Commentary: A new digital covenant

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Have you ever:

- Sent a text that the recipient misinterpreted?
- Wondered how to decipher an angry sounding email you received?
- Congratulated someone on Facebook for an accomplishment, only to discover the news was still confidential?

If you haven't had one of these experiences, you've had one similar. We can all share stories of digital communication gone wrong.

Members of faith communities today often ask, "How will we relate to each other as Christians in a digital world? How will we treat our brothers and sisters in Christ in the ever-changing cyber-world?" Many assume they know the answers, only to discover that not all members of the fellowship share the same convictions.

How do we come to a common understanding of appropriate digital communication? A church may adopt an official policy on the subject, but *policies* are only enforceable with employees. How does the broader membership agree on principles of internet conduct?

While exploring this idea, I discovered the concept of a digital covenant between members – a common commitment to how we treat each other in the virtual world as part of Christ's church. I don't have a finished product, but here are some suggested principles.

1. Use digital communication for information, but not for emotions.

Seven percent of interpersonal communication is verbal – the remainder is

non-verbal. The recipient can't see your facial expressions, hear your tone of voice, or read your body language in an email or text. Ninety-three percent of your digital communication is hidden and, therefore, easy to misinterpret. If your message has emotion behind it, go see the person or pick up the phone and call.

2. CC wisely.

Copying someone on an email is for information, not leverage. Do not copy someone in order to pressure the primary recipient. Consider using this practice at work, as well.

3. Do not share another person's information digitally until they do.

I know an instance where a person posted a prayer request on Facebook, "Pray for my neighbor whose father died tonight. She dreads calling her children at college to tell them their grandfather is gone." It seemed innocent enough until the Facebook user's daughter saw her mother's post, made the connection and texted one of the grandchildren, "I was sorry to hear about your grandfather." It was an unfortunate way to hear about a death. Therefore, be respectful. Either ask directly if you can share the information or wait until they post before you do.

4. Ask for permission to post pictures of children.

A couple shared a video of a funny moment in their child's life. One of the recipients posted it to YouTube. The parents asked them to take it down, and they refused. They were addicted to the number of hits they were getting. The parents found that even though their child was the subject, they had no legal standing to have the video removed from the internet. Get permission to post pictures or information about another parent's child. If a friend asks you to remove a photo or information about them, respond in Christian charity and comply.

5. Remember that the world is your audience.

Randi Zuckerberg says when you share information digitally, think "Who among the recipients do I trust the least?" The question sounds cynical, but contains much wisdom. Don't say anything in an email that would embarrass you if it were forwarded.

6. Remember the permanence of the digital.

Digital communication is quick, convenient, and allows us to stay in touch with more people we could never see or call. The ease of writing and deleting lulls us into thinking messages come and go. Google's search ability is quick and its memory is permanent. A tweet or post that may seem funny in the moment can have lasting embarrassment.

7. Remember Colossians 3:17

"And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." We don't have permission to stray from the mind of Christ just because we are angry, or participating in sports – or because we are on the internet. Paul mentions no exclusions to "everything."

These are starting points for a covenant about how we treat each other in the digital age. Consider having a church discussion about the idea. Develop your own principles and then pledge together to treat others on the internet in a way that honors Christ.

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