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**Safeguarding Guidance for the use of**

**Facebook and other Social Media**

July 2018

**Introduction**

Facebook and other social media platforms are used by young people and families as an important communication tool. However, they are also open to misuse, and Twitter tweets, Facebook posts and other public social media engagement can be subject to misunderstandings or taken out of context. This means that it is important to have guidance in place that identifies what the difficulties might be and to help church leaders make wise decisions in their Facebook and other social media use. Leaders of any church activity should be setting an example, and be a good role model which enables the young people they work with to recognise and develop their own behaviour appropriately. Youth Leaders in particular should use their own social media behaviour and engagement to help young people identify behaviour on social media which is, or is not appropriate.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this guidance is to:

* Protect the church from legal risks
* Ensure that the reputation of the church is protected
* Safeguard all children and young people, and those who work with them
* Ensure that any users are able clearly to distinguish where information provided via social media is legitimately representative of the church

All clergy, church officers and volunteers should bear in mind that information they share through social networking applications, even if they are on private spaces, are still subject to the Data Protection Act, the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 and other legislation. They must also operate in line with the Church of England’s Safeguarding Polices and Practice Guidance. Within this document there is a distinction between use of church-sanctioned social media for church purposes and personal use of social media: however, there is a likelihood that the two will overlap and it is this “grey area” that needs the most consideration.

**Making “friends” on Social Media**

Once you have accepted someone’s friend request on most social media sites, they will have access to a wide range of information about you, such as your photographs, who your other friends are, your current location, groups you are in and events you have arranged to attend through that site. They will also have access to any comments or discussions on your timeline or personal profile.

It may not be appropriate for young people that you know in your “professional” capacity through the Church to have this much personal information about you, and whilst it is possible to restrict your profile in some instances, it is a far better idea to let young people at Church know that you will not be accepting friend requests from them, so that you can keep your personal and professional life separated. This ensures that there are no “mixed messages” about being a personal or close friend rather than being an adult who knows them in a more formal capacity. The other option is to use your social media profile purely for church activities, and refuse all requests from family and friends. Whilst some social media platforms may allow you to have two separate identities others state this is against their rules, and it is important to set a good example by adhering to the published rules of any site you are a member of.

It is also important to ensure that you have strong security on your social media profile – do not use a password that anyone could guess such as the name of your child or pet. Check your “public” profile on social media regularly to ensure that everything on it, which is available to anyone searching you on Google, is appropriate for young people, employers and family members to see.

**Setting up “Groups” and “Pages” on Facebook**

Facebook gives users the option to set up pages and groups. Pages are public and can be used for advertisements, announcements, and updates on activities. Groups can be public or private, and allow for people to become members, and host discussions, as well as giving space for all of the activities that also happen on a page. A church “page” could be used to advertise events for example, and also direct interested people to the private “closed” groups which will have more details and discussions about arrangements and who is attending. Discussions and posts within a closed or private group cannot be seen by people outside of the group, although a list of members can be seen.

The page or group should be set up by, and administered by more than one person, including youth leaders and other church officers. Young people can be made page or group moderators, which would allow them to remove or report inappropriate content and add relevant content, but should not have overall control of the page or group. The group administrators would need to decide who can be added to a group – just young people, or young people and parents, helpers and others interested in the activity – and also who to exclude, such as people who do not need to know about the details: e.g. young people who do not meet the age criteria, (Facebook sets a minimum age of 13 for membership) people who are not parents, helpers or church officers. Administrators would set the tone for the group by initiating discussions and setting the rules for commenting or responding to anything posted, and removing anything which breaks the rules. There is no need for the people within the group or on the page to be “Facebook friends” in order to access any of the content. Discussions can be held within a closed group between all members of the group and these reduce the need for personal private messaging. Message Chats can be set up for groups of people on messenger without them all being “friends”, and everyone in the chat can see the conversation.

**Communications on Social Media**

Before adding a child or young person to a group, or engaging in discussions with them on social media, it can be a good idea to ask parents or guardians to sign a consent form or send an email to say that they are in agreement with this. Again, this highlights the formal, professional relationship, and is a way of indicating to parents what contact you are likely to have with their child. That consent form could indicate restrictions that parents would like imposed, such as not adding pictures of their child to a page, not inviting their child to join certain groups or activities, or not private messaging, emailing or texting. They may specify for example communicating by email or Facebook Messenger where they can be copied in, rather than by Blab or Whatsapp (social media private messaging applications, mostly used by young people), or Twitter (where all messages are public).

Any communication with a young person initiated by a youth worker or other church officer, whether this is on a social media platform, by email or text should have someone else copied in – a parent, other youth leader, or all of the young people involved in a particular group or activity. Communications should not be sent after 10pm or before 8am unless this is unavoidable (for example a last minute change to arrangements for the following day) to discourage young people from the need to check their mobile phones for messages during the night. Content should be limited to arrangement changes, reminders or information.

Messages should not be deleted off the system, so that that there is a clear record for accountability purposes. They constitute written documents under legislation such as the Data Protection Act, and should be treated as any other written communication. Information that is serious or upsetting (such as a safeguarding concern, injury to or illness of a member of the group) should be shared face-to-face wherever possible, rather than in a social media message. Written words, which may have limited emotional context can be easily distorted, mis-interpreted and shared in ways that were not intended.

If young people contact you personally away from work/church via social networking sites, texts, emails, Skype or any other media, then it is strongly recommended that you take every reasonable step to ensure that the young person does not form an inappropriate attachment to you. Such an attachment may be misconstrued by third parties, and may give the young person false expectations and impressions. If you suspect that there is a danger of this, copy someone else into the communication (such as another youth worker), ensure that you scrutinize every word you type to check that it cannot be misconstrued, limit the contact as much as possible, and inform your member of clergy or youth work lead as soon as possible.

If you receive a significant emotionally charged personal message or one with inappropriate content from a young person via social media, inform another youth leader, or your member of clergy immediately. This is to keep communications with young people out in the open dispelling any accusation of improper relationships. Setting appropriate boundaries is a skill that some young people struggle with and it is important to set a good example. If the message suggests that the young person might harm themselves or someone else, it is important to take immediate action such as contacting parents, your safeguarding lead, or in an emergency, dialing 999.

If, when viewing an internet site, such as comments left in a group or on a Facebook profile, you become aware of a situation in which a young person is potentially in danger, then it is vital that you report it straight away. Depending on the situation, you may report it to your member of clergy, your safeguarding officer, the police, the CEOP or another relevant authority.

**Photographs of young people and activities**

Remember that your “private” social media posts may be visible to a range of people without you necessarily being aware. Do not post photographs of yourself or others that may be embarrassing, misinterpreted, or which would be inappropriate to share with members of the congregation in church – nothing is private once posted on social media and you cannot control where it may end up.

The Diocese has Practice Guidance about taking and using photographs of children and young people. This includes posting pictures on the internet, and parents or guardians always need to give consent to such photographs being published or shared anywhere. Please check the Practice Guidance for more details. On many social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, it is possible to “tag” someone in a photograph. This will link it to their profile and make it available to all of their friends on that social media network, and on Google. Do not tag young people yourself, and explain to them the implications of being tagged in photographs. Discourage them from tagging others without permission. They can set their security settings to restrict who can see them and tag them in photographs.

**Is Social Media a Mystery to you?**

Please seek advice from the Diocesan Communications Team, and [download the handy tips from the website](http://www.bathandwells.org.uk/supporting-parishes/parish-communication/social-media-support/) – or ask a 17 year old!

Thanks go to Sky Cady Youth & Young Adults Minister, All Saints Weston Church, Bath, BA1 4BX for his assistance with this guidance.