**Church of Ireland
Central Communications Board**

Social media & digital communications guidelines

September 2017

Introduction: Social media

Social media offers wide opportunity for groups and individuals to engage creatively and positively with others. It is a key contemporary way in which we can share stories about parish and diocesan life, the Church and the Christian faith as a whole. At the same time, the nature of social media means it is important to think about how to use it well and to manage the risks to which its use can give rise.

These guidelines[1] are intended to help clergy and lay employees, office-bearers and representatives of the Church of Ireland use social media in the most effective and appropriate way and to help prevent its misuse.

- Social media technologies and attitudes to it are constantly changing. Current platforms include Facebook, Flickr, Google+, Instagram, LinkedIn, Periscope, Soundcloud, Twitter, WhatsApp, WordPress and other blogging platforms, YouTube, and there are others. Many more will appear over time.

- Some of the benefits of social media compared to more traditional forms of communication are its speed, high visibility, a conversational and open-ended tone, the tendency to attract public attention and encouragement of interaction. Social media is faster, cheaper and more widely available than printed media, although potential exclusion issues arise when part of a community lacks internet access.

- The speed of social media is both a delight and a danger. As with any communication, things can go wrong and misunderstandings can arise. We hope these guidelines will help you to think through the issues around using social media.

- The aim of the Central Communications Board is to foster healthy and active online and social media engagement. The guidelines should not limit or prevent constructive debate or discussion through social media. People should be free to engage in discussions within and beyond the Church but should also remember their duties and responsibilities to the Church or to any bodies of which they are members when they do so. Members of the Church of Ireland should also be aware of the Church's commitment to upholding its *Dignity in Church Life Charter* (2015).[2]

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[1] The Central Communications Board of the Church of Ireland is grateful to the Scottish Episcopal Church for its assistance in the development of these guidelines.

[2] www.ireland.anglican.org/dignity

- Church of Ireland discipline relies on trust rather than policing. These guidelines, therefore, as far as possible, are based on trust in people's common sense and that they will take responsibility for their actions. Actions that are deliberately damaging or hurtful to the Church, to an individual or group within it, or that bring the Church into disrepute are already potentially disciplinary matters, whether they are carried out online or not.

Guidelines

1. Exercise courtesy and responsibility

Responsibility

Social media posts can travel across the globe within seconds, and misunderstandings can quite easily occur very quickly. You need to exercise good judgment about what you are saying, how and why you are saying it, and to whom it is being said.

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 clergy and lay readers/leaders in Church) say this from the pulpit or in general to members of my congregation either individually or collectively?

- Is what I'm writing reflective of a Christ-like compassion, even if challenge is present?

Courtesy

Social media works well for offering praise, encouragement or support, and it's a good way to convey simple, positive messages.

It is important to read as well as comment when using social media. Exercise courtesy and kindness when responding or posting a comment, especially if it concerns an individual. If this is not possible then consider the wisdom of posting a comment or response.

Constructive criticism and challenging certain views can be worthwhile but these should be done in a way that does not give rise to insult, offence or hurt towards another person.

If you are in any way unsure about an image or film content that you wish to share please seek 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 any doubt – don't.

2. You are the face of the Church

As a clergy person, an office-bearer (volunteer or paid) or an employee of the Church of Ireland, you will be widely regarded as a representative of the Church. It is therefore important that the distinction is made between personal and professional comment/opinion on social media 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. You should make it clear when you are posting personal comment/opinion that it is your own personal comment/opinion and not the views of the Church of Ireland.

However, do bear in mind that not everyone will necessarily separate perceptions of the two so your views can potentially be read as those of 'the Church' albeit unofficially.

3. Once you've posted something, it's posted

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

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

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?' 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.

Canonical provisions and guidelines concerning the conduct of clergy apply to digital and online communication as they do in any other setting. Similar considerations apply to employees and other representatives.

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 and images (video and still images) has 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 it is done so with care and sensitivity.

The Church of Ireland child protection policy Safeguarding Trust is committed to ensuring best practice with regard to the use of social media. Safeguarding Trust's *Guide for Good Practice* manuals for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland provide guidelines for sharing information detailed in Section 7 (which are kept under review).[3]

Along with other Churches and bodies the Church of Ireland also recommends following the good practice detailed in *Guidance for Faith-based Groups on the Use of Social Media and other E-based Communication* published by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland in 2017, which is available in both printed brochure form and at: www.safeguardingni.org

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[3] www.ireland.anglican.org/safeguardingtrust

For further information regarding safeguarding issues, please contact our Safeguarding Officers as follows:

Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9082 8860
Email: cponi@ireland.anglican.org

Republic of Ireland

Tel: 01 4125 661
Email: cpori@ireland.anglican.org

7. If in doubt, ask

If you have questions or concerns about the use of social media you can contact the Church of Ireland Press Office on press@ireland.anglican.org or call +44 (0)28 9082 8880.