Computer use and Social Media Policy   Review date: Mar. 2024

INTRODUCTION

This policy and related material is intended as good practice guidance for those who volunteer on behalf of the two churches in our parish, St George's and St Michael's.

The guidelines should not limit or prevent constructive debate or discussion through social media. People should be free to engage in discussions and debates within and beyond the Church on any topic, but should also remember their responsibilities to the Church or to any bodies they are members of when they do so. There is a wide range of opinion within the Church on some topics, and one of the attractive features about Anglicanism is our ability to disagree constructively.

Discipline relies on trust, rather than policing. These guidelines therefore as far as possible trust in people's common sense and that they will take responsibility for their actions. Actions that are deliberately damaging or hurtful to the Church, to an individual or group within it, or that bring the Church into disrepute are already potentially 'disciplinary' matters, whether they are carried out online or not. Social media does not change our understanding of confidentiality or what is or is not acceptable to say. The Church expects all involved to respect confidences when they are included in them. Similarly, something that would be unacceptable to print in a newsletter – for example – would be unacceptable to publish online.

There is a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour online, and this line will move with time. One of the benefits of a healthy online community is that it is this community that provides the best guidance to others and to itself. The aim of the Church should therefore be to foster healthy and active online and social media engagement.

The principles of communication are that it is:
- Credible, accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.
- Consistent, encouraging constructive criticism and deliberation.
- Cordial, honest and professional at all times, and responsive. When you gain insight, share it where appropriate.
- Integrated. Wherever possible, align online participation with other communications.
- Respectful and respects confidentiality. Respect the views of others even where you disagree.
- All online communication should be a good representation of the Church of England. Remember that you are an ambassador for Christ, the Church and part of it. Disclose your position as a member or officer of the Church, making it clear when speaking personally.

You should participate online in the same way as you would with other public forums. You take responsibility for the things you do, say or write.

Never share personal details like home address and phone numbers except to someone you know and trust, and if you decide to do so then use a private message. Be aware an address can be disclosed in many ways for example via photos or a GPS position as well as in written form. Refer to the Church's GDPR policy if in doubt.

Always remember that participating in online results in your comments being permanently available and open to being republished in other media. Once something is posted to a blog or other internet site, it should be assumed to be still available even if it is later deleted from the original site.

Stay within the legal framework and be aware that safeguarding, libel, defamation, copyright and data protection laws apply.

If telling a story about anyone, ask yourself *"Is this my story to tell?"*
Be aware that this may attract media interest in you as an individual, so proceed with care whether you are participating in an official or a personal capacity.

PRIVATE SPACE VERSUS PUBLIC ARENA

The use of social media significantly blurs the boundary between what is public and private at times it may be porous or even non-existent.

This blurring is highlighted in the relationship between employer and employee, but also applies to individuals and any groups or bodies they belong to. Whilst an individual may feel that what they see or do in their own time is their own private business, social media blurs or removes this line between private and public. The safest assumption is that any use of social media is public.

This blurring of the boundary between public and private is probably a bigger concern to older generations than younger, and is not necessarily a bad thing. But when one group struggles to understand why private information is being shared online, whilst other regards it as normal, this may create tensions.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONSULTATION

Respecting confidentiality is challenging in this area. The existence of social media does not change the Church's understanding of confidentiality. Within the life of the Church there are private conversations, confidential processes and private or closed meetings. All involved have a right to expect that others will respect confidential information they receive in any context. Breaking a confidence is as wrong when using social media as it would be by any other means.

However, people might inadvertently break a confidence. Some might report on Facebook about the facts of a confidential decision, which would clearly break our understanding of confidentiality. Alternatively, they may make a comment about how they feel about the decision, which inadvertently gives away some confidential information. They might feel they have done nothing wrong, whilst others would see a breach of confidence.

Everyone should be sensitive and sensible about sharing information gleaned from conversations, emails or meetings with others not originally involved. If in doubt, check with the originator. Anyone who wishes something they say or write to remain confidential should make that clear to the recipients at the time.

Social media does not and should not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the whole life of the Church. Private conversations or emails, confidential reports to Governing Body or other bodies, are confidential, both at the time

and after. Only when a confidential item is explicitly released from its confidential status by those able to do so should it be shared. This is as true in relation to social media as it is to any other media or conversations with others.

ANONYMITY
As noted below, there is no legal protection offered by posting either anonymously or under an alias. While many bloggers use an alias either for themselves or as a shorthand way of referring to their site, most make their true identity easy to find. Some sites, such as Facebook, use people's real names throughout, although of course it is always possible to register using a false name.

The blogging community has mixed views of anonymity. In general, it is frowned upon, mainly on moral grounds (in that it is only fair to identify yourself) but also on practical ones (if several different people in a discussion are posting anonymously, it quickly becomes hard to track who is saying what). However, it is wrong for official comments from an organisation to be made anonymously. When someone is commenting or writing on behalf of the Church, they should make their true identity clear from the start. It is also wrong to use anonymity as a way of evading responsibility for online activities. It should therefore only be used when personal safety is at stake.

HUMOUR
Humour is an important part of any ongoing relationship or conversation. When talking to someone, or a group, we all use verbal or physical cues that we are making a joke, and we receive immediate feedback in the form of a smile or laughter (or the lack of) to let us know if the others treated it as humour. Online many of these cues are missing, and so it is easy for a joke to be taken seriously or misinterpreted. Make sure that it is clear when you are joking, not only to those reading it immediately, but also to people you don't know, who might come across it later.

Also remember that it is not acceptable to pass off intentionally offensive comments as 'just joking'. Humour is a great gift and an essential part of life, but should not be used to exclude, bully or offend in any situation.

Some tips for using Social Media safely and responsibly can be found in the Appendix.

This policy is not exhaustive and covers best practice at the time of its institution or revision. It will be revised at least every three years. The next revision date is:

This policy was approved by the PCC at a meeting held on 22 March 2022

Signed ………………………………….…….Position ………………………………

APPENDIX

TOP TIPS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA SAFELY

USE SECURE PASSWORDS
Make it really secure – use at least 14 characters and mix in upper and lower case, numbers and symbols.

CHECK DEFAULT SETTINGS
Social media sites have large numbers of connected users. Make sure you check each site's default settings so your details are not on public display and minimise the amount of personal information you provide.

BE PICTURE PRUDENT
Be careful what pictures you show. Avoid adding compromising or embarrassing images that might harm you, the PCC, Church of England or its members.

BEWARE OF BIG BROTHER
Using social media sites as a diary is OK if you want anyone to know everything about you.

SECURE YOUR COMPUTER
Your life is valuable; so is the life of the Church of England. Hackers want you and your data. Only use computers with up to date security software and effective firewalls.

THINK BEFORE YOU CLICK
Never click on links just because you know the sender – if the email looks inappropriate it probably is.

STRANGER DANGER
Be wary of spammers trying to get your details by sending unsolicited invitations. If you do not know the person then the best advice is to ignore the request.