

# Social Media Toolkit For Congregations

Erik Jelinek, ELCA Director for Evangelical Mission, SCSW  
*(Inspired by "The Art of Listening" by The Greenlining Institute)*



South-Central Synod of Wisconsin  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

**A Social Media Toolkit for Congregations**  
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**Introduction**

Social Media has already changed the way we communicate, and has become an integral part of daily life for members of our congregations. But for some churches, Social Media has not been used to its fullest potential, and some leaders do not know how, or are afraid, to move forward in this way of communicating. Social Media has the potential to increase communication with members as well as grow a congregation’s outreach and stewardship ministries. In this toolkit, we will outline some basic ways to get involved in Social Media and grow your platform.

**A Social Media Strategy**

When a church is developing a Social Media Strategy, you need to discern who you are communicating with and what you want to communicate. It is important to figure these things out first, because they will help to determine which platforms to use. It is also important to ask yourself why – why are you doing what you are doing when it comes to Social Media.

**Initial Questions to Ask**

Who is your audience?

- Internally to enhance communication within your congregation?
- Externally as an evangelism tool?
- Mixture of both?

What are your goals?

- Raise awareness of the congregation in the larger community?
- Publicize events and ministries?
- Get more people from your congregation involved in activities?
- Invite people from outside the congregation to come to events and services?
- Use as a stewardship tool?
- Use for teaching and education?
- Relate to the younger generations?

How can Social Media be used to advance your current ministries?

How much time and energy will your congregation invest in managing social media?

Who will be the primary leaders?



After you have discerned what you want to accomplish with a Social Media Ministry, and who you are trying to reach, you will need to determine which social media tools are best suited to your needs. Each platform has a different purpose and a different audience. Here are some of the platforms available and their purposes:

Social Networks: Facebook, Twitter, Google+  
Micro-Blogs: Tumblr  
Photo Sharing: Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest  
Professional Networks: LinkedIn  
Traditional Blogs: Blogger, WordPress  
Video Sharing: YouTube, Vimeo, Vine

As you start this ministry, start small. Select one or two platforms to begin your ministry and build those platforms up. Over time, as your ministry grows, you can add new platforms.

Facebook and Twitter are the two largest Social Media platforms today. They are normally a good place to start because they are very visible and many in your congregation already have accounts with these platforms. They are also very good at driving traffic to websites, coordinating people, and publicizing events.

### **A Few How-To's**

After selecting your platform, then you can move your ministry forward by creating content. Below are some ideas to follow as you are starting and enhancing your Social Media Ministry. At this point, please remember that there is no one formula for social media outreach and growth. Some of these practices may work for you, some may not, so take time to try a variety of practices. Be willing to take a risk, make changes, and see what works for your community.

### **Know your Congregation**

When you are starting, or growing, this ministry, you need to know your congregation well. What is the congregation's vision and mission? When you use social media, you will be telling the world who your congregation is, what your congregation is about, and its core values by what you post, the pictures you share, and the invitations you offer. Make sure that you know what is at the heart of your congregation before you begin.



## How to Communicate on Social Media

The basis of social media is very simple - communication. You are speaking and listening to people online. To do this, keep it short and simple (KISS). The most effective messages are engaging, get straight to the point, and use links and images. To make your content accessible to more people, use plain English and avoid words that those outside of the congregation wouldn't understand. You want to let the person who has no clue about your church and ministries to easily understand what you are saying. By doing this you are inviting people to join the conversation, not leaving them out of it.

On Twitter, you have a 140-character limit per tweet, so make the most of every character.

Facebook doesn't have a strict character limit, but it still makes sense to keep things short and simple. You want to draw your audience in by your posts, and if they are too long you will lose them.

### *Develop your Social Media Voice*

Social media interactions revolve around relationships. The people you are reaching out to want to know that there is a real person listening and speaking to them. So while you are creating content, posting pictures and captions, highlighting events, or replying to others, be yourself and show the personality of your congregation. Develop content that gets your point across, but is funny, witty, and serious when it needs to be. Share good news, send out prayer requests, highlight exciting ministries, but do it all with a real voice, your voice, and not just someone trying to pump out information with no emotion behind it.

### *Tag It!*

Tagging enables the church, or anyone involved in social media, to build relationships and create conversations that focus on specific topics. Here are some basic ways to tag:

# hashtags on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are used to make keywords or topics in a message. If someone were to click on the hashtag #scswadvent it would open up a stream that would show all of the posts/tweets/pictures related to this hashtag. It is like a file folder containing all of the posts tagged with that hashtag.



For more information on hashtags I have attached an article from Mashable called “The Beginner’s Guide to the Hashtag” at the end of this document.

@ On Twitter the @ sign is a way of mentioning another. This symbol allows you to tag a person, church, or organization’s Twitter account and lets them know that you are talking about them. Mentions (@) are important ways to seek direct conversation with another person on Twitter.

On Facebook, you can tag other Facebook Pages in your messages by typing @ followed by the name of the individual or organization you’re looking to tag. You can only tag Pages, which are public, and not personal accounts, which are private.

### ***Respond***

When you get a comment or reply on any of your social media platforms, respond promptly. This will let the person know that you are attentive and your social media platforms are active.

### ***Share Content – Good Content!***

Pictures and videos capture the attention of social media users more than anything else. Visuals are much more likely than plain text to grab and hold the attention of social media users, so attaching a photo or video will generate more feedback - likes, comments, and shares.

## **How to Build an Audience**

Obviously, one of the main reasons for using social media is to get the word out, and that can only happen if you have an audience. Building an audience, especially for a church, takes time. You will want to be interested in not only building up your audience numbers, but attracting quality followers as well. The quality of followers will eventually build the quantity.

### ***Start with your friends and church members***

To start building your congregation’s social media ministry, start with your own network. Get the word out to your friends, church members, and staff who have social media accounts by inviting them to like your Facebook page and Twitter account. Then ask them to invite their friends to do the same thing. The more



people you ask, and invite to ask their friends, the more “likes” your page will have and it will continue to grow exponentially. In order to inspire “likes,” you’ll want to make sure you share engaging content.

### ***Follow Partner Ministries***

You can continue to grow your base by following some of your partner ministries, like the Synod, other church pages, and national and international ministries. Often, once you “like” or “follow” them, they will do the same with you.

### ***Tag Your Big Events and Activities***

Creating hashtags for every event your congregation hosts or attends provides an opportunity to show what is going on in your congregation and opens people to an online conversation about your ministry. People who are not able to be physically present at your congregation, the event or ministry, can participate, in real time, through social media.

Remember that hashtags are public and many may already be in use. This can be a good thing if the conversation is related to what you are talking about. But if it is a different topic, and quite often with churches it is, then you may want to find another hashtag that is more unique and specific for your purpose.

## **Managing your Social Media Accounts**

If you let it, social media could take up massive amounts of your time and energy. It is essential that you find tools and practices to make the best use of your time and still use social media in the best way possible.

### ***Updating on a regular basis***

Outdated information on your social media accounts sends the message that these accounts are not active or the congregation really isn’t involved in social media. This can be very frustrating to other users. Review your information at least once a quarter and if you have any important changes or additions, such as new times for a worship service or special events for Advent or Lent, update them immediately.

### ***Content Management Tools***

Content management tools are very helpful to manage multiple social media



platforms. Hootsuite is one that is free (for the basic version) and allows you to manage Facebook and Twitter at the same time. One of the nice features is that it gives you the ability to schedule future posts and provides basic analytics so you can measure the impact of your posts.

### **Creating Content**

Having content that engages others is the key in social media. This is what gets your audience hooked.

#### ***Try to Post Daily, At the Very Least***

Consistency is key when it comes to social media. If you post at a regular time every day, your followers will look forward to what you have to say for that day, and you will gain more of a following. Inconsistency does the exact opposite, it demonstrates the lack of presence of a church and you may get forgotten altogether. Set goals and be realistic about how much you can post and how often, depending on the number of people you have doing your social media ministry. Below is an example of goals for posting:

Facebook:

Share 1-2 posts each day, preferably photos and inspirational quotes  
Like, comment, and share posts from other members of the church

Twitter:

Share 5-8 tweets a day, a mixture of original material, retweets, and direct mentions  
Follow new Twitter accounts.

#### ***Mix Up the Content***

When it comes to your social media, mix it up. Your audience will be more engaged if you share a variety of content: a video, a story, a new ministry you are starting, highlights from a sermon, a devotional, quotes from others, questions, etc. Mixing it keeps your audience more engaged.

#### ***Scheduling***

One of the most helpful things I have learned with social media is how to develop a schedule for when content is posted. What I have done is selected a theme for every day of the week and then found content related to that theme. By doing this



I have been able to focus on finding specific content related to the theme and highlighting certain ministries, rather than searching for a new idea and material every day.

But the scheduled content is not the only content posted every day. Scheduling makes sure that something new goes up daily but the majority of days I add extra content to highlight events or other activities going on in the church.

### **Needing a Social Media Policy**

When you develop a Social Media Ministry, you will need a Social Media Policy as well. There are challenges and potential dangers with social media, and so developing a policy helps to clear up confusion related to the Social Media Ministry as well as clear guidelines on what should and shouldn't be done on social media. A good policy outlines your congregation's values and social media goals, and indicates the roles and responsibilities of staff members.

#### ***Defining Roles***

Defining roles improves efficiency and management of your social media ministry. It is a good practice to have one person in the congregation as the main contact for the Social Media Ministry. Then you need to create a system of checks and balances within the ministry: Do your posts have to be approved by the ministry leader or pastor? If so, what kind of posts? What events need to be highlighted? Is this talked about at staff or team or committee meetings? Where are you getting your information? Etc.

#### ***Do's and Don'ts***

You want your congregation to be involved in social media – social is a key part of all of this – but you do need to be clear about what is acceptable and not acceptable. The “do's” should give encouraging reasons for participating in social media, while the “don'ts” provide guidelines that everyone should follow in order to protect their reputation as well as the reputation of the church. Here are some examples:

#### **Do:**

1. Be professional –What you share still reflects on the congregation
2. Be responsible – remember what you publish is a reflection of you and the



congregation

3. Be respectful and civil — don't make insulting comments
4. Think before you post — keep in mind the global audience you're sharing with
5. Be factual — make sure you can back up what you say
6. Ask questions — if ever in doubt, ask the ministry team leader

**Don't:**

1. Post anything that will jeopardize the congregation
2. Post anything that you don't want the public to see - a good rule of thumb: if you don't want your parents to see it, don't post it!
3. Post anything obscene, offensive, or profane
4. Reveal confidential information
5. Intentionally mislead or misrepresent the truth

As you move forward with a Social Media Ministry, please remember that there is no one way to do social media for congregations. Different churches have different priorities and audiences, and you need to determine what works best for your church and your setting.

It will take time and energy to get good at doing this ministry. Finding the right group of people to work with and putting in the time and effort will pay off in the long run.

Embrace the changes that will come with social media. There will always be new tools, platforms, and ways of reaching out. Take some time to play with the different platforms and see what works best as your ministry continues to grow and adapt.



## GLOSSARY OF SOCIAL MEDIA TERMS (from The Greenlining Institute)

**Analytics** - Quantitative and qualitative measures of social media activity used to evaluate impact and effectiveness

**Blog** - Short for “web log.” Essentially an online collection of entries focusing on commentary or discussions around certain topics and issues

**Comment** - A response that is often provided as an answer or reaction to a blog post or message on a social network. Comments are a primary form of two-way communication on the social web

**Content management tool** - An online tool like Hootsuite used to manage different social media accounts at the same time

**Facebook** - Facebook is a social network that connects individuals and organizations globally and allows people to easily share information and interact with one another. Facebook is the largest social network in the world.

**Facebook Page** - Pages allows organizations to publicly connect with people on Facebook through the sharing of content. Admins can post information and newsfeed updates to people who Like their pages.

**Facebook Timeline** - The Facebook profile page for an individual or organization that shows the collection of photos, stories, and updates that a user shares

**Follow** - On a social network, when you follow a user, you subscribe to the content that they share with others, which will be displayed through your newsfeed

**Follow Friday (#FF)** - Follow Friday is a trend via the hashtag #ff every Friday on Twitter. Users select other usernames and tweet them with #ff in their post, meaning they recommend following those Twitter users

**Followers** - People who have signed up on social networks to receive your shared content

**Hashtag** - A tag used on social networks indicated by the “#” symbol used to organize messages for the purpose of marking topics in conversations. Hashtags are searchable and allow social media users to zone in and listen to conversations regarding specific topics. (Ex: #scswadvent)

**Hootsuite** - A social media management system that helps organizations streamline management across social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Teams can collaboratively monitor, engage, and measure the results of social campaigns from one secure, web-based dashboard

**Instagram** - Instagram is a photo sharing application that lets users take photos, apply filters to their images, and share the photos instantly on the Instagram network and other social networks like Facebook and Twitter.



**Like** - A feature in social networks that allows users to recommend content or demonstrate agreement with commentary, and also serves to move popular content up in the news feed or search rankings. In Facebook, when users Like a page, they subscribe to the respective page's updates.

**List** - A way to combine select people you follow on Twitter into a smaller feed. A list can be made up of friends, influencers in different topics, types of people, etc. Lists let you view a slice of your followers at a time and are a great way to focus on specific folks when you're following a large number of people.

**Mention** - Mentioning another user in your Tweet by including the "@" sign followed directly by their username is called a 'mention.' Also refers to Tweets in which your username was included.

**Newsfeed** - A continuous feed of updates and news that you want to receive or have subscribed to. On Twitter, it is the collection of tweets from accounts you have followed. On Facebook, it is the collection of posts and updates from your "friends" and fan pages you have liked.

**Reply** - An @reply is a Tweet posted in reply to another user's message. This is usually done by clicking the "reply" button in their Tweet. @replies always begin with the "@" symbol, followed by the username.

**Retweet** - A Retweet is a repeated tweet. It is sometimes used in a reply to allow everyone to see the original tweet. It is also used to forward a message onto one's own followers.

**Trending topics** - A word, phrase, or topic that is popular at any given moment. In Twitter, trending topics are the collection of hashtags and keywords that are being used extensively at a given moment.

**Tweet** - A message shared through Twitter, limited by 140 characters

**Twitter** - Twitter is a real-time information social network that connects you to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what you find interesting. Tweets (or updates) are 140 characters long.

**Twitter Chat** - An online conversation scheduled and hosted by Twitter users focusing on a specific topic. A great way to build community with like-minded users interested and invested a particular topic.

**YouTube** - YouTube allows billions of people to discover, watch, and share originally-created videos. YouTube is a video-sharing network that provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe through the use of video.



## The Beginner's Guide to the Hashtag

By Rebecca Hiscott, Oct 08, 2013

If you're a social media novice, hashtags — those short links preceded by the pound sign (#) — may seem confusing and unnecessary. But they are integral to the way we communicate online, and it's important to know how to use them (even though some people, like Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake, are not the biggest fans). Plus, they can be a lot of fun.

On Twitter, the pound sign (or hash) turns any word or group of words that directly follow it into a searchable link. This allows you to organize content and track discussion topics based on those keywords. So, if you wanted to post about the *Breaking Bad* finale, you would include #BreakingBad in your tweet to join the conversation. Click on a hashtag to see all the posts that mention the subject in real time.

The hashtag's widespread use began with Twitter but has extended to other social media platforms. In 2007, developer Chris Messina proposed, in a tweet, that Twitter begin grouping topics using the hash symbol. Twitter initially rejected the idea. But in October 2007, citizen journalists began using the hashtag #SanDiegoFire, at Messina's suggestion, to tweet updates on a series of forest fires in San Diego. The practice of hashtagging took off; now users and brands employ hashtags to cover serious political events (#Cairo) and entertainment topics (#MileyCyrus) alike.

With our beginner's guide, you'll be hashtagging like a pro in no time.

### Supported Characters

Which characters can you include in a #hashtag?

For starters, spaces are an absolute no-no. Even if your hashtag contains multiple words, group them all together. If you want to differentiate between words, use capitals instead (#BlueJasmine). Uppercase letters will not alter your search results, so searching for #BlueJasmine will yield the same results as #bluejasmine.

Numbers are supported, so tweet about #50ShadesOfGrey to your heart's content. However, punctuation marks are not, so commas, periods, exclamation



points, question marks and apostrophes are out. Forget about asterisks, ampersands or any other special characters.

Keep in mind that the @ symbol does something completely different. Using @ before a person's Twitter handle will tweet at him directly, letting him know you have written to him via the @Connect tab. A hashtag will not. Sometimes users will hashtag a celebrity's name instead of using her Twitter handle — it is acceptable to tweet #Lorde or @lordemusic. But if you are trying to reach someone directly, don't use a hashtag.

There is no preset list of hashtags. Create a brand new hashtag simply by putting the hash before a series of words, and if it hasn't been used before, voilà! You've invented a hashtag.

### Supported Platforms

Most major social media platforms support hashtags. These include:

**Twitter:** Twitter is the birthplace of modern hashtag usage — as such, its hashtags are more versatile than other sites' (see "Tone & Voice," below). Twitter hashtags are mainly used to denote specific topics of conversation; the "Trends" sidebar of your Twitter feed curates a list of hashtags you might be interested in, based on your tweets.

When you search for a hashtag on Twitter, there are three ways to filter the results. The "Top" option displays the most relevant and popular posts, including those from users you don't follow. "All" shows you every tweet that uses the specific hashtag in real time, and "People you follow" will only display results from users you are following.

**Facebook:** Facebook only recently added hashtag support in June 2013, and the practice has not picked up much steam. Nevertheless, clicking on Facebook hashtags will take you to a list of posts containing the same hashtag. The results are not limited to people you know.

**Instagram:** Hashtags can be used to complement photos shared on Instagram and help you discover new accounts and pick up followers. Some hashtags were created specifically for Instagram photo challenges — #ThrowbackThursday, for example, encourages users to post retro photos. Vine uses hashtags in the same way — try accompanying each of your Vine videos with at least one hashtag to



maximize shareability.

**Google+:** When you click on a hashtag in Google+, the search results will include the original hashtag as well as posts with similar tags and keywords. Google search results display on the left side of the page, while hashtag results from within Google+ appear on the right. Google also gives you the option to search within Facebook or Twitter.

**Tumblr:** Tumblr posts have a special “Tag” section where you can enter tags. These tags function like Twitter hashtags, organizing posts by topic, but the hash symbol is inserted automatically. Hashtags included in the main body of a post are not transformed into links.

**Pinterest:** Use Pinterest hashtags to mark and search for content. Click on the hashtag in a pin description to navigate results that contain the exact hashtag, plus pins with the same word or phrase in the description.

Curious which hashtags are trending across social media? Hashtags.org tells you which tags are hot in real time.

### Tone and Voice

Beyond simply organizing your tweets, Twitter hashtags can help you craft your voice while joining in a larger discussion. You can use multiple hashtags in one tweet, but don’t go overboard. One to three is generally an acceptable range.

In a post for *The New Yorker*, Susan Orlean points out that hashtags can provide colorful commentary as a sort of “muttered into a handkerchief” aside, to give context and to convey humor or sarcasm.

Sometimes a hashtag is so zany or specific that there are few, if any, search results attached to it. These exist mainly for entertainment purposes. Orlean gives the example “Sarah Palin for President??!?! #Iwouldratherhaveamoose.” As she points out, it is unlikely anyone would actually search for “#Iwouldratherhaveamoose,” but it adds a dash of humor that followers appreciate.

Here are some sample tweets that use hashtags (in bold) to add context, humor and voice:



Let the weekend begin! #TGIF

Wearing socks with Crocs is so stylish #kidding

Just dropped my second ice cream cone. #fail

I hate when people smoke e-cigarettes indoors. #annoying #rude #whygodwhy

The movie #Gravity is beautiful, but so terrifying! #nevergoingtospace

I'm loving 'The Sound of Things Falling' by Juan Gabriel Vasquez #FridayReads

### **Business and Marketing**

Many major brands now have Twitter accounts, and some choose to create hashtags to promote specific events or campaigns. If you want to use Twitter as part of your business strategy, here are a few tips to keep in mind:

**Consolidate your tweets:** Choose a specific account that will represent your brand or business. Set up a business account, or designate one employee to tweet on behalf of the company. That way, users can find all of your tweets in one place.

**Use relevant hashtags:** See what hashtags other businesses in your field are using. If you're promoting cheap airfare, you will want to use hashtags like #CheapTravel and #FlightDeals so users will find you when they search for those keywords.

**Follow trends:** See what hashtags are trending and make use of them — if they are relevant to your business. Using a popular hashtag that has nothing to do with your brand (for example, including #MileyCyrus in a tweet about cheap airfare) makes you look like a spammer and will hurt your credibility.

**Create your own hashtag:** If you want to create a special hashtag for an event or campaign, select one that hasn't been used before and remind everyone to use it in related tweets. Be sure to include the hashtag in any promotional materials. Make it informative but short — for example, Mashable uses #MashReads to talk about writers who visit our HQ.

**Generate buzz:** Creating a contest, raffle or promotion is a great way to get Twitter talking about your brand. Users will be more likely to retweet your hashtags if they



know they might win a prize by doing so. For instance, if you're promoting a new confectionery shop called Candy Land, get Twitter buzzing by offering free treats to users who tweet #CandyLandPromo.

Remember, your hashtag's visibility will depend on your privacy settings. If your Twitter account is private, only those authorized to see your tweets will have access to your hashtags. If you are using hashtags to increase your brand's exposure, make sure your tweets are set to Public.

### Best Practices

Twitter has a helpful list of best practices for using hashtags, but here are three key tips for all users:

**Be specific:** If you're using a hashtag to join a conversation, make sure the hashtag is specific and relevant to your topic. If you're talking about Obama's health care plan, use #Obamacare instead of simply #Obama. A vague or generic hashtag like #health or #opinion isn't effective either.

**Keep it simple:** Hashtags, like links, look like spam if they are used too often. Three hashtags should be the maximum on Twitter and Facebook, but you can get away with more hashtags on Instagram and Vine. And don't hashtag the same word twice ("#Gravity is a great movie! Everybody go see #Gravity"). It's #redundant.

**Give context:** A tweet that contains only hashtags is not only confusing — it's boring. If your tweet simply reads, "#happy," your followers will have no idea what you're talking about. Similarly, if you tweet, "#BreakingBad is #awesome," you're not really adding much to the conversation.

STAY CONNECTED WITH YOUR SYNOD!

