Protecting yourself when using social media
A guide for churches and church leaders

The online world has changed the way we communicate and while it has many advantages there are a number of traps and risks that have led to individuals getting into a great deal of trouble and potential disciplinary action. If you want to engage with this media, we want to make sure you don't fall into the trap of becoming a figure of notoriety. This guide has been written to help clergy, readers and lay workers protect themselves online.

This guidance note gives information about protecting yourself from the risks of entering the online debate. It sets out the best practice for making sure you can build safeguards around your communication – and any communications you conduct on behalf of your church or church group.

As a church leader you are a public figure – even if that is just in your own local context – and you have to be aware that your comments and opinions will be watched, valued, scrutinised and criticised.

A brief guide to what's out there

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

Blogging sites: 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 Pinterest 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.

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)

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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What we are talking about

The main emphasis of this paper is to do with Facebook and Twitter – however this advice applies to any tool where you may put information, comment or opinion.

The key things you must do to protect yourself online

There are a few simple things you can think about and do to protect yourself and your posts

You are a public figure
You must remember that you are a representative of the Bishop and of the church and your opinion and behaviour matters. People will look to what you do and say either for moral guidance or to find the true you. As a result the unguarded and off the cuff remark can very often take on extra significance.

In particular anyone in ordained or licensed ministry needs to remember their oaths of loyalty to the Bishop and their vows to offer their lives as an example to others in ministry.

Social media blurs the distinction between the professional and private life of any individual. It is easy to think that you can have an element of privacy online. You can't. You can protect yourself by remembering at all times you are a public figure.

Think about your friends and followers
You need to think about who you accept as friends on Facebook (and to a certain extent followers on twitter). Reaching out to a wide network of people who may share different views and express them in colourful ways may have many benefits. But you may need to think through the challenges of reaching a diverse group of people online and how you disassociate yourself from those who may cause you embarrassment. Similarly your friends may not appreciate your public permission and post messages, photos or videos that could be very harmful. You could also be "tagged" in these photos bringing more attention.

One example is the many incidents of teachers' careers getting into trouble because of the embarrassing holiday or night out picture.

Some people consider having a professional and personal online persona. This can manage some of the risk but shouldn't be seen as the ultimate solution.

Anything you say is in the public domain
You may think you are speaking to a controlled private group of friends but anything you put online can be regarded as published. Even if you put safeguards around whom you accept as friends or followers information can still be passed on.

Legally posts may be subject to action under the laws of libel and defamation and online activity also has implications for Data Protection and copyright law. You cannot necessarily protect yourself by being anonymous or using a pseudonym. Legal cases have forced anonymous posters to reveal their identity.

Clergy have found themselves the centre of unfavourable media attention after they posted social media comments. Most notably The Bishop of Willesden was suspended for comments about the Royal Wedding. A clergyman in the north criticised aspects of worship and was widely criticised and rebuked. Your comments may not reach the same level of harm but if you criticise an aspect of your local church, parishioners or simply sound off at the end of a stressful day your comments could be taken and used against you.

It may be regarded as a disciplinary matter if you make any derogatory comments about others on any social media site.

You can protect yourself by only putting comments that you would also make in a public meeting; in your parish magazine or in local media.

Anything you say is permanent

You may be able to delete a comment or entry made in haste but records could still have been seen. Your comment could have been reposted or copied to other sites. Even if you sent a direct message or personal email the recipient could find a variety of ways to keep a valid record of the comment. People could take a screen dump to save information that you may have thought is deleted.

Your opinion matters
Everyone has an opinion and it is good and important to have debate. Freedom of speech is important and the church has a duty to hold a mirror up against society and society's values. Many do this through a blog (online diary). This is fine provided that you make clear the source of the opinion. It seems a bit of a modern cliché but you do need to state that views expressed are your own views and not necessarily that of your local or the national church. Many people put that statement on their twitter feed.

You need to remember that a large part of people's interest in what you say comes from the authority your membership of the church gives. You may be speaking for yourself but people will make assumptions about who you are speaking for. This is particularly true if you are a member of a forum or representative group. You need to be aware when you may have a conflict of interest. You also need to consider those issues you need to remain publically neutral about.

You also need to be extremely carefully if you are using as a profile your church or church group. Then any opinions have to be those of the group and not your personal opinion.

Pictures tell a thousand words
Be careful about any pictures or videos you post. They may seem innocuous and fun to you but many people have fallen foul with the image of an unguarded moment. You may be "tagged" by a friend in photos that you don't wish to be seen in. You need to make sure they are removed.

Don't forget copyright
It's easy to use Google to search and find that relevant image as a background to a blog entry or post. But beware that many images are protected by copyright and some organisations – such as the Getty Picture library will pursue infringements relentlessly. Similarly you need to be sure of the copyright of any music or film you wish to use.

Online safeguarding is of essential importance
You need to be very aware of making sure you are safe, public and open in your communication with people – particularly the vulnerable. You need to have regard to our diocesan policies and the law.

You should think very carefully about accepting "friend requests" from young or vulnerable people and in no circumstance should initiate a request with a vulnerable person. In any communications you should not attempt to send a direct message to a vulnerable person - all communication online should be open and transparent.

Similarly you need to respect other people's confidentiality. It is easy to share someone else's story as an illustration of a point your wish to make. But you may not have that right (even if you change details). Make sure you are not the source of confidential information leaking out.

Think about your personal details
You need to keep yourself safe and not publish any personal or contact details - particularly addresses or phone numbers unless you are happy for people to know them

The one thing to do

The single biggest thing you can do to protect yourself online is to assume anything you put is in the public domain and will be shared. If you do that and self edit your comments you are approaching the medium in a clear, responsible manner.

Who to contact for advice and support

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