*Social media guidelines for clergy,*

*lay ministers, office workers and volunteers*

Within our diocesan community, more and more people are using social media as part of their ministry. The Diocese of Coventry embraces this, acknowledging the value of social media as an important missional tool. Through social media we can connect with people where they are and build relationships with those we might struggle to reach through other channels.

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. As well as the many opportunities, users should also be aware of (though not put off by) the associated risks.

These good practice guidelines have been compiled to help clergy, lay ministers 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 principals of common sense and good judgement. Essentially, you should participate online in the same way as you would in any other public forums. Your actions should be consistent with your work and Christian values and you take responsibility for the things you do, say or write.

1. **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. Responding quickly doesn’t mean doing so without due consideration. Before posting always think:

* Is this my story to share?
* 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.

1. **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 and will be shared with others. Even if you delete it later on, it may have been seen and republished or referred to elsewhere.

1. **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 you are posting from a personal account and talking about a church matter, make it clear that these are your personal opinions and not those of the Church of England or the diocese.

1. **Blurring of public and private lives**

As 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 church – even if you feel you are speaking in the a personal capacity rather than an official one. Be aware that any controversial or sensitive comments you make may attract attention of the media. Consider setting up different accounts for ministry and personal use to help set definite boundaries. Use privacy settings wisely.

1. **Safeguarding**

The informality that 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 vulnerable adults. Communicating directly online with someone, for example with private messaging, is like meeting them in private. Therefore, it is advisable to make sure another adult (parent / guardian / another church worker) is involved in the conversation.

One of the easiest ways to communicate with a church group is through WhatsApp or Facebook groups. If these groups contain young people or vulnerable adults (such as a youth group etc.), some precautions should be put in place. For Facebook, you should make sure that the privacy settings are either ‘closed’ or ‘secret’ so that only approved users can join the group as young people or vulnerable adults may share personal information in these groups. Also, like with private messaging, being in a closed group should be viewed as a being in a room with a closed door. As such, you should make sure that there are always two adults / church workers in the group and any safeguarding concerns are reported to the parish safeguarding officer.

Most social media sites do not allow children under the age of 13 to join (however these rules are not strictly enforced and many under 13s do have social media accounts). You should never interact with anyone you know to be under the age of 13 on social media.

You may need to be friends with a young person or vulnerable adult on social media in order for them to be part of a group you manage. You may want to consider setting up separate accounts for ministry and personal use to help set definite boundaries. If you do not set up a separate account, you will need to use privacy settings wisely (perhaps use Facebook’s custom privacy settings to limit the amount of posts / photos shared with under 18s).

No photographs or videos of under 18s should be posted on social media without the written consent of parents / guardians.

1. **Be sensitive to confidentiality and the risk of intrusion**

When telling a story about a situation which 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 (even if you change details). Make sure you are not the source of confidential information leaking out.

Similarly, you should obtain permission before posting photographs and videos of people online.

1. **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.

1. **Be mindful of your own security**

Be careful about the personal details you share online – again assuming anything you share about yourself is in the public domain. Never publish detailed personal information such as your address or telephone number, unless in a private message to someone you know and trust.

1. **Remember the value of other forms of communication!**

It can be very easy to hide behind an online persona and neglect other relationships – remember that while social media is an exciting forum which presents many new opportunities, the value of face-to-face relationships should never be forgotten.

**Who to contact for advice and support**

Anna Laycock, Communications Officer for the Diocese of Coventry on 02476521348 / [anna.laycock@covcofe.org](mailto:anna.laycock@covcofe.org)

**Some common social media tools**

There are many internet social media tools that can be used. The most common are:

**Blogs**: these are personal websites or online diaries. You posts thoughts and musings alongside links to other areas you are interested in. Others can comment on your posts - this can lead to debates.

**Facebook**: This is the most well-known and used social media site. Here you can build networks of friends and join pages dedicated to particular areas of interest. People use

Facebook to organise events, launch campaigns or simply keep in touch. It is similar to having several conversations about things that interest you.

There are other similar sites – Linkedin, Bebo, Ning, MySpace, Tumblr and Yammer for example – that do similar things for different audiences. All these sites can link to each other and can include videos and photos.

**Twitter**: This is known as a micro-blogging site where users follow people or organisations that interest them and are followed in turn. On twitter users post short 140 character messages (tweets) to their followers but can also send private messages. You can also include links to pictures and other sites in a similar way to Facebook.

**Instagram:** This is a smartphone app where users can upload, edit and share photographs and short videos. Users can follow others and send private messages.

**TikTok:** This is a smartphone app where users upload and share short videos. Users can follow others and send private messages.

**Flickr**: This is a website for sharing photos where users can upload and share pictures.

You can also search for photos.

**YouTube and Vimeo**: These are websites for sharing videos and is organised in a similar way to Flickr. You can add comments to videos (and others can comment on your work)

**Snapchat**: A messaging app that allows users to send photographs to their friends and document their day through photos - ‘My Story.’ These photos are only available for a limited time before they are deleted.

**Discussions and forums**: Many websites have discussion boards and forums for debate and comment – these are particularly popular for news-based sites.

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