

# Putting a Window in Your Virtual Door

## The Basic Boundary Issues:

- **Power Inequalities:** In ethically sound relationships, the person in greater power exercises care to compensate for power inequities.
- **Confidentiality:** A promise to keep silent sensitive information at the request of another.
- **Transparency:** Maintaining a capacity for others to review behavior facilitates verification of claims and attention to boundaries.
- **Ownership of Information:** Whose story is it to tell? Are there needs to share information despite requests for confidentiality (such as Mandatory Reporting obligations)?
- **Use and Misuse of Power:** Refrain from using power to deliberately harm another, and before using power, try to understand its potential harmful consequences to avoid harming another unintentionally.
- **Maintaining Personal Space:** Understanding and sensitively maintaining a “comfort zone” for one’s own sharing of personal information, while authentically representing oneself in “professional” roles.
- **Protecting Sensitive Information:** Revelation of some facts, regardless of their intrinsic worth or meaning, can harm individuals in this society. Understanding potential hazards in storing and transmitting this kind of information is crucial to avoid harming others or oneself.



THE PRIOR'S DOOR.  
[After a Drawing by S. K. Greenslade.]

## Additional Factors in Digital Communication:

- **Privacy and Confidentiality:** Without encryption, online communication is inherently insecure. It may be intentionally or unintentionally misdirected or intercepted, and in some cases may not be protected by traditional confidentiality laws. Remember: Nothing is confidential in the digital world.
- **Longevity:** Information that takes electronic form tends to endure. It may be discovered long after the original purpose for its creation has vanished, and after its creator(s) have rejected it.

- **Permeability:** Over the course of their lives, adults tend to gather discrete circles of relationship (family circles, work acquaintance circles, school friends, neighbors) that do not overlap. Digital communication tends to commingle these circles.
- **Language and Etiquette:** Digital media tend to quickly develop, and quickly evolve, new idiomatic expressions and manners, which confuse or unintentionally mislead the uninitiated.

## Christian Values Relevant to Digital Communication:

- **Love:** “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Cor. 13:4-7)
- **Forgiveness:** “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” (Luke 17:3b-4)
- **Evangelism:** “And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.’” (Mark 16:15)
- **Incarnation in Community:** “[Jesus said,] ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’”



## Suggestions for Best (or at least good) Practices in the Virtual World:

### Power Inequalities

- Adults (clergy or lay) should not submit “friend” requests to youth.
- Clergy should not submit “friend” requests to adult parishioners.
- Adults should refrain from initiating video chats with youth.

### Confidentiality

- Remember that on-line communication is never confidential. Thus, do not communicate things on-line that should really only be communicated face-to-face.

### Transparency

- Keep a copy of your email communications, especially with youth.
- CC an adult (e.g. a parent, adult lay leader, etc) on your email with youth.
- All social networking groups should have both adult and youth administrators.

### **Ownership of Information**

- Do not identify or “tag” youth or adult parishioners in photos on church sponsored sites without previous permission to do so.

### **Use and Misuse of Power**

- Establish covenants regarding digital communication within your community of faith.

These covenants should address:

- Appropriate language,
- Eligibility of membership (do you have to be a member of a local congregation or youth group, are parents of current members eligible, what are the age requirements/restrictions for participation, etc.),
- Content that can be posted/published on the site or page (Rule of thumb: post information that belongs to you, and don't post information that belongs to someone else),
- Who, how and when may photos be tagged (members identified by name; for example: individuals may tag themselves in photos but should not tag others),
- What is appropriate and inappropriate (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, sexual acts, etc.) behavior of members and the consequence for inappropriate behavior,
- Transitions due to departure, loss of eligibility or removal of youth members and/or adult leaders, and
- Notice that mandatory reporting laws will be followed.

### **Maintaining Personal Space (self-care)**

- When and where available, clergy are encouraged to consider creating separate personal and professional accounts to maintain appropriate boundaries with members of their congregations or other members of communities of faith.

### **Protecting Sensitive Information**

- Clergy and lay leaders are encouraged to use privacy settings to shield both adult parishioners and youth from viewing on-line content that may be inappropriate.
- Google yourself and your community of faith on a regular basis in order to be aware of your presence on the internet.