

Social Media Guidelines – St Mary’s, Wexham

INTRODUCTION

Social media offers exciting opportunities to share the Gospel and to interact with people we might not otherwise connect with. However, social media takes us into territory where we need to think carefully. It is interactive, conversational and open-ended and happens in a public space. This sets it apart from other forms of communication and demands a new way of thinking. As well as the many opportunities, we should be aware of the associated risks, in particular with respect to children and vulnerable adults.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

As Christians, the same principles that guide our offline conversations should apply to those that take place online, common sense and good judgement. Interacting through social media does not change our understanding of confidentiality, responsibility and Christian witness.

SCOPE

This applies to social media which is directly linked to the church, and social media used by Church Officers (A “Church Officer” is anyone appointed/elected by or on behalf of the Church to a post or role, whether they are ordained or lay, paid or unpaid.)

THE ROLE OF THE PCC

The PCC must approve the use of social media in the name of the church. Where there are online groups set up on the church’s behalf, the PCC must ensure there is a named person to whom all workers are responsible. The named person must be a church officer and should proactively monitor communications.

GUIDELINES

Guidance for Church Officers

- Have your eyes open and be vigilant.
- Maintain the utmost integrity and the same level of confidentiality.
- Report any safeguarding concerns to the Parish Safeguarding Officer (PSO).
- Assume everything you write is permanent, can be viewed by anyone and can be traced back to you and the church. Always think before you post.
- Draw clear boundaries between social media used for your private life and social media for public ministry.
- Always ask carers/parents written permission to
 - Use and store photographs of children/young people from activities or events in church publications/website/social media.
 - Use telephone, text message, email etc. to communicate with young people.

- Allow young people to connect to the church's social media pages.
- Only use an approved church/ministry account to communicate with children, young adults and/or vulnerable adults. The named person should be able to access and review conversations and the account should be visible to young people and their parents. young people should be made aware that the conversation will be viewable by all users.
- Avoid one-to-one communication with a child or young person.
- Report any inappropriate material received through social networking sites or electronic means and alert immediately the named person, PSO, incumbent or, if appropriate, The Diocesan Safeguarding Officer (DSO). Do not forward this material.

Stay within The Legal Framework

Whilst sharing thoughts and reflections with friends or followers via social media can seem personal and private, it is not. By law, if one or more people can access it, content is classed as published, in the public domain and subject to legislation around libel, defamation, copyright and data protection. If you wouldn't say something in a public meeting or to someone's face or write it in a newspaper or on headed paper – don't say it online.

Don't Rush In

The immediacy of social media is one of its benefits – we can respond quickly to questions, correct misunderstandings, give our perspective about a breaking story but responding quickly doesn't mean doing so without due consideration.

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 people with respect. 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 with this appearing on the front page of a national newspaper?

This point applies even before you start posting your own content. Spend a while listening to others, getting a feel for the tone in that particular forum, giving thought to how you might participate.

Transient Yet Permanent

Social media updates are immediate and will outdate quickly BUT they can have a more lasting impact. Assume that anything you post is permanent. Even if deleted later on, it may have been seen and re-published or referred to elsewhere.

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.

Courtesy and Respect

Increasingly people use Twitter and other social media to comment live as events unfold. While this can enhance participation, 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 full attention?

Do not Facebook stalk.

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.

Don't Hide

Anonymity and 'hiding' behind aliases when using social media is frowned upon. It's also at odds with the significant reason for using social media networks. How can anyone really connect with an alias? When the account is a shared one, for example, a Facebook page for your parish, ensure people can easily find out who is responsible for the content. Participation in social media should never be completely anonymous.

Be Mindful of Your Own Security

Don't overshare personal information. Never publish detailed personal information such as your address or telephone number, unless in a private message to someone you know and trust. Assume anything you share about yourself is in the public domain.

Do not use visual media (e.g. Facetime) for one-to-one conversations with young people - use only in a group setting.

Do not use a personal social media account in your work with children, young adults or vulnerable adults.

Do not add children, young people or vulnerable adults as friends on your personal accounts.

Confidentiality

Social media does not change our fundamental understanding of confidentiality across the whole life of the Church where there are private or closed meetings, confidential processes and conversations, particularly in terms of pastoral work. All involved have a right to expect that others will respect confidentiality. Breaking confidentiality is as wrong as it would be in any other context. Arguably, it is worse as via social media a broken confidence could spread rapidly and be impossible to retract. Remember: Is this story mine to share? If in doubt, don't.

Blurring of Public/Private Life Boundaries

Remember that the distinction between public and private lives is increasingly blurred. It is no different online. If you are a member of the clergy or office holder, anything you do or say in the public domain will be interpreted by the public as being representative of the Church – even if you feel you are speaking in a personal capacity rather than an official

one. Consider setting up different accounts for ministry and personal use to help set definite boundaries. Use privacy settings wisely.

Children and Young People/Safeguarding

Maintain clear boundaries. Remember that the law and [diocesan safeguarding policy](#) apply in your communications with children and young people – you should not exchange private messages with young people via social media and should not accept “friend requests” from young people (under the age of 18) without considered thought and consultation with a member of the Safeguarding Committee. If youth work includes an element of social media, try to keep all communications public and only send messages to whole groups, rather than to individuals.

Please be aware that sharing photographs of children and young people online can put them at risk of harm. St Mary’s policy is that written permission must be given by parents and photos would be of an activity and not full face. Please consult our Children’s Advocate.

Parental consent for using electronic forms of communication is essential and should be included on annual consent forms. You should outline what means you will be using for communication (e.g. e-mail) and what you will be communicating.

All language should be appropriate and where possible ‘standard responses’ should be used (eg if you have sent an email out containing event details and receive a reply asking for further details, create a standard response with the additional details so that all young people receive the same information).

Workers and volunteers should take great care over the language used to reduce the risk of misinterpretation. Workers should not use informal language such as shorthand or ‘text language’ as this can often be misunderstood and lead to complications.

Workers should seek to ensure that their personal profiles on any social networking sites should be set to the highest form of security to avoid young people accessing personal information or seeing any pictures of a personal nature.

ratified by St Mary’s PCC on 11th January 2022