

THE JOINT COUNCIL OF HOLY TRINITY AND ST JAMES'

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

The following policy was agreed at the Joint Church Council (JCC) meeting held on 27th May 2025.

What is meant by Social Media?

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, Snapchat.
- 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.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance applies to both churches and is directed in particular to:

1. All youth workers, youth leaders, youth work interns, employed or voluntary, and their supervisors.
2. All other workers employed or voluntary, licensed, or lay ministers who are engaged in working with children and young people.
3. All other workers employed or voluntary, licensed, or lay ministers who are engaged in working with vulnerable adults or any person who has difficulty with modern online technology.

All the above are referred to as Church Officers in the remainder of this guidance. A "Church Officer" is anyone appointed by or on behalf of the Church to a post or role, whether they are ordained or lay, paid or unpaid.

What is the purpose of this practice guidance?

This guidance seeks to ensure that children, young people, vulnerable adults, and church officers are appropriately informed and protected while using social media in the context of diocesan, cathedral, or parish church work.

Why is this practice guidance important for your Church?

For many, especially young people, using social media is an extension of physical face to face relationships. It is therefore important that churches also engage with their community and worshippers through these platforms. Churches' engagement with social media should be carried out with a constantly updating understanding of how to use it responsibly. Extra care needs always to be taken when dealing with young people and vulnerable adults. It is important to balance user-friendly workability, and good quality youth work and ministry, with keeping children, young people, and vulnerable adults safe.

The Risks

- **Forming inappropriate relationships.**

It is perhaps easier to form inappropriate relationships using social media. Online banter and private messaging can both lead to a level of intimacy that you would naturally guard against. The professional distance that it is important for church officers to maintain can easily disappear when you are connected to someone – either at your instigation or at theirs. This is particularly important with members of the opposite sex, children and young people and vulnerable adults. We must safeguard ourselves so that content could not be perceived as sexual grooming.

- **Saying things you should not – with increased impact.**

Social media is public, permanent and has published status. However, people have a tendency online of being indiscrete about themselves, other people and, in our context, the Christian faith and Church. This can then be picked up and shared widely. There is a risk of illegal comments that could be seen as hate crimes, libelous, defamatory remarks etc. Our online behaviour and communication could be something that lets down the reputation of the church in the eyes of the community.

- **Breach of confidentiality and gossip.**

As with saying things you should not, electronic, and online communication can be used to breach confidentiality and spread gossip.

- **Blurring of public ministry/private life boundaries**

The distinction between public ministry and private life is difficult to draw. This is no different online. There are risks associated with personal opinions being seen as public statements, a church officer's private life being invaded and the difficulties of detaching from their work. You are advised to draw clear

boundaries around your social media usage associated with your private life and use different social media for public ministry (e.g. only use a Facebook page, Twitter or blogs for public ministry while keeping a Facebook profile for private life – see Social media tools).

- **Bullying, harassment, and malicious accusations.**

Social media can be used to bully and harass others and is a forum for malicious accusations. Young people are particularly vulnerable to this.

- **Grooming and impersonation.**

There are clear dangers particularly for children and young people from those who use social media as a means of grooming

Role of the JCC

- The JCC should always approve the use of social media by the church, and which social media should be used.
- Where there are Facebook or similar online groups' set up on the church's behalf the JCC should ensure there is a *named person* to whom all workers are accountable. The named person is a church officer.
- The named person should be a worker colleague or supervisor and should be aware of the account name and password so that they can at any time log onto the account to monitor the communications. The named person should be proactive in fulfilling this role.
- Wherever possible the JCC should supply church officers with a dedicated mobile phone for work purposes. This allows for the phone more easily to be switched off outside working hours, and for usage to be more easily monitored. It also allows for the workers personal number to remain private.

See also "privacy"

Consents

Church officers should always ask parents and guardians for their written consent to the following:

- Use of photographs of young people from activities or events in official church publications, or from the church's social media, website and displays.
- Email communication with young people
- Use of telephone, text message and other messaging services between young people and staff

- Young people connecting to the church's social media pages.

Confidentiality

Church Workers should ensure that vulnerable adults and their carers, young people and their parents are aware that social media platforms are not themselves confidential systems. For example, communications are shared with the named person Groups with more than one adult "present" are always the safest. Crucially, whilst church officers are bound by professional rules of confidentiality, where there is concern that a young person is at risk of abuse, or themselves pose a risk of abuse to others, safeguarding procedures must always be followed.

Privacy

The lines between public ministry in the church and private life can become particularly blurred in social media.

Always assume:

- that everything you write is permanent and can be viewed by anyone at any time.
- that everything can be traced back to you personally as well as to your colleagues or the church.

A trusted role

Remember you are always in a position of trust and acting on behalf of the church as a church officer and are a role model for children, young people, and vulnerable adults. In some cases, you will be acting as a role model for youth work interns under training. When using social media, but not on behalf of the church, you always remain in a position of trust and may still be perceived as an ambassador for the church, and a role model for young people and others who are vulnerable.

Facebook & Social Networking Sites

The safest option to protect children, young people and vulnerable adults is not to use a personal Facebook account and profile for your work with them. You are advised to keep the Church or Diocesan Group account and profile separate from your social media account for personal use. In other words create a separate church or diocesan group page related to your church role for your communications with young people and vulnerable adults.

When setting up a Facebook page for your church, ensure young people and their carers can easily find out who is responsible for the content. Be cautious about accepting friend requests from church members and do not accept them from children and young people.

If you are using a church computer/hardware/software you cannot use a private Social Media account for work purposes.

*If you do allow young people, or others to have access to your personal social networking account or profile, to protect yours and your friends' children or any other vulnerable people, and so as not to potentially compromise the church, you must ensure that no one using the site can access photographs of, or information about your family or friends. Only the ministry profiles of youth workers, interns, youth leaders, clergy and so on should be visible. **To do this you should therefore set the privacy settings to the appropriate level, customising them to maintain the boundaries between your personal life and church role.***

How to create a “ministry” or “church role” account and profile

- Enter your work email in the sign-up box, adding ministry or another suitable term after your last name to distinguish your ministry profile from your personal profile (i.e., John Smith ministry)
- Your Named Person should be aware of the account name and password so that they can at any time log onto the account to monitor the communications. Young people should be made aware that information is shared in this way.
- You should ensure your church or diocesan group name is entered onto the profile you create. Also make sure you use your ministry contact details and web address.
- Adding interests makes your profile more interesting, but only share information appropriate to the young people or vulnerable adults you will be working with.
- You should use a photo of you from your ministry setting.
- Any communication or content that raises concerns should be saved or printed, shared, and discussed with your named person.
- You should only accept friend requests for this profile from young people or others known to you, that they have met offline.
- Communication should normally be in the public domain wherever possible (by using group mailings or public wall posts)
- Where groups are set up, they should be closed, and not open to the general public. You should retain administrative rights and moderate the group, only sharing those rights with the named person or other trusted church officer.

Mobile Phones

Wherever possible, Church workers 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 are given, and the worker's personal number remains private. Texts that raise concerns should be saved and passed on to the named person. Conversations raising concerns should be discussed as soon as possible.

Email and Instant Messenger

Be aware of who has access to computers, or other devices, used for communication between workers and young people.

- Only use instant messaging with young people to further the aims of the church, not for personal reasons.
- There should be a 'curfew' on instant messenger communication, and this should only take place during normal working hours.
- Log and save all conversations and regularly review these with the named person before they are deleted. Make sure that young people know that a named person has access to the conversations.
- Video or Voice messenger should be done in public so that other people are aware of what you are doing and to whom you are speaking.

Some safer working Do's and Don'ts

Do's

- Have your eyes open and be vigilant.
- Maintain the upmost integrity – remember that your profile only supplements the real person and is not an alter-ego. Honesty, transparency consistency and accountability are key.
- All Church workers communicating with young people or vulnerable adults via the internet, social networking or mobile phone should be recruited safely, asked to complete confidential declarations and be criminal records checked in accordance with Church of England and Diocesan Safer Recruitment practice guidance.
- If a worker expects to communicate with young people in the group via email, messenger, social networking sites (i.e., Facebook) or texting, written permission from the child's parents should be given.
- One-to-one communication between a worker and a young person is best avoided, communication is safer in a page or group context.
- If it is necessary for a worker to communicate with a young person individually, it should be through an approved church/ministry account that a named person can also access and review the conversations. Young people must be made aware that any one-to-one communication will be shared in this way. Save any messages and threads through social networking sites, so that you can provide evidence to the named person of your exchange when required
- Make sure communication is from a specific account/address known to the young people, vulnerable adult, parents and named person
- Use clear and unambiguous language in all communications and avoid abbreviations that could be misinterpreted.

- Do not use any comment or picture of a young person without written parental permission. Diocesan Guidelines on the taking of images should always be followed.
- Treat communication with young people as you would in real life. If you are having a one-to-one conversation online, the same safeguards are needed as if you were in a physical one-to-one relationship.
- Save and download to hard copy any inappropriate material received through social networking sites or other electronic means and show immediately to your named person, 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 nots: -

- Do not add young people as friends on your church account. In the case of Facebook, adding children under 13 years of age as a friend is in any case contrary to Facebook terms and conditions.
- Do not Facebook stalk (i.e., dig through people's Facebook pages to find out about them).
- Do not say anything on social media that you would not be happy saying in a public meeting or to someone's face or writing in a local newspaper or on headed notepaper.
- Do not comment on photos or posts, or share content, unless appropriate to your church role.
- Do not use visual media (e.g., Skype, Facetime) 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 references
- Inappropriate language

- or anything which may be harmful to a child, young person, or vulnerable adult, or which may bring the church into disrepute or compromise its reputation.

Diocesan Online Worship Gatherings

These are public events, held on social media, which leave a trail that is recorded. All interactions are via a public forum and live, seen by potentially large numbers of people (adults and young people).

Where young people are joining in as physical groups, their leaders should use a consent form beforehand for parents to give relevant permissions, including for use of photographs. Interaction should be primarily through a group profile, on shared devices, shown to the group on a big screen. Under 13's should not be allowed to use their own devices during a session.

Although the public and recorded nature of the situation makes it relatively safe, caution should always be exercised where young people are concerned. There should be discussion with young people on the risks, highlighting that anyone they engage with online, even if it's through a Diocesan gathering needs to be checked out in real life, and should always be in a public space until they are totally sure of their trustworthiness.

Compliance

Misuse of social media by a church officer will result in any offending content being removed and may lead to the church officer being suspended from using social media as a representative of the 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. More serious violations may also be pursued through the provisions of the appropriate Disciplinary Procedure and could include dismissal.

Responsible Persons to Report any Issues to:

Revd Rebecca Elliott
Sue Fox (Parish Safeguarding Officer)

Appendices

You can download a Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat full safety checklist here: <https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/young-people/resources-11-19s>