

Guidelines for the use of Social Media and Digital Communications

Introduction

These Guidelines are intended to help all within the congregation to use 'social media' and other electronic forms of communication in the most effective and appropriate way and to help prevent its misuse.

Social media and digital communications offer wide opportunities for groups and individuals to engage creatively and positively with others.

At the same time, the nature of these mean it's important to think carefully about how to use them well, and manage the associated risks.

Social Media and Digital Communications

The use of e-mail, text messaging, social media technologies and attitudes to them, are changing at an ever-increasing speed. Current social media platforms includes Facebook, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, WeChat, X (formerly Twitter), Zoom, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube and so on; the list is larger and growing.

Some of the benefits of these, compared to more traditional forms of communication, are speed, high visibility, a conversational and open-ended tone, the tendency to attract public attention and encouragement of interaction. They are faster, cheaper and more widely available than printed media, although potential exclusion issues arise when part of a community lacks internet access, or for whatever reason does not wish, or is unable, to become part of particular platforms.

Research on behalf of Youth for Christ is both interesting and challenging. [Digital Generation - Youth for Christ \(yfc.co.uk\)](https://www.yfc.co.uk) At the time of the survey (2018) 94% of Generation Z (those born after 1995), engage with social media daily, and 75% engage with YouTube. A high proportion have had their views on important matters changed as a result what they have seen on-line. The report is well worth reading to gain an appreciation of how young people relate to social media, and each other through it. Six years later, social media is probably even more influential.

The speed of social and digital media is both an advantage and a danger. With any form of communication, things can go wrong and misunderstandings can arise. These are particular dangers with social media.

These guidelines are intended to help you think through the issues.

1. Be courteous and responsible

Responsibility

Posts can travel around the globe almost instantly, and misunderstandings can arise **very** easily and **very** quickly. You need to exercise good judgment about what, how, and why you are saying something, and to whom you are saying it.

Before posting a comment or image on social media, pause to consider the tone of the conversation you are joining, and whether it is appropriate to participate. Ask yourself:

- Would this breach a confidence?
- Would I want this on the front page of a newspaper?
- Would I want my family and friends to read this?
- If it concerns a disagreement, have I tried to resolve it privately first?
- Would I (in the case of Church leaders) say this from 'the pulpit', or to members individually or collectively?
- Does what I'm writing reflect Christ-like love, care, concern, and compassion?

Courtesy

Social Media works well for offering praise, encouragement or support, and it's a great way to convey simple, positive messages. However, beware the danger of becoming sycophantic, or creating a 'mutual admiration society'!

Exercise courtesy and kindness when responding or posting any comment, even if disagreeing.

Constructive criticism and challenging certain views can be good but it should be done in a way that does not give rise to insult, offence or hurt towards others. On-line debate is rarely the way to resolve differences of opinion. For example, WhatsApp is great for communicating information. However, discussion of even very simple matters on (say) WhatsApp is rarely helpful, and frequently leads to difficulties. **It is not recommended.**

If you are in any way unsure about an image or film content that you wish to share you should obtain the author's permission. Under no circumstances can a 'Googled' image be used to relay a response or highlight a cause without granted permission. If permission has been granted be sure to credit the source. If you are in doubt – don't.

2. You are the face of the Church

Particularly to those outside the Church, those in positions of leadership, paid or unpaid, will be regarded as representatives of the Church. It is therefore important that the distinction is made between personal comment/opinion on social media, and that which is being made on behalf of the Church, and that clear boundaries are in place to ensure such distinctions are both respected and upheld.

You are responsible for everything that you post on social media. If you are posting personal comment/opinion, you should make it clear that it is your personal comment/opinion and not necessarily the views of the Church.

Bear in mind that not everyone will separate perceptions of the two, so your views can potentially be read as those of 'the Church', albeit unofficially. If in doubt, don't post it!

3. Once posted - it's posted!

You should regard all social media posts as public and permanent.

Once something is posted online you probably can't delete it entirely. Even if you delete or retract a post, others may have seen it, shared it and be talking about it.

Care should be taken over re-tweeting, adding links to external sites, re-posting another's material, etc. You need to be sure you know, in full, what the content of the item is, and what the implications of associating with external organisations are.

Particularly in pastoral settings, but also elsewhere, confidential meetings and conversations take place within the Church. The Church's understanding of confidentiality and its importance are unaltered by social media. Ask yourself: "is this story mine to share and/or to share widely?" or, "what would be the implications if what I post/send, even if it is intended to be 'private', were to be made public - even inadvertently?" If you are at all uncertain - don't.

4. Normal rules apply

You are responsible for ensuring that your posts are appropriate.

Legislation including defamation, copyright and data protection applies to digital and online communication as much as it does to print communication. If you are unsure about whether something could potentially be challenged in this way then seek advice before posting a comment/image.

5. Tell people who you are

Don't hide behind a pseudonym or alias. For personal accounts, if your username or profile on a social media platform does not include your real name, provide some brief details in the 'About' section. When you create a profile page for a congregation, identify the person who is responsible for the content posted within it and provide contact details.

That said, you should manage your privacy settings carefully, and not divulge personal information unless you are sure you can trust that this will not be misused.

6. Safeguarding

The use of social media is open to different interpretations and perceptions of what is and is not appropriate behaviour. The transmission of words, sounds, image (video and still images) have the potential to be harmful in a safeguarding sense, and it is therefore important that when communicating online with children, young people or vulnerable adults that it is done with care and sensitivity. Detailed guidelines have been produced by the Free Church of Scotland and can be accessed on [Free-Church-of-Scotland-Social-Media-Guidance-May-2021.pdf \(freechurch.org\)](https://www.freechurch.org/media-guidance-may-2021.pdf)

7. Data Privacy

There are legal issues associated with the use of personal data – that is any information held, either in paper form or electronically, from which individuals can be identified. This includes names, addresses, email addresses, telephone numbers, IP addresses, photographs or video images. Anyone acting on, or who could be perceived as acting on behalf of BFPC should familiarise themselves and comply with our Data Protection Policy and associated documentation. These documents can be found here: [Downloads \(broughtyferrypresbyterianchurch.org\)](https://www.broughtyferrypresbyterianchurch.org/downloads)

8. Alternatives

Rather than carrying on debates in public, or where contentious issues are involved, it is usually better to contact the individual by telephone, Zoom, or meet face-to-face. This is less likely to cause misunderstandings, inadvertently give offence, etc.

9. If in doubt, ask

If you have questions or concerns about the use of social media you can contact the Session Clerk in the first instance. (Dr Alan Woodley, a.woodley@hotmail.co.uk, telephone 07740 942336)