

SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

March 2024

Social Media : Golden Rule

If you would not

- Say something in a public meeting or to someone's face
- Write something in a local newspaper or on headed notepaper

DO NOT PUT IT ONLINE

"A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything - or destroy it!"

James 3:5 (Message)

In this digital age where communities are formed online, we need to be part of the conversation and would urge churches to look at ways to use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Social media offers a great number of opportunities for the church, such as increasing communication, building relationships and community, providing opportunities for participation, collaboration and feedback, enhancing learning and generating ideas and reaching and connecting with new groups. There are also risks involved such as forming inappropriate relationships, saying things you should not, breaching confidentiality and spreading gossip, bullying, harassment, grooming and impersonation.

Guidelines

Social media is immediate, interactive, conversational and open-ended. This sets it apart from other forms of communication and demands a new way of thinking.

These good practice guidelines have been compiled to help the Diocesan community (including clergy, office-holders and staff) already active on social media (or thinking about it!) fulfil, with confidence, their role as online ambassadors for their local parish, the wider Church and our Christian faith.

All are based on principles of common sense and good judgement. Essentially, you should participate online in the same way as you would in any other public forum. Your actions should be consistent with your work and Christian values and you are responsible for the things you do, say or write.

In addition, parishes are advised that any account that is set up under the name of the parish, or which can be identified in public as the parish, should be set up in a regular manner, including:

- A minuted decision of the PCC to set up such an official presence;
- An account which is set up and under the control of the PCC, wardens or incumbent, even if it is at the same time run for all practical purposes by a volunteer, nominee or employee.

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 in the news media. Responding quickly doesn't mean doing so without due consideration.

Before posting always think:

- Is this my story to share?
- Would I want my mum to read this?
- Would I want God to read this?
- Would I want this on the front page of a 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 and you should assume that anything you post is permanent.

Even if you delete it later on, it may have been seen and re-published or referred to elsewhere.

You're an ambassador

Like it or not, if you are ordained, lead in or are employed by the Church, others will see you in your public role as a representative of the Church.

If talking/commenting about any aspect of the work of the Church in a blog or in a posting, it is important to clearly identify yourself and state your connection to the Church and the Diocese.

Don't hide

Anonymity and 'hiding' behind aliases when using social media is frowned upon. It's also at odds with what we consider the main reason for using social media networks. How can anyone really connect with an alias? It is important to be clear about who you are when discussing topics relevant to the Church of England or the Diocese of St Albans; you should

always use your real name. If you have a vested interest in something that is being discussed, be the first to point it out, to ensure that you protect yourself and your privacy.

On any social media platform, if you choose a username or profile different from your real name, include brief personal details in the about section. 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.

Blurring of public/private life boundaries

In everyday ministry, the distinction between public duties and private life is difficult to draw. It is no different online. There are risks associated with personal opinions being seen as public statements, a minister's private life being invaded and the difficulties of detaching from work.

Consider setting up separate accounts for ministry and personal use to help set definite boundaries.

Alternatively, use privacy settings wisely. For example, you may not want to 'over share' personal updates on your Facebook profile – so keep close friends as 'friends', and all other people as 'acquaintances' so in that way content you post on Facebook can be filtered.

Blurring of boundaries also applies to private messaging through any social media: if the conversation wouldn't be appropriate person to person, nor would it be online.

Safeguarding

The informality social media encourages can mean that it might be harder to maintain a professional distance that is required when working with children, young people and the vulnerable.

Communicating directly online with someone, for example with private messaging, is like meeting them in private. You're advised to send messages to groups, rather than individuals, or share them publicly.

Best practice is that individual links with under 18s are ill-advised but group communication with, for example, a youth group is acceptable. Parents must always be invited to be part of those communications.

It is your responsibility to be aware of the various Safeguarding policies developed by the Church of England and the Diocese of St Albans.

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.

Golden rule

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.

Confidentiality

Use of social media does not change the Church's understanding of confidentiality. Within the life of the Church there are private meetings and conversations, particularly in terms of pastoral work.

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 share it.

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.

Get in touch

If you are unsure about how to approach a communication, are having problems with an existing online relationship or if you have any questions or issues with using social media, feel free to get in touch with the Diocesan Communications Team.

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