

# Social Media Guidelines

## Introduction

Social media platforms dominate how people communicate, find information, and access news and entertainment. If your church does not have a presence online, people cannot interact with it online. Having no website or no Facebook page is like having no church building in a town: people cannot come to us if we're not there.

Most churches now have a website, or up-to-date details on A Church Near You ([www.achurchnearyou.com](http://www.achurchnearyou.com)). However, there's still a lot of uncertainty around social media – should churches use social media? How should they do it? What spaces should they use?

These guidelines are not designed to be comprehensive instructions on how to use social media, but as points to consider when communicating in these spaces.

## The opportunities of social media

- Interaction on social media gives us new opportunities to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is a form of communication and interaction which is growing and growing, and in many cases, replacing more traditional forms of media.
- Facebook is an ideal place for churches to start in social media. Churches should create a page, rather than a personal profile. (there's information on how do that here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/how-create-facebook-page-your-church>). You need to create a personal account first, but the people who view the church's page will not know who the creator or editor of that page is. You can be anonymous. When creating your page, you should choose the category 'company, business or institution' and then 'church/religious organisation'.
- Instagram is another good place for churches to be online, and it is linked with Facebook. Instagram is good for sharing photos or videos, though, unlike Facebook, posts can **only** be shared if they contain images or photos.
- Once you've created your Facebook or Instagram page, make contacts with people online. Is there a social butterfly in your church who is on Facebook or Instagram, who could encourage their friends to like/follow your pages? Are there organisations like the Scouts or local businesses that could encourage their followers to like your pages?
- You'll also need to go offline – ask people in your church and at community events like Summer Fetes or Harvest festivals to like or follow your Facebook pages. Put their details on your posters and leaflets. Encourage people who come for weddings or Christenings to post their pictures of the service and party on social

media and to tag you – as long as they have the consent of the people appearing in the photographs.

- Your pages are yours to use creatively. Social media is a great space to invite people to events, share some of the life of the church, and encourage people to pray about local or national occurrences.
- People are more likely to look at and respond to pictures and short video clips. The more pictures and video you can include on your accounts, the more likely people will be to share them with their friends or followers.
- Social media is social. The people you encounter are made in the image of Christ. The technology you use to do so is secondary – you are meeting with people just as you would in a church or café. Technology is morally neutral – it is equally capable of showing the best and the worst of people.
- A lot of people are frightened that social media spaces are a bit like the wild west – verbally violent places where people post without thinking. Social media can be fast paced, but most churches do not encounter unpleasant comments or abuse online. If you do, remember you can always delete unpleasant comments from your website or social media pages, and block anyone being abusive.
- When using social media, make sure that you aren't so busy making noise that you don't make time to reflect. It's a great place to learn and discover.

### **Being a high-profile individual on social media**

If you are a clergyperson, a lay minister, or a lay person with a prominent role in a church, your interactions will reflect on the church and our faith. We hope these following guidelines will be of use to enable you to use social media to its fullest capacity, and to avoid incidents that might lead to any repercussions.

- As church representatives in social media spaces, you may be seen as unusual or interesting. There may be an element of vocational calling in your presence there. You can represent your parish, your denomination, your faith – it's a great responsibility and a great opportunity.
- If you use social media wisely, you can shine a light on the church - often through how you act. If you need to apologise – do! Show that church people sometimes make mistakes and aren't above apologising.
- Church representatives can be visible in social media spaces. Don't be scared of trolls or people wanting to abuse the church – the biggest risk to your reputation (and the reputation of the church) is yourself.
- Take responsibility for what you write and assume everything is public. On the internet, everything is visible, and everything is stored. Nothing you say will be

forgotten or hidden. Post as though your grandmother or your bishop is reading over your shoulder.

- In social media spaces, the distinction between the public and private arena is blurred. Some clergy chose to have two social media presences – one for their close friends and family, and one for people they know in a professional sphere. This means you have a ‘safer’ space to let off steam or be silly. Others have one social media presence but curate it more carefully.
- If you share who you work for in your profile, be aware that others may equate your views with those of your organisation.
- Be prudent – don’t post or share text or pictures that might compromise you, your church, or your faith. Remember to love your neighbour as yourself – don’t post anything which is or could be seen as sexist, racist, or homophobic.
- Don’t gossip, and respect confidentiality. If you’re telling a story about someone, ask yourself – is this my story to tell? Don’t talk about people without their permission - this includes your family.
- If someone uses a social media space to access pastoral care, or disclose information inappropriately, you may need to take the conversation offline or into a more private location.
- If you are a clergyperson, remember you hold public office, and remember your bishop could be reading what you post. What you share online could provoke a disciplinary hearing. If you’re applying for a post, most parishes will check to see what sort of a presence you have on social media.
- Remember, social media is subject to laws of safeguarding, libel, slander, copyright and data protection. There is no legal protection offered by posting anonymously or under an alias.
- Most advice on staying safe in social media spaces is the same as using the internet more generally. Use secure passwords and check what security or privacy settings you have on various social media sites. Don’t click on links you are unsure about.
- If anyone makes a threat, defames you or impersonates you online, firstly, take a screenshot of what has been posted – the person may later take a message down if they are challenged about it. There are simple instructions on how to do this on WikiHow ([www.wikihow.com/Take-a-Screenshot-in-Microsoft-Windows](http://www.wikihow.com/Take-a-Screenshot-in-Microsoft-Windows)). Save the screenshot and contact the Diocesan Communications Team ([www.dioceseofyork.org.uk/communications](http://www.dioceseofyork.org.uk/communications)).

## Safeguarding Children, young people, and vulnerable adults

If you have any concerns about the safety and/or wellbeing of a child or vulnerable adult, please contact your Parish Safeguarding Officer or the Diocesan Safeguarding Team ([safeguarding@yorkdiocese.org](mailto:safeguarding@yorkdiocese.org)).

Do use the material below in your Parish Safeguarding Policy to provide further guidance in a local setting.

- It's important to put more thought into your boundaries when communicating with children, young people and vulnerable adults. The law and diocesan policies around safeguarding apply in your communications with children, young people and vulnerable adults.
- Get parents' or guardians' permission before you contact young people via social media or email, and consent for use of photographs.
- You should not add children or young people on your personal social networking page who you work with in a professional capacity who are under the age of 18. You can set up a group for your project or group and invite them to be members (if they are over the required minimum age limit).
- Keep all your communications public and only send messages to whole groups, rather than to individuals. Behave as you would in a public setting - always maintain a second leader 'in the room', and make sure your line manager is able to see what is posted or emailed.
- Only contact young people during office hours, not in the evening or at night.
- Leaders and young people could develop agreed 'Internet Guidelines'. A youth group is a good context for healthy use of the internet to be encouraged.
- It's potentially easier to form inappropriate relationships using social media. Online banter and private messaging can lead to a level of intimacy that you'd ordinarily guard against. Be alert to the potential for misinterpretation. Keep your boundaries in place.
- If a young person uses social media to disclose sensitive or difficult information to you, save these messages in case they are needed later, for example in sharing with the Diocesan Safeguarding Team, police, or social workers. If someone uses a social media space to access pastoral care, or disclose information inappropriately, you may need to take the conversation offline or into a more private location.
- Avoid interacting more with one young person than another, e.g., if you wish happy birthday to one person, you need to do it for all users.

- Humour - without the cues of non-verbal communication, humour can be easily misconstrued. Be alert to adolescent sensitivities.
- Be a good example. Remind young people that there's no such thing as 'private' online. Tell them what kind of photos and information are okay to post and to never share personal information like name, school, or address.
- There is a risk that young people can be drawn into extremism via social media. For help on this, visit the ACTearly site: [www.actearly.uk](http://www.actearly.uk).
  - If you are a registered childcare provider (e.g. playschool, nursery etc. registered with OfSTED), then you may have specific duties under the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015. Please see the Prevent Duty and Guidance 2023 at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance).

### Other useful resources

- The Church of England's Social Media Guidelines are at [www.churchofengland.org/terms-and-conditions/our-social-media-community-guidelines](http://www.churchofengland.org/terms-and-conditions/our-social-media-community-guidelines).
- The Church of England's Social Media Charter is a voluntary pledge for individual Christians and churches to sign to help make social media and the web more widely positive places for conversations to happen: [www.churchofengland.org/terms-and-conditions/our-digital-charter](http://www.churchofengland.org/terms-and-conditions/our-digital-charter).
- Child Online Exploitation and Protections' Thinkuknow at [www.thinkuknow.co.uk/](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/)
- Thirtyone:Eight offers advice on internet safety at [thirtyoneeight.org](http://thirtyoneeight.org).
- Childnet International at: [www.childnet.com](http://www.childnet.com).
- Safer Internet Centre: [www.saferinternet.org.uk](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk).
- The City of York Council 'Raise York' website offers advice on using social networks when working with children, families and communities, at: [www.raiseyork.co.uk](http://www.raiseyork.co.uk).

We hope that you and your church will engage with God's people online, sharing the good news of God's love, and news of the events and services happening in our churches. Following the guidelines above should avoid problems, and encourage good practice.

For further information, please contact the Communications Team ([comms@yorkdiocese.org](mailto:comms@yorkdiocese.org))

*Updated November 2024*