

Parish Policy for External Communications

St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church, Naperville, IL

INTRODUCTION

Since 2005, St. Thomas has experienced rapid growth in the area of external communications technology. Parishioners and members of the community currently enjoy access to parish information via a growing mix of electronic and print media. However, external church communication is not without challenges and limitations. Ease of computer access creates an environment for unauthorized and inconsistent posting of information, as well as conflicting information from other sources.

The expansive nature of communications technology has necessitated the development of this communications policy to facilitate continued growth in the area of communication and establish boundaries protecting the integrity of the information being delivered while safeguarding the unique charism of St. Thomas.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the internet age, church communication referred to the transfer of information within the walls of the church via faith sharing and witness, preaching, sacramental celebrations, education and formation programs. In the current milieu of mass media, a broader net can be cast to express the message of the Gospel over multiple channels including newspapers, magazines, books, video, telecommunications, direct mail, radio, television, film, e-mail, the internet, social networking sites and the like.

In 1997, the USCCB published a document entitled “*The Pastoral Plan for Church Communication*” affirming the place of mass communication as a means to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. The document was written primarily as a guide for diocesan planning. However, it has become clear that parishes also have a responsibility to participate in mass communication of the Good News on the ground level. Successful utilization of mass communication necessitates well planned, appropriate and thoughtful pairing of the message, its intended audience and the venue of communication most likely to resonate with that audience.

St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church is one of six large suburban parishes situated in Naperville, IL, approximately 30 miles west of Chicago. Located within the Diocese of Joliet, it serves a diverse demographic of close to 3400 families including multiple ethnic, socio-economic groups of all ages, all levels of education and employment, or lack thereof. Its access to major news agencies and publishers, its proximity to the city of Chicago, a variety of colleges and universities, as well as major theology schools and seminaries, makes the effort to promote and communicate “the Good News” well beyond St. Thomas’ parochial boundaries a viable and worthwhile endeavor.

The following policy applies to all forms of external communication as defined in the policy.

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Part I: Summary

I.1 PURPOSE OF POLICY

1. To maximize best practices for wide-ranging delivery of the Good News via mass media and electronic communications channels.
2. To minimize the risk to St. Thomas' reputation that can be caused by improper and unauthorized external communications.

I.2 KEY POINTS

1. The purpose of church communications is to relay information about the parish to a broad or specific audience. (II.1)
2. St. Thomas communications staff and pastoral staff¹ have sole responsibility for editorial policies governing church communications. (II.2)
3. Church communications may not be used for partisan political messages or paid advertising² (II.3.1, II.3.2)
4. Only members of St. Thomas communications staff and pastoral staff shall maintain external communications channels on behalf of the parish (II.3.3)
5. Only authorized St. Thomas staff spokespersons such as the Pastor(s), communications staff, and departmental directors may coordinate communications with members of the media on behalf of the parish. (II.4)
6. Any external communication from a parish office regarding unexpected events or serious incidents must be approved by the Pastor, and follow diocesan guidelines. (II.5)

I.3 DEFINITIONS

Communications is defined as any means of conveying church related information to parishioners and others in the larger community.

External communication includes any public representation of St. Thomas to parishioners as well as the greater community via news releases, interviews with news media on behalf of the church, newsletters, the St. Thomas' website, weekly website generated email announcements, social networking (i.e. Facebook, blogs), print advertising, written communication on St. Thomas letterhead, email, banners, and posters or displays using St. Thomas' name and logo

Content provides accurate information about St. Thomas' ministries, business and activities, consistent with Catholic values, the St. Thomas mission, vision statements, goals and objectives.

¹ Part III

² Except for Sunday Bulletin advertisers

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Part II: Policy

II.1 PURPOSE OF CHURCH COMMUNICATIONS

The purpose of church communications is to inform the members and friends of St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church, newcomers to the area, and others residing within the local community, including Catholics, Christians of other denominations, members of other faith traditions and all people of good will, of the programs, events and activities taking place at or being sponsored by the parish, in a manner of communication reflective of St. Thomas' mission and goals.

II.2 RESPONSIBILITY

St. Thomas' external communications staff and pastoral staff have the sole responsibility for editorial policies governing certain print and electronic publications of the parish. (See Part IV.1)

In order to maintain the integrity and quality of information being delivered, the external communications staff and pastoral staff will

- Include, in an unbiased way, content that supports or fulfills the above stated purpose.
- Take reasonable precaution to protect the privacy of parishioners
- Edit material that is too long or that needs correction in grammar, spelling, or style and may refuse material that is not appropriate.
- Ensure that submission requirements and deadlines are clearly communicated to Pastoral staff. (See Part III: Procedures and Guidelines)

II.3 PROHIBITED USE OF EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

1. **PARTISAN COMMUNICATION.** Church communication may not be used for partisan political messages. Association, representation or endorsement of, or by, any political candidate, party, or campaign, whether actual, inferred or implied is prohibited.
2. **ADVERTISING.** No aspect of church communications may be used to promote any activity resulting in financial gain of a staff member, parishioner, or business, with the exception of sponsored advertising which supports the cost of printing the Sunday bulletin.
3. **UNAUTHORIZED COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS.** Unauthorized websites, blogs, social network sites, direct mailings, and use of the parish name and/or logo are not permitted. Only members of St. Thomas communications staff and pastoral staff shall maintain external communications channels on behalf of the parish.

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II.4 SPOKESPERSONS: Only authorized St. Thomas staff spokespersons such as the Pastor(s), communications staff, and departmental directors may communicate directly with members of the media on behalf of the parish.

It is in the best interest of St. Thomas to maintain relations with the media in an open, pragmatic manner, and respond promptly to their legitimate interests.

1. All media requests should be recorded accurately and passed on in the following order: 1.) Pastor(s), 2.) communications staff or, 3.) departmental directors.
 - (1) Media requests include inquiries for interviews, commentary and information, and include all media – TV/Radio, newspapers, magazines, local/national media and internet sites.
2. Authorized St. Thomas spokespersons will respond on behalf of the parish, or assist in identifying the appropriate person from staff to handle the response.
3. Ministry volunteers are not authorized to speak to reporters without advance knowledge and coordination with the appropriate staff spokesperson or communications personnel. Volunteers who are approached by the media should be instructed to direct all media calls to the appropriate staff spokespersons or communications personnel.
4. All media calls are to be reported to the communications staff for follow-up and archiving. Provide the reporter's name, media outlet and telephone number, the anticipated publication date, and the subject of the story.

II.5 CRISIS COMMUNICATION: Communication from a parish office regarding unexpected events or serious incidents must be approved by the Pastor or business office, and channeled through the Diocesan office of Communications. Written communication as such is prepared in collaboration, or following the appropriate protocol established by the Diocese of Joliet.

1. In the event of an extreme crisis, the situation and the parish must be handled immediately through the Diocesan Office of Communications.

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Part III: Procedures and Guidelines

III.1 The following represents current Procedures and Guidelines for current channels of external communication.

III.1.1 PARISH WEBSITE

1. St. Thomas has one authorized website, **www.stapostle.org**, to represent its ministries, events, activities, staff members, parishioners.
2. The web editor writes copy, selects graphics, locates suitable links, and provides assistance to users of the site
3. The web editor trains and assists staff members who wish to upload their own content. Non-staff members are not permitted upload access.
4. The web editor and Website developer ensures that the website, website pages, and all links function properly.
5. The web editor strives to ensure the website meets the needs of visitors, members, and friends of the Church and works with the developer to expand usage of the site.
6. Information from the parish bulletin is added to the site weekly
7. Information on special stories are added as needed and as instructed by staff
8. Home page details are handled by the Web developer and communicated by the Web editor
9. Website user feedback is handled daily by the web editor and forwarded to appropriate staff members for follow-up as needed.
10. Other internet sites collect and post content directly from the St. Thomas parish website. Others require maintenance from St. Thomas. The web editor regularly searches the internet for accuracy and proper representation of the parish and attempts to correct errors in a timely manner.
11. The parish website includes links only to non-commercial sites that are not in conflict with the parish mission and goals.

III.1.2 SOCIAL MEDIA, I.E. FACEBOOK AND BLOGS

1. The external communications staff is responsible for managing content and frequency of updates for social media and monitoring commentary on social media sites such as the official St. Thomas Facebook page and community blogs.
2. Social media site content represents current and upcoming events, news, and commentary related to the activities of St. Thomas and is reflective of the parish mission statement.
3. The external communications staff may remove social networking sites at any time.
4. No social media sites are to be created by individuals not employed by St. Thomas.
5. The intent of social media for parish use is to give witness to the Good News in such a way which is open, transparent, and safe for all users.

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6. Social media for parish use is never to be used to establish private communications between parties.

III.1.3 ST. THOMAS JOURNAL/NEWSLETTERS

1. The *St. Thomas Journal* is printed 11 times a year.
2. The *St. Thomas Journal* promotes events and activities likely to interest people who are not yet fully engaged in the life of the parish, but may desire to be so.
3. The *St. Thomas Journal* includes an editorial reflection
4. Journal content is compiled and written by the editor and gathered from results of meetings with staff members.
5. Calendar events are selected by editor
6. Significant parish events should always be included in The *St. Thomas Journal*
7. Event details must be submitted by staff members at least 6-8 weeks in advance for inclusion.
8. Print copies of The *St. Thomas Journal* are included in new parishioner registration folders, and a supply is available in the gathering area and outside the main office for parishioners and visitors

III.1.4 PRESS RELEASES

1. Press releases are written by or coordinated by the communications staff
2. Press releases may also be written by a paid freelance writer
3. Press releases will be submitted to area parishes, local newspapers and other media outlets in the Naperville and surrounding areas.
4. Press releases promoting upcoming events require 4 weeks lead time.
5. Staff members are responsible for proofreading and returning releases written on their behalf to the writer in a timely manner to meet publisher deadlines.

III.1.5 PRINT ADVERTISING

1. The communications staff is available to coordinate print advertising, which may include media buying and design
2. The cost of print advertising is covered by the budget of the particular department
3. Print Advertising planning should take place a minimum of 5 weeks prior to publication

III.1.6 OUTDOOR BANNERS

1. Professionally printed vinyl banners are positioned at the main driveway
2. Banner planning and scheduling should take place with the communications staff a minimum of 5 weeks prior to usage
3. Banners must meet minimum quality requirements. Dimensions and hanging standards are available upon request.
4. The originating department is responsible for the expense to print banners.

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5. The originating department is responsible for picking up new banners from the vendor.
6. The originating department is responsible for hanging and removing banners.

III.1.7 E-MAIL COMMUNICATIONS, FORWARDS, AND CC'S

1. Individuals within St. Thomas the Apostle communicating to other individuals within and/or without the church are using or assuming the name and reputation of St. Thomas the Apostle. Church email should be restricted to church business and activities.
2. Email sent using @stapostle.org addresses should include complete sender identification such as an identifying signature which includes, name, official title, phone extension and email address, plus the church name, address, contact information and website.
3. As a rule, group emails should generally be sent using blind copy or distribution lists in order to prevent unauthorized sharing of email addresses.
4. Forwarded emails should be edited to eliminate originating distribution lists unless permission to share addresses has been granted.

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Part IV: External Communications Channels and Staff Responsibility

IV.1 EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS: St. Thomas' External Communications staff and designated Pastoral staff have the sole responsibility for editorial policies governing certain print and electronic publications of the parish. The following list reflects the current* communications mix.

- Parish website www.stapostle.org
- Website generated communications
- Social media sites ([Facebook](#) etc.)
- Community Blogs: “[Come and See](#)” and “[Question of the Week](#)”
- Press Releases
- Broad email communications
- Media and Public relations
- Direct mail communications
- St. Thomas Journal Newsletter
- Driveway banners
- All church related audio, visual, print and electronic promotions and advertisements developed for external audiences.

IV.2 DESIGNATED STAFF: The following list represents the current* list of staff members who are involved in maintaining aspects of external communications.

- A. S.: OSJ news and information content editing;
- P. D.: Question of the Week Blog, RE content editing;
- K. P.: YM facebook page and YM webpage;
- J. A.: Music ministry schedule and menu uploading.

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