

Communication Guidelines

A GUIDE FOR PRODUCING RESPECTFUL AND EFFECTIVE
COMMUNICATIONS WITHIN THE CHURCH AND WITH THE LARGER
COMMUNITY.

Congregational Church of South Dartmouth,
17 Middle Street
P.O. Box 80608
South Dartmouth, MA 02748-0608

This publication has been reviewed and approved by the Church Council of the
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Purpose of this booklet

The Membership Ministry of the Congregational Church of South Dartmouth is responsible for providing guidelines for the creation of the many communication vehicles used by our church, and to look into issues that may accompany them. Considering the growth of our church, changes in the outside community, and recent advances in technology, we have focused on security, sensitivity, ethics, legal issues, and media uniformity. Our goal is to suggest guidelines that will improve our communication within the church, with the community, and with each other.

From the Bylaws: “The Membership Ministry works with the Pastor and Church Administrator to develop and maintain an attractive and informative web site, telephone directory listings, community bulletin boards, etc.” Included within this scope is the development of suitable guidelines for how these materials are to be published.

The areas of initial investigation and suggested guidelines in this booklet cover the following communications methods.

- *The Spire*
- Church Web Site
- Email Distributions
- Letters
- Facebook Page
- Annual Report
- Press Releases and Articles
- Event Tables and Bulletin Boards
- Internal Material

The content of this booklet is the result of committee research including communication with the UCC Massachusetts Conference, the UCC National Conference, examination of our church bylaws, personal interviews with our church staff, investigation of other resources related to these areas, and consultation of experts in the fields of law, ethics and publishing.

The Membership Ministry had the following members who participated in this work.

Douglas Hagerman
David Ferreira
Richard Bockstein
Leslie De Groot, MD

Philosophy

This guide provides general and specific suggestions about how to approach church communications. It is not a guide about how to communicate effectively or economically, but instead it is a collection of ideas that can and should be taken into consideration when preparing church-related material for publication.

A detailed list of dos and don'ts is not included. Communication is difficult enough without raising additional hurdles! The church relies on the general good will, careful judgment, common sense, and right-mindedness of all participants in order to maintain a positive, open, and welcoming social environment. A basic rule is to think twice before submitting material to a church media outlet. A useful rule of thumb is to try to look at any discussion from the other person's viewpoint, and to be aware of what that other person might react to your writing.

Some basic processes and procedures are outlined below, but in general, the idea is to maintain mindfulness in your undertakings as an author, as is appropriate in any endeavor.

Outline

Each section discusses a communication outlet used by the church, such as the web site, the newsletter, and official church mailings. Each section describes the communication and its purpose, who is responsible for it, etc. Processes or procedures used in generating and publishing the material are mentioned, such as the sources of material, frequency of publication, password mechanisms used for access by authors, etc.

It is not the intent of this guide to add, reinforce, or multiply anything that makes it more difficult to publish news of interest to the church. It is assumed that the authors, reviewers, and publishers are working towards a joyful goal, and that a few suggestions might be helpful.

The items of guidance suggested for each kind of communication are summarized and gathered in a table at the end of this brochure.

All of these guidelines require periodic review, perhaps every 2-3 years.

General guidance

In all cases, the primary guiding principle is to be careful about publishing anything that could be harmful, or could be perceived as harmful. The following suggestions apply to all of the communication methods.

Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a proposed article or message is harmful. For example, is it better to publish too much information, and accidentally publicize something that would be better left private? Or is it better to publish too little, and shortchange the community by withholding useful knowledge? When in doubt, speak to the Pastor, the Moderator, or the Ministry Chair to get a second opinion.

It is useful to publicize upcoming church events, and to report on recent events. That is the whole point of communications in the first place!

It is usually harmless to publish the names of adults who are associated with the church. However, some people are more sensitive to this than others, so the Pastor or Moderator should review any publication that contains names.

The telephone number, home address, or email address of a church member should never be made public without the explicit, written permission of that member.

The publication of names of minors (persons under the age of 21) can lead to legal difficulties. The explicit, written permission of that person's legal guardian must be obtained before the name can be published.

Photographs of church activities can generally be published without special approval, but if images of minors are to be published, there may be legal exposure. The explicit, written permission of that person's legal guardian must be obtained before the image can be used.

The Pastor AND Moderator should be called upon to provide a careful review of any proposal to publish official church documents such as reports, reviews, or financial information, etc. Each case must be examined carefully to confirm that the material is appropriate for the proposed media outlet. For example, certain reports that are sent by postal mail to the congregation would not be appropriate for publication on Facebook!

In general, the best rule of thumb is "when in doubt, ask."

Church Web Site

<http://congochurchsd.org>

Statement of Purpose

The web site provides our members and any other interested party with activity and programming information, and it also serves as a resource for those who wish to obtain past sermons or require information about our Church Bylaws, our Covenant, our Boards or Committees. The Church web site is our 'calling card' to the world: our invitation to visit for those who may be looking for a new church home. Through the web site, we are also able to reach out to the homebound and to those who no longer reside in the local area.

Considerations

We are blessed with new technology and resources and we must be mindful that the audience for our church web site is, in fact, the world. We must assure that information published to the web site does not compromise the privacy of our church members. No password is needed to read the web site, and it is completely open to the reading public. Entry for those who are approved to make changes to the web site is controlled by usernames and passwords.

Responsible Parties

Those responsible for the content of the web site include those who submit articles and pictures for publication, the webmaster, and the church Pastor, and moderator.

Guidelines

- ◆ Articles from *The Spire* may be published on the web site, but because they are intended for different audiences, care must be exercised. *The Spire* is sent directly and primarily to the church community, so certain personal information (addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, etc.) can be published in *The Spire* but should not be published on the web site. Use care in this area.
- ◆ Verbal permission should be obtained for individuals recognizable in photographs.
- ◆ Avoid using names with photographs, other than for clergy, staff or "special event" speakers.
- ◆ Pastoral approval must be obtained prior to publishing content related to church theology or doctrine.
- ◆ Articles and photographs related to an outreach partner must be consistent with the partnership's guidelines.
- ◆ The name of a person submitting an article must be present in the article.

The Spire

Statement of Purpose

The Spire chronicles the life of our church. It includes a pastoral message, a calendar of events, a parish record (births, hospitalizations, deaths, marriages, baptisms, new church members and other personal events), and narratives about members who are involved in fulfilling our mission as a church.

The Spire is our Church newsletter, which is published monthly. It is mailed to Church members, potential members and friends of the Church. The recipients may be current members and friends of our church, or former members and friends who have moved away but have expressed the desire to continue to receive this publication.

Responsible Parties

Those responsible for the content and the format of *The Spire* include those who submit articles and pictures for publication, the church administrator, the Church Pastor, and moderator.

Guidelines

- ◆ Content should be consistent with our mission as a church. The newsletter should provide spiritual enrichment and should inspire readers to respond to the invitations and the challenges that the Church provides. It should be objective and factual, but also display our church and its members in an inviting manner that allows us to know each other and to build community.
- ◆ Editorials, letters to the Editor and letters to the Church are not included.
- ◆ Articles whose content includes Church doctrine or theology will be written by our church clergy or will have the approval of the church Pastor.
- ◆ The publishing of addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, or other personal information requires prior verbal permission from the individual (parent or guardian).
- ◆ Photographs, cartoons, and other complementary graphics may be used, if desired. Observe copyright rules if you “borrow” an image, text, or music.
- ◆ Group photographs are allowed without expressed permission if those pictured are not explicitly identified. When the subject of a photograph is identified by name, however, verbal permission must be obtained before publishing. [cf. General Guidance]
- ◆ Submitted materials must include the date and the name of the person submitting the materials. The name of the author is always published along with the article.

Writing Tips

- ◆ Remember to include the five “w’s” of journalism: who, what, when, where, and why.
- ◆ Make sure that the facts are correct. Ask for permission to use the names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and other personal information of those individuals mentioned in the article or visible in the photograph.

- ◆ Keep sentences and paragraphs short. Use the active voice if possible and maintain a positive writing tone.
- ◆ Articles from *The Spire* articles may also be published individually on our church web site if appropriate. If you think that your article is appropriate for the web, submit the piece for web publication. See the following section for more information about this point.
- ◆ Individual “thank you” comments are best expressed by sending personal notes of expression and are not published on the *The Spire*.

Email distribution lists

Statement of Purpose

The church community uses a number of email distribution lists to distribute information to various interest groups. Email lists are typically used on an intermittent, as-needed basis. For the most part, the recipients are members of the church community, but that may not always be the case. [a review of existing distribution lists is recommended]

Responsible Parties

The Pastor and Moderator and church administrator are responsible for the large lists that contain all members of the church membership, plus typically some “special friends “ of the church.. Ministry chairs may maintain ministry-specific distribution lists. Other lists that may be useful are under the control of the individuals making those lists.

Guidelines

All Email messages must be specifically signed by the sender. Material sent to a distribution list should be reviewed by the list owner, and any message sent to a list must be copied to the list owner.

Avoid including copies of email address lists in the message. This can be done by using Group distribution lists, or the “blind copy function”. However neither approach really stops a recipient from accessing the list of addresses.

Letters sent via postal mail

Statement of Purpose

Even in these modern times in which we live it is still appropriate in some cases to communicate within the church community by a “hard copy” letter or flyer. Letters are used on an intermittent, as-needed basis, and the recipients are almost always members of the church community.

Responsible Parties

The Pastor and Moderator or other specific individuals are responsible for the content of letters.

Guidelines

Church letters are primarily used for the communication of important and closely-held information about the church. The Pastor or Moderator are likely to be involved in the writing and sending of church letters, and should vet the contents of any such letters.

Facebook Page

Statement of Purpose

The Facebook page is used on a continuing basis to communicate church events to the outside world.

Responsible Parties

The church Facebook page is written and edited by an informal volunteer committee. The members of the committee are approved by the Moderator, but are self-nominating and self-organizing.

Guidelines

- ◆ Follow the General Guidance and err on the side of caution. Facebook is read by millions of people.
- ◆ The Facebook page should be set so that the operators can review articles submitted by external sources before they become visible on the page. It is tricky to balance the desire for openness and the need for control.

Annual Report

Statement of Purpose

The Church *Annual Report* contains the individual reports submitted by the Church Boards and/or Committees, the Church Staff and the Church Officers. The Church Annual Report *serves our church both as a reporting tool and as a historical record.* The Ministers' *Annual Report* should provide insight into both the spiritual and business life of the church and is mandated in our church bylaws. In addition, reports submitted by the various boards and committees provide the church member with a broader and more detailed view of the spiritual life, activities and business aspects of the church.

Responsible Parties

The Church Moderator and Vice-Moderator, in cooperation with the Pastoral Staff, are responsible for the review of the Annual Report.

Guidelines

- ◆ The board/committee chairperson or designated individual shall write the report.
- ◆ The entire board/committee should review its chair's report before submitting it for publication.
- ◆ The report should be balanced, complete, concise, informative, factual and friendly.
- ◆ Use sensitivity when describing events or issues which maybe controversial in nature or may evoke strong differences of opinion.
- ◆ The report should not include an individual's personal information, such as an address or phone number.
- ◆ Submitting the report electronically and formatted in a word-processing program for publication is required in order to reduce church office staff workload.
- ◆ Add graphics/pictures to the text body, if desired.
- ◆ Write sentences in active voice – they will be more interesting than those in passive.
- ◆ Avoid long lists of the year's events/topics – attempt to provide some interesting details about each event/topic without getting too "wordy."

The Church Annual Report should:

- ◆ Provide a summary of the year's activities for each board and selected committee and for the church minister.
- ◆ Provide a clear sense of the finances and the business structure of the church.
- ◆ Identify the issues important in the year ahead.
- ◆ Provide a historical record of our current church life.

Press Releases or News Articles

Statement of Purpose

Press releases are a communication tool used to reach a wider audience through the use of a carefully crafted message distributed to the press and other mass media entities for publication in newspapers and magazines or announced on radio and television broadcasts and or other and public communication forums.

A press release should address a specific issue, cause, or event and communicate a key message supported by proof points. Determine what the objective of the release is, who it is intended to reach and what the message should say. Be simple, clear, concise, positive, and accurate. Make sure the press release is newsworthy.

Responsible Parties

Individuals are responsible for the content and truthfulness of the press releases they submit. Press releases may be reviewed and approved by the church Pastor, the Moderator or Vice Moderator, or another officially appointed spokesperson.

Guidelines

- ◆ Write a detailed outline of the release focused to the target audiences. Develop a headline that sells the story. Make sure your facts are correct, timely and relevant to the target audiences. The writing style should be simple, declarative and understandable to the audience.
- ◆ Ask for permission to use names and other personal information of those individuals mentioned in the press release. Refer to the General Guidance.
- ◆ Provide support material about the event, cause or activity where possible. Use the attached “boilerplate” template for writing church releases.

Meeting With The Press

- ◆ Call the newspaper or television station and ask the editor if they might be interested in writing an article or covering an event.
- ◆ The press release should be developed before you call them. They may want it right away. You need to be prepared.
- ◆ Give the press a day or two to read a news release. Call them back and ask if they received it, and have any questions. Follow up, but don't be annoying.
- ◆ Be positive when dealing with the press. Get excited when talking about your story, article or event.
- ◆ Everyone likes a compliment, even reporters. Call when they have done a particularly good job. Or, send them a thank you note.
- ◆ If unsure, do not write it in the article; less is more.

Information Tables & Bulletin Boards

Statement of Purpose

The many *information tables* located throughout the church are distribution points for “hand out” material relevant to church activities that may be of interest to church members, potential members, visitors and friends. *Examples include recent sermons, The Messenger, church informational/visitor pamphlets, and information on current activities and opportunities.*

The Bulletin Boards are a posting place for informative flyers and notices about matters of interest that interact with our congregation’s activities and volunteer opportunities (copies of which, in some cases, may be on the table to be picked up by those interested). *Space may also be allocated for specific topics and groups such as UCC News & Events; and various community issues.*

Responsible Party

Given its dynamic nature, the ongoing monitoring that is necessary and the inherent need for a knowledge base about relevant issues. The name of the person responsible for posting on any board or table should be displayed on all *Information Tables and Bulletin Boards*.

Guidelines

Items included will generally have appeared in approved format elsewhere within our church, the Massachusetts Conference and/or must clearly relate to activities consistent with the church’s operations, outreach opportunities, community interaction and doctrine. Further, the Information Tables and Boards must be maintained in current and neat order. There is to be a clearly visible note indicating that permission from the responsible person is required for items to be posted or displayed. Thus, materials must meet one of the following criteria, include a clear identification of the source of the material and note its expiration date:

- ◆ Be a document approved or produced by a church board, committee, or a member of the pastoral staff.
- ◆ Have the permission (written or verbal) of any non-church members included in posed photos.
- ◆ Be a document that describes a matter supported by the UCC Mass Conference.
- ◆ Describe an outreach project supported by the Church’s volunteer or financial resources.

Internal Material

Internal material such as budgets, annual reports, surveys, etc., are typically handed out to attendees (Members) at congregational meetings, and are not distributed by other means.

Minutes of each meeting of Congregational Ministries or committees are required to be placed in the appropriate folder in the church Archives.

The Sunday Church Service Bulletin is composed uniquely by the PASTOR and Church administrator.