

Staying Legal in the Digital Age

Having a social media presence is an excellent tool for growing your church and communicating with your congregation. Staying aware of legal issues that could come up as a user of social media platforms is a way to protect your church, because you are subject to the same laws as businesses and individuals. Whether you are a pastor or another church leader, read our best practices for staying legal in the digital age.

Copyright and Intellectual Property

Don't steal online

Before you copy and paste a nice photo you found on a Google search for your weekly blog post, think again. All intellectual property is copyrighted, whether it is stated on a website or not, so make sure you own content before you post it. It's so simple to find information and images online, but that doesn't mean they are free.

Infringement per copyright violation can cost anywhere from \$750-\$30,000 plus attorneys' fees.

Read the fine print

Even if you purchase a photo or written material you are still subject to certain restrictions, so know the terms you have agreed on. Be aware of whether or not you can make multiple print copies of a photo you buy online or if you can print an image on items you sell in your bookstore.

Fair Use and what you can use

At a certain age, intellectual property becomes public domain and is available for use without permission. Works published before 1923 are in the public domain. Anything published after 1977 expires 70 years after the author's death. Knowing the difference between works in the public domain, works licensed under creative commons and works with full copyright is important if you regularly generate content from outside sources.

Plagiarism

Did you cite your source?

You may not have the following of a celebrity pastor, but that doesn't mean you won't get called out for plagiarism. If you are writing and use an outside source make sure you cite it clearly.

Losing your credibility is a problem for any profession, but it's a bigger issue for pastors who are teaching Biblical morals and standards from the pulpit.



Social Media Use

Post with discretion

Remember that everything you put online leaves a digital footprint, so post with discretion.

Monitor the social media interaction your youth and children's ministry leaders have with teenagers and children

Monitoring the use of social media interaction pastors and other leaders have on a personal level with teenagers and children provides both accountability for them and protection for your church. Bringing up social media use on a regular basis and how it can be helpful to building relationships provides a chance to set appropriate boundaries.

Reducing the Risk

Write a policy

Writing a social media policy for your church staff and volunteers participating in communications allows you to establish principals of social media use and what cannot be posted online. It can also give the church the right to monitor all computer use and content. Mauck & Baker attorneys can help write church social media policies to ensure you stay legally protected and maintain best practices.

Provide regular training

Not every church has the resources to hire a Communications Pastors or Media Director, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't take social media use seriously even if you have a church volunteer posting for you. Social media use can expand your reach vastly, but it can also get you in trouble quickly if you aren't thoughtful about how you post information and who you let control your social media platforms. Providing training in web writing, blogging, social media use, and having guidelines in place for what images you allow on your website, blog or on social media platforms is the best way to prevent inappropriate content from being posted.

Stay aware

With easy access to the internet and alerts, individuals and companies are actively seeking copyright violations of their content. Bad posting or website content whether illegally used or simply in poor taste can damage your church's reputation in your community. Consult an attorney with questions about copyright and social media policy issues.

