



CAVERSHAM THAMESIDE AND MAPLEDURHAM

ST MARGARET • ST PETER • ST JOHN

Policy on use of Social Media & Private Messaging

Introduction

Social media are websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

Social media activities include:

- Maintaining a profile page on a networking site such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn
- Writing or commenting on a blog, whether it is your own or the blog of another person
- Taking part in discussions on web forums or message boards.
- Taking part in online church services and prayer meetings.
- Participating in conversation online i.e. WhatsApp, Zoom

Social media are important components in how the parish/church relates to the community and indeed how the community relates to the church. For young people it is now a matter of course to use social media, and most adults, including older adults, do so also.

The widespread availability of social media means it is important to understand how to use it responsibly and requires extra care when dealing with young people and vulnerable adults. This policy aims to ensure that our paid employees and volunteers are protected while using social media and feel empowered to contribute to wider online activity when it supports their role within the parish/church.

Virtual relationships should not take place in isolation but be an extension of real life interaction. There are many risks and pitfalls in using social media. Hence, this policy and the guidelines included are repetitious.

Privacy

The lines between public and private can become blurred so assume that everything you write is permanent and can be viewed by anyone at any time. Also, assume that everything can be traced back to you personally as well as to your colleagues or the parish/church.

Use of social media for purely personal reasons does not need approval but even here you should be aware that you are at all times in a position of trust, that you may be perceived as an ambassador for the parish/church and you are advised to exercise caution and to consider following controls.

Forms of social networking

The parish should agree which forms of social networking will be used for parish/church purposes. This decision should be reviewed annually.

Role of the PCC

The PCC should approve the use of social media by the parish/church and appoint two administrators who should be proactive in fulfilling their roles. The administrators should be aware of account names and passwords in order to monitor communications. It may be appropriate to make more detailed requirements, e.g. about membership, postings, permissions.

The parish/church's experience in using social media should be included in the annual safeguarding report to the PCC.

Restrictions

Employees and volunteers, when writing on behalf of the parish/church, must ensure that their content or links to other content does not contain:

- Libellous, defamatory, bullying or harassing statements
- Breaches of copyright and data protection
- Material of an illegal nature
- Offensive sexual references
- Inappropriate language
- Material that brings the parish/church into disrepute or compromises its reputation.

Employees and volunteers should also bear this in mind when posting in a private capacity as everything can be traced back to you personally as well as to your colleagues or the parish/church.

Compliance

Breaching the conditions set out in this policy will result in the offending content being removed and may lead to the employee or volunteer being suspended from using social media as a representative of the parish/church. A note of the incident will be kept and in the case of a safeguarding issue will be reported to the Diocesan Safeguarding team or the police if appropriate. For staff, more serious violations will also be pursued through the provisions of the Disciplinary Procedure and could include dismissal.

Guidelines from the Diocese of Oxford

www.oxford.anglican.org/support-services/communications/social-media-guidelines

1. Legal considerations

Remember that the law views anything you share online as being in the public domain. Sharing your thoughts and reflections with friends using social media or email might feel personal and private, but if more than one person can read what you have written the law would class it as “published”, and therefore subject to numerous laws around libel, slander, copyright, Freedom of Information and data protection. So, if you wouldn’t say something to the local newspaper or in a meeting, you shouldn’t say it online.

2. Honesty and transparency

Truth matters. Don’t repeat unsubstantiated claims without finding out if they are true. Make sure you’ve got the facts right; if in doubt, check. Repeating an untruth does not make it true, and you are opening yourself up to the charge of libel and/or slander if you do so. Be clear about who you are. When discussing topics relevant to the Church of England or the Diocese of Oxford, use your real name. If you have a vested interest in something you are discussing, point it out. It may be appropriate to use a disclaimer to the effect that views expressed are your own.

3. Tone

As with any other communication, think about the tone you use. Without visual cues, humour can easily be misinterpreted online. Make sure you are not attempting to pass off offensive comments through attempts at humour. Treat your colleagues with respect and do not sound off online. As a rule of thumb, ask yourself:

- Would I be happy for my Mum to read this?
- Would I be happy for God to read this?
- Would I be happy for my worst enemy to read this?
- Would I be happy with this appearing on the front page of a national newspaper?

4. Permanence

Assume what you say is permanent. Even if you delete an online comment, it could already have been seen by other people and/or re-published on other, unconnected sites. It can be easy to say something in the heat of the moment that you will come to regret, and it could remain online permanently for all to see. So always think carefully and never make personal comments about someone that you wouldn’t also say in public or to them in person.

5. Security

Do not assume anything electronic is secure. You might be able to delete or recall an email but there’s no guarantee the recipient will. Equally, your privacy settings on your social media tools might mean only your accepted “friends” or “followers” can see the things you say, but there is no guarantee that they will not pass them on outside your trusted circles. Equally, be careful about any personal details you share online – again, assume anything you share about yourself is in the public domain.

6. Confidentiality

Social media does not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the whole life of the parish/church. When telling a story about a situation that involves someone else, always ask yourself, “Is this my story to tell?” Would it cause distress, inconvenience, upset or embarrassment to others if they found out you had shared in this way? If in any doubt, do not share it online. Equally, be careful when copying others into or forwarding an email which has gone backwards and forwards a couple of times – there may be confidential information earlier in the correspondence.

7. Public vs. private

Remember that the distinction between public and private lives is increasingly blurred. If you are a member of the clergy, anything you do or say in the public domain will be interpreted by the public as being representative of the parish/church – even if you feel you are speaking in a personal capacity rather than an official one. A good name is easily lost, and the reputational damage caused may be widespread. Be aware that controversial or sensitive comments you make may attract the attention of the media. If in doubt, take advice, but please remember that you are responsible for your online activities.

8. Courtesy and respect

Increasingly people use Twitter and other social media to comment live as events unfold. While this can enhance participation in a debate or conference, consider whether it is courteous to those around you to be commenting on the contributions of others. Are you treating the speaker with courtesy and respect? Are you giving the meeting or event your full attention? Might you be distracting those around you? Are you acting with grace?

9. Social media is a tool, not an end in itself

Ask yourself: what am I trying to achieve here? Is this the best tool to use for that end? If you start something, do you have the resources to monitor and manage it? Remember the value of other forms of communication! It can become easy to hide behind an online persona and neglect other relationships – remember that while social media is an exciting forum and presents opportunities, the value of face-to-face relationships should never be forgotten.

Policy on use of Social Media & Private Messaging in relation to Safeguarding

Scope

Young people for the purpose of this policy are defined as those in school years 7 to 13 (ages 12 to 18) or equivalent. Where a young person reaches the age of 18 but remains in youth work provision, it is good practice to adhere to this policy. Children in years 6 and below (under 11s) and below should not normally be communicated with by the parish/church using social media or mobile phones.

Good practice

When using any form of social networking to communicate, on behalf of the parish/church, with groups that could include children, young people or vulnerable adults, the following controls, based on the Diocesan Safeguarding Policies, should be followed to ensure the protection of all those involved:

- Take responsibility. You are accountable for what you do, say and write.
- Where possible use parish/church accounts rather than your personal account. If you must use a personal social media account for parish or church business, all of the controls listed here must be observed.
- Display only appropriate and necessary information about yourself.
- Ensure personal telephone numbers and email contacts are not visible on public display on social media.
- Only use instant messaging to further the aims of your parish/church role and not for personal reasons.
- Do not delete any messages/threads on social networking sites; so that you can provide evidence of your exchange should the necessity arise.
- Download to hard copy any inappropriate material received by electronic means and show to your group leader, line manager or the Incumbent.
- Carefully consider what you display on your online activity.
- Be discerning about making public comments/rebukes and about liking or sharing posts.
- Do not comment on photos or posts unless appropriate to your parish/church role.
- Never add, as a friend, a young person or vulnerable adult, unless they have sent a request. It is at your discretion whether the request is accepted. Consider carefully the potential vulnerability of that person before accepting them as a friend, especially if the accompanying relationship is not strong or well established. Seek advice if you are unsure.
- Do not accept friend requests outside of social network terms and conditions (i.e. under 13 years of age for Facebook). You should not be friends with a person who should not have an account.
- Do not encourage participation on social media platforms outside of the legal age limit (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, SnapChat = 13 years, WhatsApp, Zoom = 16 years).

- Maintain the utmost integrity – remember that your profile only supplements the real person and is not an alter-ego.
- On Facebook, only allow friends to post on your timeline.
- Review all posts and tags before being made public to friends.
- It may be appropriate to restrict the viewing of your tagged photos.
- Do not Facebook stalk (i.e. dig through people’s Facebook pages to find out about them) or use other social media sites for this purpose.
- Use passwords and log off promptly after use to ensure that nobody else can use social media pretending to be you.
- Care should be taken when using any visual media. Users, particularly under 18s, should be discouraged from connecting on screen when they are in personal or secluded spaces where possible.

Do not use social visual media for one-to-one conversations with young people - use only within group conversations where a minimum of two DBS checked adults are present.

Consents

Written consent from parents or guardians must be requested and received for all children and young people under the age of 18. It should be reviewed annually by the parent/guardian. Please be aware that sharing photographs of children and young people online can put them at risk of harm. If in doubt, don’t.

Parents and guardians must be asked to consent to or to decline to consent to the following:

- Photos/videos being taken at church/parish events intended for use in official parish/church publications, on parish/church noticeboards, on the parish/church's social media page(s) and parish website. Bear in mind that traditional media, such as printed newspapers, expect to be able to use images they have been sent in their social media outlets as well, so parental consents must be obtained and refusals clearly communicated, clear and unequivocal.
- Young people having email, telephone, or social media contact with staff and volunteers in accordance with this policy.

Timing

Communication should not usually take place with children or young people after 9.30pm or on staff members’ days off. Note this does not mean staff and volunteers have to be available to young people at all other times. Young people should also be made aware that, whilst staff and volunteers will exercise appropriate discretion in dealing with the substance of communication, they cannot promise confidentiality.

Use of Social Media advice from the Church of England Parish Safeguarding Handbook 2018

Social Media sites enable users to create and share contact and keep in touch with other users. They include maintaining a profile on networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat; writing or commenting on a blog, whether it is your own or the blog of another person; and taking part in discussions on web forums or message boards. For many, especially young people, using social media is an extension of physical face-to-face relationships. It is therefore important that parishes/churches also engage with their community and worshippers through these platforms. However, this must be done safely to avoid risk of:

- Forming inappropriate relationships
- Saying things you should not, such as offensive, sexual or suggestive comments
- Blurring the boundaries between public work/ministry and your private life
- Grooming and impersonation
- Bullying and harassment

Do:

- Have your eyes open and vigilant
- Maintain the utmost integrity – honesty, transparency, consistency and accountability are key. Treat online communication with children, young people and adults as you would communication that is face to face. Always maintain the same level of confidentiality.
- Report any safeguarding concerns that arise on social media to the PSO (Parish Safeguarding Officer) and the DSA (Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser).
- Always assume that everything you write is permanent and may be viewed by anyone at any time; and that everything can be traced back to you personally as well as to your colleagues or the parish/church. Always think before you post.
- Draw clear boundaries around your social media usage associated with your private life and your use of different social media for public ministry. Keep parish/church account/s and profiles separate from your personal social media account/s e.g. only use a Facebook page, Twitter or blogs for public ministry, while keeping a separate Facebook profile for private life
- Always ask parents/carers for written consent to:
 - Use and store photographs of children/young people from activities or events in official parish/church publications, or on the parish/church's social media, website and displays.
 - Use telephone, text message, email and other messaging services to communicate with young people.
 - Allow young people to connect to the parish/church's social media pages.
- Only use an approved parish/church/ministry account to communicate with children, young people and/or vulnerable adults. The named person should be able to access this and review conversations, and the account should be visible to young people and their parents. Young people must be made aware that any communication will be viewed by all users. Save any messages and threads through social networking sites, so that you can provide evidence to the named person of your exchange when required.
- Avoid one-to-one communication with a child or young person.

- Use clear and unambiguous language in all communications and avoid abbreviations that could be misinterpreted.
- Save and download to hard copy any inappropriate material received through social networking sites or other electronic means and show immediately to the named person, PSO, incumbent or, if appropriate, Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser
- Use passwords and log off promptly after use to ensure that nobody else can use social media pretending to be you

Do not:

- Use a personal Facebook or any other social media account in your work with children, young people or vulnerable adults.
- Add children, young people or vulnerable adults as friends on your personal accounts.
- Facebook stalk (i.e. dig through people’s Facebook pages to find out about them).
- Say anything on social media that you would not be happy saying in a public meeting, to someone’s face, writing in a local newspaper or on headed notepaper.
- Comment on photos or posts, or share content, unless appropriate to your parish/church role.
- Use any visual media for one-to-one conversations with young people – use only in group settings.

In particular, do not allow content to contain or share links to other sites that contain:

- Libellous, defamatory, bullying or harassing statements.
- Breaches of copyright and data protection.
- Material of an illegal nature.
- Offensive sexual or abusive references.
- Inappropriate language.
- Anything which may be harmful to a child, young person or vulnerable adult, or which may bring the parish/church into disrepute or compromise its reputation

Mobile phones

Wherever possible, parish/church officers should be supplied with a mobile phone dedicated for work purposes. This allows for the phone to be switched off outside working hours, and for usage to be accountable. This means that the work phone number is the only number that young people or adults are given, and the parish/church officer’s personal number can remain private. Texts or conversations that raise concerns should be saved and passed on to the named person or the PSO/incumbent (or if unavailable the DSA).

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