



ST JOHN THE APOSTLE & EVANGELIST, WATFORD

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Policy Statement

The Parochial Church Council ('PCC') of the parish of St John the Apostle & Evangelist, Watford, believes that as Christians, the same principles that guide our offline conversations should apply to those that take place online. Interacting through social media does not change our understanding of confidentiality, responsibility and Christian witness.

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

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

Galatians 5:22-26 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace and forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Introduction

Social media offers exciting possibilities to share the Gospel and to interact with people we might not otherwise connect with. We can communicate with people faster and more cheaply than ever before. However, social media takes us into territory where we need to think carefully. It is interactive, conversational, and open-ended and happens in a public space.

Responsibility

Every member of the PCC is responsible for conducting themselves in a manner consistent with this Policy in all their church-related activities.

Scope

This policy covers all types of social media platforms, but also extends to the use of mobile phones, blogs, website forums and emails.

The policy should be read in conjunction with the Safeguarding and Data Protection Policies adopted by the PCC.

Communications via social media offer a great opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ as well as a means of internal communication. Social media is inevitably now a normal part of our church's communication system. However, there is a danger of inappropriate messages being relayed, and having a robust policy in place is considered to be essential.



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Legal considerations

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

Honesty and transparency

Truth matters. Don't repeat unsubstantiated claims without finding out if they are true. Make sure you've got the facts right; if in doubt, check. Repeating an untruth does not make it true, and you are opening yourself up to the charge of libel and/or slander if you do so. Be clear about who you are. When discussing topics relevant to St John the Apostle & Evangelist, Watford, use your real name. 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.

Tone

As with any other communication, think about the tone you use. Without visual cues, humour can easily be misinterpreted online. Make sure you are not attempting to pass off offensive comments through attempts at humour. Treat your colleagues with respect and do not sound off online. As a rule of thumb:

- Would you be happy for your mother to read your communication?
- Would you be happy for God to read your communication?
- Would you be happy for your worst enemy to read your communication?
- Would you be happy with this appearing on the front page of a national newspaper?

In particular, beware hasty responses to blogs, tweets, posts, etc.

Permanence

Assume what you say is permanent. Even if you delete an online comment, it could already have been seen by other people and/or re-published on other, unconnected sites. It can be easy to say something in the heat of the moment that you will come to regret, and it could remain online permanently for all to see. So always think carefully and never make personal comments about someone that you wouldn't also say in public or to them in person.



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Security

Do not assume anything electronic is secure. You might be able to delete or recall an email but there's no guarantee the recipient will. Equally, your privacy settings on your social media tools might mean only your accepted "friends" or "followers" can see the things you say, but there is no guarantee that they will not pass them on outside your trusted circles. Equally, be careful about any personal details you share online - again, assume anything you share about yourself is in the public domain.

Consider carefully when using video facilities during online virtual meetings that your webcam will display to others your environment and background.

Ensure that your computer is kept virus-free by means of proper software protection for your WiFi and equipment and careful perusal of all suspicious, incoming emails. To protect all social media apps with passwords and to log off promptly after use.

Confidentiality

Social media does not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the whole life of the Church. When telling a story about a situation that 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. Equally, be careful when copying others into an email which has gone backwards and forwards a couple of times - there may be confidential information earlier in the correspondence.

Public vs. private

Remember that the distinction between public and private lives is increasingly blurred. If you are 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. 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, take advice, but please remember that you are responsible for your online activities.

Children and young people

Maintain clear boundaries. Remember that 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 includes an element of social media, try to keep all your communications public and only send messages to whole groups, rather than to individuals. Please be aware that sharing photographs of children and young people online can put them at risk of harm. If in doubt, don't.



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Courtesy and respect

Increasingly people use social media to comment live as events unfold. While this can enhance participation in a debate or conference, consider whether it is courteous to those around you to be commenting on the contributions of others. Are you treating the speaker with courtesy and respect? Are you giving the meeting or event your full attention? Might you be distracting those around you? Are you acting with grace?

Consider the timing of your communications. Aim to avoid direct communications with church members late at night or on their day off.

Social media is a tool, not an end in itself

Ask yourself: what am I trying to achieve here? Is this the best tool to use for that end? If you start something, do you have the resources to monitor and manage it? Remember the value of other forms of communication! It can become easy to hide behind an online persona and neglect other relationships - remember that while social media is an exciting forum and presents opportunities the value of face-to-face relationships should never be forgotten.

Review

The PCC's Social Media Policy will be reviewed triennially, or sooner in response to new legislation, policies or guidance, or specific demand and feedback.