

Social Media policy

1.0 Policy Statement

St. John the Apostle and Evangelist Church (St. John's) and the Parochial Church Council (PCC) recognises that social media and the internet have become an increasing influence on many people's lives. We believe that, as Christians, the same principles that guide our offline conversations should apply to those that take place online. Interacting and utilising social media to spread the Gospel does not change our understanding of confidentiality, responsibility, and Christian witness.

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Colossians 4:6).

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour (Exodus 20:16).

The Church of England has produced a series of social media community guidelines which can be found in **Appendix 1**.

2.0 Policy Principles

Social media offers a great number of opportunities for the Church, such as increasing communication and notices; building relationships, community, and the congregation; providing opportunities for participation, collaboration, and feedback; enhancing learning and generating ideas; and reaching and connecting with new groups. There are also risks involved, such as inappropriate relationships; saying things you should not; breaching confidentiality; spreading gossip; bullying and harassment; grooming; and impersonation.

The law views anything that is shared online as being in the public domain. Sharing thoughts and reflections with friends using social media or email might feel personal or private, but if more than one person can read what is written, the law could class it as 'published' and therefore subject to numerous laws around libel, slander, copyright, and data protection. As a rule of thumb, if you wouldn't say something to the local newspaper or in a meeting, you shouldn't say it online.

3.0 Posting on St. John's associated social media accounts

3.1 Confidentiality

Social media offers a unique blurring of the boundary between public and private life, and as such we at St. John's recognise our responsibility to maintain confidentiality. Within the life of the Church, there are private or closed meetings, private conversations, and confidential matters. All involved have a right to expect others will respect that confidentiality. Breaking confidentiality on social media is as wrong as it would be in any other context. If a confidence is broken, it can spread via social media with alarming speed and can be impossible to retract.

Some basic guidelines to follow are:

- Photographs and videos should never be taken during Church services without the permission of the clergy.
- Photographs and videos should never be uploaded without the permission of the individuals involved.
- Photographs, videos, and comments should never be uploaded which could compromise, misrepresent, or embarrass the individuals involved.
- Do not photograph or video children without referring to section 3.2 below.
- Do not give away confidential information that you have obtained about any individual/s whom you have met through the course of your work within the Church or community.

3.2 Images of children

Permission must be obtained by parents / carers of children and young people under the age of 18 before a photograph or film footage is published on the Church website or Church-associated social media accounts. It is perfectly acceptable to ask parents / carers to let the Church know if they do NOT want their child/ren photographed or filmed.

At Church events where photographs are taken, prior to publishing:

- It must be made clear why the image(s) or film are being used, what it will be used for, and who might want to look at the pictures.
- We must obtain specific consent from parents / carers before using photographs on publicly available domains (website, social media).
- Photographs should be selected carefully.
- Children's full names and other identifiable information (including, but not limited to, email or postal addresses, phone numbers) should not be used anywhere, particularly in association with photographs.

Publishing images of children can bring positive publicity and usually gives a sense of joy to children and their parents, but also raises some issues that we must take consideration of:

- Images count as personal data under the UK General Data Protection Regulations 2018.
- There may be copyright issues.
- Images of children in media with a wide circulation may lead to children being traced by people who should not be able to find them. This affects children who have been involved in disputed custody matters, adoptions, abductions, or other civil / criminal matters.
- Images of children may be used or manipulated for the purposes of child pornography, which is a growing problem on the internet.

4.0 Posting on personal social media accounts as members of the PCC or as Clergy

Members of the PCC and clergy represent St. John's and as such should be aware and mindful of their responsibility to not publish or share anything which may go against St. John's policies or bring the Church and parish into disrepute.

Users are personally responsible for the content that they publish online, whether in blog, social media, or any other form of user-generated media. Be mindful that what you publish may be public for an indefinite period of time. Protect your privacy and take care to understand a site's terms of service.

If you are a member of the clergy, anything you do or say in the public domain may 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. A good name is easily lost and the reputational damage caused may be widespread. Be aware that controversial or sensitive comments you make may attract the attention of the media. If in doubt, seek advice, but please remember that you are responsible for your online activities.

5.0 Key principles of social media usage

- If you comment on any aspect of the work of the Church of England, Diocese of St. Albans, or the parish of St. John's, you must clearly identify yourself.
- If you have a vested interest in something you are discussing, point it out. It may be appropriate to use a disclaimer to the effect that views expressed are your own.
- Respect copyright.
- Respect libel and defamation laws.
- Never provide details of confidential matters or the performance of groups such as the PCC or its sub-committees.
- Truth matters. When you make a reference, link back to the source. Don't publish anything that might allow inferences to be drawn that could embarrass or damage an individual.
- Assume what you say is permanent. Even if you delete an online comment, it could already have been seen by other people and / or republished on other, unconnected sites.
- Maintain clear boundaries. The law and our Safeguarding policy apply in your communications with children and young people - you should not exchange private messages with young people via social media and should not accept "friend requests" from young people without due consideration.
- If your youth work involves an element of social media, try to keep all your communications public and only send messages to whole groups, rather than to individuals.
- Do not do anything that could be considered discriminatory against, or bullying or harassment of, any individual.

6.0 Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed triennially, or sooner in response to new legislation, national policy development, or specific demand and feedback, at the first PCC meeting after the APCM.

7.0 Relevant and Related Legislation, Policies, and Resources

- Data Protection Act 2018
- UK General Data Protection Regulations 2019
- Safeguarding of Children and Adults in the Church 2018

8.0 Version Control

Version #	Author	Date	Summary of changes
01	PCC members	November 2020	New policy
02	Meg Murphy	October 2024	Significant refresh including: - consent for publishing children and young people's photographs / videos - reference to CoE social media community guidelines

Appendix 1: Church of England social media community guidelines

Be safe: the safety of children, young people, and vulnerable adults must be maintained. If you have any concerns, ask your local Parish Safeguarding Officer or Diocesan Safeguarding Advisor.

Be respectful: do not post or share content that is sexually explicit, inflammatory, hateful, abusive, threatening or otherwise disrespectful.

Be kind: treat others how you would wish to be treated and assume the best in people. If you have a criticism or critique to make, consider not just *whether* you would say it in person, but the *tone* you would use.

Be honest: don't mislead people about who you are.

Take responsibility: you are accountable for the things you do, say, and write. Text and images shared can be public and permanent, even with privacy settings in place. If you're not sure, don't post it.

Be a good ambassador: personal and professional life can easily become blurred online so think before you post.

Disagree well: some conversations can be places of robust disagreement and it's important we apply our values in the way we express them.

Credit others: acknowledge the work of others. Respect copyright and always credit where it is due. Be careful not to release sensitive or confidential information and always question the source of any content you are considering amplifying.

Follow the rules: abide by the terms and conditions of the various social media platforms themselves. If you see a comment that you believe breaks their policies, then please report it to the respective company.