THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND
Diocese of Manchester
CHURCH FOR A DIFFERENT WORLD

Social Media Guidelines for Clergy and Lay Ministers

Within our diocesan community, more are using social media as part of their ministry. The Diocese of Manchester embraces this, acknowledging the value of social media as an important missional tool. Through social media we can connect with people where they are and build relationships with those we might struggle to reach through other channels.

Social media is immediate, interactive, conversational and open-ended. This sets it apart from other forms of communication and demands a new way of thinking. As well as the many opportunities, users should also be aware of (though not put off by) the associated risks.

These good practice guidelines have been compiled to help clergy, lay ministers and staff already active on social media (or thinking about it!) fulfil, with confidence, their role as online ambassadors for their local parish, the wider Church and our Christian faith.

All are based on principals of common sense and good judgement. Essentially, you should participate online in the same way as you would in any other public forums. Your actions should be consistent with your work and Christian values and you take responsibility for the things you do, say or write.

1. DON'T RUSH IN

The immediacy of social media is one of its benefits – we can respond quickly to questions, correct misunderstandings, give our perspective about a breaking story in the news media. Responding quickly doesn't mean doing so without due consideration. Before posting always think:

- Is this my story to share?
- Would I want my relative to read this?
- Would I want God to read this?
- Would I want this on the front page of a newspaper?

This point applies even before you start posting your own content. Spend a while listening to others, getting a feel for the tone in that particular forum, giving thought to how you might participate.

2. TRANSIENT YET PERMANENT

Social media updates are immediate and will outdate quickly BUT they can have a more lasting impact and you should assume that anything you post is permanent and will be shared with others. Even if you delete it later on, it may have been seen and re-published or referred to elsewhere

3. YOU'RE AN AMBASSADOR

Like it or not, if you are ordained, lead in or are employed by the Church, others will see you in your public role as a representative of the Church. If talking about a church matter, make it clear that these are your personal opinions and not those of the Church of England or the diocese.

4. BLURRING OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIVES

As a member of the clergy, anything you do or say in the public domain will be interpreted by the public as being representative of the Church – even if you feel you are speaking in a personal capacity rather than an official one. Be aware that any controversial or sensitive comments you make may attract attention of the media. Consider setting up different accounts for ministry and personal use to help set definite boundaries. Use privacy settings wisely.

5. SAFEGUARDING

The informality that social media encourages can mean that it might be harder to maintain a professional distance that is required when working with children, young people and the vulnerable. Communicating directly online with someone, for example with private messaging, is like meeting

them in private. Make sure you communicate appropriately with young people and be aware of the risks to them of online bullying.

You should not accept “friend requests” from young (under 18) or vulnerable people and in no circumstance should you initiate a request with a vulnerable person. You’re advised to send messages to groups, rather than individuals, or share them publicly.

6. BE SENSITIVE TO CONFIDENTIALITY

When telling a story about a situation which involves someone else, always ask yourself *Is this my story to tell?* – would it cause distress, inconvenience, upset or embarrassment to others if they found out you had shared in this way? If in any doubt, do not share it online (even if you change details). Make sure you are not the source of confidential information leaking out.

7. STAY WITHIN THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Whilst sharing thoughts and reflections with friends or followers via social media can seem personal and private, it is not. By law, if one or more people can access it, content is classed as published, in the public domain and subject to legislation around libel, defamation, copyright and data protection. If you wouldn’t say something in a public meeting or to someone’s face or write it in a newspaper or on headed paper – don’t say it online.

8. BE MINDFUL OF YOUR OWN SECURITY

Be careful about the personal details you share online – again assuming anything you share about yourself is in the public domain. Never publish detailed personal information such as your address or telephone number, unless in a private message to someone you know and trust.

9. REMEMBER THE VALUE OF OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION!

It can be very easy to hide behind an online persona and neglect other relationships – remember that while social media is an exciting forum which presents many new opportunities, the value of face-to-face relationships should never be forgotten.

Sign up for the Church of England Digital Charter:
www.churchofengland.org/terms-and-conditions/our-digital-charter

FOR ADVICE AND SUPPORT



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