Communication with Youth Policy
First Lutheran Church
Fergus Falls, MN

Adopted by Church Council: 09/12/2023

General
The purpose of this policy is to direct staff and volunteers in their practice with regards to communicating with young people through social media, email and mobile phone. Young people communicate in these ways and it is essential for our ministry that we engage with them effectively and safely. Social media are continually changing and this policy will be reviewed and updated annually, but the principles embodied in this document will continue to be applied. This policy is designed to provide a framework to protect children, young people, staff and volunteers. It also serves to help children and young people understand appropriate use of social media and modern technology. It should be read alongside the *First Lutheran Church Child Protection Policy*.

Scope
'Young people' are defined as those in school grades 6th-12th, or equivalent. Where a young person reaches the age of 18 before leaving our youth work provision it is still good practice to adhere to this policy. Children in grade 5th and below should not be communicated with using social media or mobile phones in any way.

Consequences for Non-Compliance
Violation of the guidelines below may result in temporary or permanent suspension of volunteer worker's role or termination of employment at the discretion of the organization.

Consent Forms
Parents and guardians will be given the option to consent to the following in the First Lutheran Church media release/consent form:

- Photos to be taken at youth events and then used in official First Lutheran Church publications, our Facebook group and Instagram account, the church's website and displays.
- Young people to have email contact with staff and volunteers in accordance with this policy.
- Young people to make and receive calls and texts to and from staff and volunteers in accordance with this policy.
- Young people to connect to their group's social media groups and pages.

Note for all Forms of Communication
Communication should not take place with young people between the hours of 9:00pm and 7:00am or on staff members' days off, unless in an emergency. Note this does not mean staff and volunteers have to be available to young people at all other times. Young people should also note that, while staff and volunteers will exercise appropriate discretion in dealing with the substance of communication, they cannot promise confidentiality. An effective way to speak about sensitive matters with youth is to give options. For example, "if we get to a point where I think it would be important for your parents to know this, I'll give you some options. You can tell them. I can tell them. Or, we can do it together. Does that sound ok?"

Emails

1. Once permission is given via the First Lutheran Church media release/consent form, staff and volunteers (small group leaders, mentors, coaches and children's group leaders) can hold email addresses for young people in their care.
2. Emails should be short and should usually be a one-off communication to arrange a meeting or remind young people to attend an event.
3. Conversations should not be had over email. Staff and volunteers should arrange to meet one-to-one with a young person if the young person would like to talk.
4. If an email raises any child protection concerns, the staff or volunteer must raise the issue with their supervisor, according to the First Lutheran Child Protection Policy.
5. When a volunteer leaves the youth work team, young people's email addresses should be removed from their personal address book.
6. Staff should only email using their work account and not personal email accounts.

Phone Calls, Texting

1. Once permission is given via the media release/consent form, staff and volunteers (small group leaders, mentors, coaches and group leaders) can hold mobile phone numbers of the young people in their care.
2. Text communication should be short and should usually be a one-off communication to arrange a meeting or remind young people to attend an event. When possible, leaders should use a group text that includes another leader.
3. Staff and volunteers should use an appropriate tone; friendly, but not over-familiar or personal. While communications should be warm and friendly, they should not suggest or offer a special relationship.
4. Staff and volunteers should only give personal contact details that are within the public domain of First Lutheran Church including their mobile phone number. All staff working with young people should only use their work phone number. Volunteers should only text from private phones as an exception.
5. Conversations should not be had over texts. Staff and volunteers should arrange to meet one-to-one with a young person if the young person would like to talk.
6. Staff and volunteers can have phone calls with young people, but these should be short.
7. If a disclosure is made that raises a safeguarding concern, verbatim notes should be made as soon as possible. The staff or volunteer must raise the issue with their supervisor.
8. When a member of staff or volunteer leaves the youth work team, young people's numbers should be removed from private phones and any other digital or written record.

Social Media

This policy does not list every social media site, but the principle for all of them is that staff and volunteers should not befriend, follow, or be followed by young people. All those using social media sites should set their privacy settings accordingly and check them periodically.

Counseling of children through social media is not permitted. When children form their own social media groups, **adults should not join these groups**.

Facebook

Schools and secular youth work policies state that an adult cannot be friends with a minor on Facebook. This is also First Lutheran Church's policy. Private messaging is not permitted. If a young person messages a staff member or volunteer's personal account, they should not respond.

1. Volunteers and staff cannot be friends on Facebook with a minor where their contact has been established through their role as a staff member or volunteer.
    a. Once a young person reaches age 18, it is then the volunteer or staff member's choice whether to be Facebook friends with them.
2. Each ministry group/class can have a Facebook group. They should follow this policy on the group page.
    a. The group must be closed.
    b. The group must be monitored by at least two staff/volunteers who have admin rights.
    c. Young people, staff and volunteers can become a member of this group, provided they are 13 or over.
    d. Communication can occur openly through comments and posts on the page.
    e. Events can be posted on the page.
    f. First Lutheran Church personnel are forbidden to post or distribute personal identifiable information of any child under the age of eighteen. Personal identifiable information includes but is not limited to: full name, home address, email address, telephone number or any information that would allow someone to identify or contact a child or that would jeopardize their safety or well-being in any way.
    g. As an exception to this policy, a child whose parent or other legally responsible adult has signed a media release/consent form may be identified by name in photographs or videos posted to an official social media account unless the child or his/her parent has requested otherwise.
    h. Privacy settings on photographs should be set to ensure that only members of the group see them.
3. If a child directly contacts church personnel engaged in ministry through a personal social media account, **the church account should be used to reply**. In unusual cases where a personal account is used to respond, such as an emergency situation which requires urgent communication, church personnel should **maintain copies of all such messages and must promptly provide copies of the communication to a supervisor.**

Instagram (Pinterest should be treated similarly)

1. Volunteers and staff cannot follow a minor on Instagram where their contact has been established through their role as a staff member or volunteer.
    a. Once a young person reaches age 18, it is then the volunteer or staff member's choice whether to follow them on Instagram.
2. Staff and volunteers should make their personal accounts private so that young people cannot follow them.
3. Staff, volunteers and young people can all follow the official First Lutheran Church Instagram account(s), provided they are 13 or over. Young people should not be followed by the church's Instagram account.
    a. The account should be a private account.
    b. It should be monitored by at least two staff/volunteers who have admin rights.
    c. The administrators can post pictures and comments but only on our own posts.
    d. Notice of events can be posted on the account.

e. Administrators should not initiate conversation by private message but if a young person sends a private message a very short reply can be sent.
f. Pictures of young people and events can be posted by the administrator provided parents have given permission on the consent form.

Snapchat, WhatsApp and all Anonymous Apps

1. Staff and volunteers should not connect with young people on Snapchat, WhatsApp or any "anonymous" app.
2. As a general rule, use of Snapchat, WhatsApp, and all anonymous apps is forbidden to use as communication tools for parishes, schools and ministries due to the lack of accountability and ability to retain records of communications on these apps. This policy also prohibits the use of any such apps for communications between any Church or School personnel and any child connected to any ministry or school related activity.

YouTube or similar

1. Staff and volunteers should not subscribe to any young person's YouTube channel or comment on their uploads.