be brief and pertain to the logistical details of connecting (e.g. about attending an event or requiring transportation).
- Pastoral care or counselling should be carefully done through text messaging.

Adapted from guidelines of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut,  
<https://www.episcopalct.org/FindResources/General-Parish-Operations/Safe-Church-Resources/Guidelines-for-Social-Media/> Used with permission. Excerpts from "Social Media for Christian Ministry: Getting Online and Keeping Out of Court," Kenneth A. Hall, The Advantage, September 2012.