

Good conduct on social media

Guidelines for clergy and officer holders

In common with many organisations the Diocese of Liverpool seeks to protect its reputation and that of its office holders. Good conduct on social media is a key aspect of this.

The previous guidelines – *Protecting yourself on social media* – gave good general advice. This note seeks to reinforce and strengthen that guidance and is to be read in conjunction with it. It relates to individual behaviour online.

Any church or church group seeking to establish a social media presence should have that activity approved and controlled by the PCC. A PCC will be legally responsible for anything published in its name. If an individual maintains their own blog site then they will have to accept the legal responsibility for anything they publish.

This guidance cannot cover every aspect of online behaviour and office holders are expected to use judgment and an element of caution.

There is much corporate guidance and advice on social media use. This note has been based on best practice guidelines from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (with some additions taken from guidance to doctors published by the General Medical Council). The guidance also refers to appropriate elements of the Guide to Professional Conduct for Clergy published in 2003.

Background

Increased use of social media and online forums has led to an increased debate about reputation management. There are many high profile cases where an individual has published comments deemed inappropriate which resulted in dismissal.

The Bishop of Liverpool expects the highest possible standards from all licensed office holders. The online forum is no different from other forms of an office holder's public life. Online the authority to speak is recognised by many as part of the authority that derives from the office. The same high standards must be maintained for online communication as would be in other forms of communication. An office holder must maintain their own personal integrity, reputation as well as the reputation of the wider Church of England.

We consider that nothing you say on social media can be treated or regarded as private. We strongly recommend all office holders view social media as public space.

This guidance does not aim to prevent clergy from entering into debate on social, ethical or church issues online but it does require that this debate is conducted in the manner that the Diocese of Liverpool expects - responsibly, respectfully, courteously.

Status

This paper gives guidance on the behaviour expected online. A failure to comply could result in action being initiated against an individual.

Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of Clergy

Whilst these guidelines published in 2003 don't make any specific reference to social media the following extracts have relevance when using social media. They were derived from the Ordinals. The most relevant clauses are

- 2.11 *The clergy should be aware of the potential for abusing their privileged relationships*
2. *The clergy are placed in a position of power over others, in pastoral relationships with lay colleagues and sometimes with other clergy. This power needs to be used to sustain others and harness their strengths and not to bully, manipulate or denigrate.*
1. *The clergy swear an oath of canonical obedience to the bishop. The clergy should participate fully in the life and work of the deanery, archdeaconry, diocese and province, giving support and respect to those given the responsibility of leadership and oversight.*
2. *The clergy should know how canon and ecclesiastical law shape their exercise of office and ministry and should respect such regulations as are put in place by the Church.*
3. *The authority of churchwardens and lay people elected or appointed to office in the local church is to be respected and affirmed.*

Good conduct on social media

Clergy or office holders using should follow this basic guidelines.

1. Be open, honest and transparent in online activity.
2. Always state when you are expressing a personal view – if you represent a forum or group then you must state whether you are giving the group's or your own opinion. Be aware of any conflicts of interest.
3. Be courteous and respectful in all postings. Do not use social media to make unsubstantiated comments about individuals. If you disagree with other people's opinions do it in a polite, measured and appropriate manner. Try to make sure that you are clearly disagreeing with the person's views rather than making a personal comment on them or their character. If a conversation gets too antagonistic find appropriate ways to withdraw.
4. Do not bring the Diocese of Liverpool or the Church of England into disrepute.
5. Do not make anyone feel uncomfortable.
6. Be aware that social media sites cannot guarantee confidentiality no matter what privacy settings you put into place.
7. Check the authenticity, reliability and integrity of anything you may repost or retweet. There are many hoax, false and damaging stories that circulate. You should not repost anything that you cannot verify.
8. Treat anything you post as permanent.
9. Correct any errors openly and in a timely manner.
10. Allow a right to reply.
11. Work within the parameters of the law (see next section).
12. Refer to the Director of Communications for further guidance

Legal considerations

While many aspects of use of online media use remains untested the legal considerations associated with print and media. The main areas to consider are:

1. **Intellectual property** (Creative Commons, copyright and trade marks)

If you post images or share videos online you may be infringing someone's intellectual property rights. You must make sure that you have the appropriate permission to publish. A specific protocol – Creative Commons – exists to enable the free sharing of material. You are advised to use Creative Commons' licensed material where possible. Details www.creativecommons.org

2. **Defamation**

This is the act of making a derogatory statement about someone that may cause a loss in their reputation. Posting online can be considered libellous. Action could also be taken if you repost a libellous statement from other sources – as in the action taken by Lord McAlpine. You are not just responsible for your own comments; action may be taken if you host a blog site where someone posts a libellous comment.

3. **Privacy** (Human Rights 1998)

This is a complex legal area but action could be taken if you post anything online that is deemed to breach an individual's privacy.

Protecting yourself

You can protect yourself and be open and accountable by:-

Liking the Diocese of Liverpool Facebook page www.facebook.com/LiverpoolDiocese

Following us on twitter www.twitter.com/LivDiocese

Following Stuart Haynes on twitter www.twitter.com/stuartehaynes

Become a friend of Stuart Haynes on Facebook www.facebook.com/stuart.haynes.5

If you are in any doubt then seek advice from Stuart Haynes, Director of Communications at St James House. Stuart.haynes@liverpool.anglican.org
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