
Public Presence, Social Media, Community

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

Most of you reading these words have a public presence!

It used to be that our communities assigned the designation “public presence” to only a few among us, such people as: elected officials, heads of public institutions (like companies, schools, the media), maybe clergy (like me), maybe movie stars. Usually, but not always, those kinds of acknowledged public people were careful about how they phrased their opinions, how they said things. They realized that a stray word, or an unguarded emotion, could crank up harsh public opinion, even if it was unintended. Un-careful words, and wild emotion, could harm the public they actually wanted to serve.

These days, however, almost everyone has their own public platform. It’s called a publishing platform. It’s called social media. We are our own publishers, not having to work our thoughts or opinions through any sort of filter at all. Most of us are free to publish things without a social filter, or community filter, or intellectual filter, or emotional filter. Most of us have no editors!

About ten to fifteen years ago, there was an image going around of a young do-nothing hacker, who experienced life almost entirely alone, in his or her parents’ basement, with no social contact. That person, so the image went, had enormous influence, using the internet and social media platforms. That person thought he or she was a genius, able to say whatever he or she wanted, with no contradiction or discussion at all.

Well, in some ways, we are all that young do-nothing hacker these days. We have been forced into isolation, into side rooms and basements with nothing to occupy us except our internet access and our social media broadcasts. Some of us have learned self-editing. Some of us, maybe, have a sense that the community reading our posted material is way different, and way broader, than our own perspective.

But others of us are behaving badly. Those posts are public! For several years now, I have received the occasional complaint about what such and such a person has posted on their social media platform. The complaint might have been about someone in my extended family. Or, more often, it was about someone in the church I serve. And, just as often, the complaint was about a fellow citizen in our country.

I am in the habit, over and over again, of advising people in two ways: 1) If you have a reaction, or complaint, about a social media post, please contact that person directly! 2) If the matter is sensitive and disruptive, please contact that person face-to-face! I am not a police officer in these matters. I do not survey the internet for people who are abusing their public platform. When people have complained to me about a post, I have often not even looked at the post, to the disappointment of the person complaining. While I do appreciate, and need, the posts and opinions of people who think differently than I do, I also practice cutting away and ignoring any posts that are abusive, contemptuous, and rude. I don’t have the space for those attitudes.

It is way too easy to believe we are engaging others simply by writing a post, or casting an opinion into the internet. It is far harder, and yet far more important, to engage with others face-to-face and over time.

That, of course, is what makes our present situation so hazardous. We are all frustrated and miserable from having to live in isolation. We do not have a way of continuing the social discipline and need for community with people who are different from us. The more isolated we are, the more we are tempted to think –without even realizing it!—that ours is the only perspective out there. We have no ability to share, civilly and gracefully, in community. Video conference calls help, but even they do not provide full social community.

So, I realize that I am writing this article alone, by myself in the office of the church. I really do miss our community. I miss it a lot. But I am especially missing it now, because I sense what happens when people speak and publish things without filters, or editors, or communities. We all need each other, and yet we are unable to be with each other. That is miserable to me, and to us. And when we speak, and post, without an awareness of others, without an awareness of wider community, it is actually dangerous to us.

Meanwhile, of course, I do have a responsibility to calmly guide family members. And I do have a responsibility to assign leadership roles in the cathedral to people who have demonstrated an ability to represent the cathedral with the grace and excellence and hospitality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have a responsibility to foster healthy community, for the common good, for the public. I pray that our community can engage, and re-engage, with that grace and excellence and hospitality, soon. Soon and very soon.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip