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Social media+ guidelines

TN99 Training Notes series: Communication

Social media are hardly new. Your church's teens and younger adults will see them as an essential element of life and spend a large proportion of each day with them. But more recent growth in, for example, Facebook use has been with an older generation so this is an issue that now affects us all.

But, though now mainstream in our culture, the effective use of social media is new for many *churches*, probably because so few today have many younger people in membership.

These notes offer a simple and straightforward approach to best practice in the use of social media and all digital communication (including emails and texting) within a church. Larger churches may already have more detailed policies in place. The purpose of these notes is to help those just putting a toe in the water of social media, and those over-awed by having to prepare a detailed policy for all digital communication.

What are social media?

The term is broad and vague (and plural!*) and these notes widen it still further by including Skype, blogs, emails and mobile phoning. At heart, social media are web-based communication tools to enable people everywhere to interact with each other by sharing and taking in information. They are more conversational and open-ended than conventional means of communication and they happen, for the most part, in public, not private, space.

Most social media platforms will have features such as the following:

- User accounts – so you can log in and take part.
- Profile pages – to give information about you, the user.
- Friends, groups, followers – people who have connected with you.
- News feeds – information from people you choose to connect with.
- Posts – items you write, photograph, record or video and place on the site.
- Comment – the chance to write a response or click a 'Like' button on someone's post.

*Singular or plural? There is a debate about how to treat the phrase. I have taken it as plural here. The plus sign in the title indicates that these notes also cover other means of electronic communication than just strictly 'social media'.

Because these sites are closely associated with email, blogs, mobile phone use and texting these means are also included in what follows, although not strictly 'social media'.

Well-known social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, YouTube. Snapchat, LinkedIn – but there are many others appealing to different markets – Wikipedia lists over 250 of them. Most teenagers will be on several of them and spend hours each day accessing them. Whether that is healthy is another matter.

What follows is a sample set of digital communication guidelines for use in a church. They are provided as a starting point more than something to be copied precisely. They are deliberately cautious in tone – some may prefer a more nuanced approach.

An outline of a possible set of guidelines

1: Scope

1   These guidelines cover all types of social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formally Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, etc. but also extend to the use of mobile phones (including texts), blogs, website forums, Zoom and emails. Note that Skype is closing in 2025.

2   They should be read in the context of the church's Safeguarding and Data Protection policies.

3   These forms of communication offer great opportunities to churches to share the good news of Jesus Christ as well as means of internal communication. Social media should become a normal part of our church's communication system.

4   But there is danger of accusation of inappropriate messages being relayed. It is therefore essential to abide by these guidelines and to maintain full records wherever possible so that details can be subsequently verified.

5   Particular risks include: content that breaches copyright or data protection limits; items that are illegal; language and visuals that are offensive, bullying or sexually inappropriate; posts that are open to misunderstanding; communication that is libelous or defamatory.

2: Responsibility of all church members

It is the responsibility of all church members, but particularly leaders of groups and activities:

1   To use social media well as servants of Jesus Christ, communicating with integrity and accuracy. Each leader is a role model for their church and the Christian faith. Whatever you say on social media (messages and profile) is public and permanent: it could be passed on to thousands and remain in circulation for years.

2   To express all messages in an appropriate tone: friendly, polite, courteous and never rude, abrupt or over-familiar. Beware hasty responses to blogs, tweets, etc.

3   To minimise the risk of personal messages being taken as official church policy, by means of appropriate disclaimers.

4   Not to disclose private or family information and contact details, nor to communicate private information for prayer in a public forum which may then be seen and used by a huge, global constituency.

5   Not to delete records of official church messages so that they cannot be traced later.

6   To be aware of what your webcam may display to others in the background in, for example, Zoom calls.

7   Not to hide your identity behind an alias in any way.

8   To 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.

9   To aim, in general, to avoid phoning church members while they are at work or late at night, and staff on their day off.

3: In addition, when working with young people or adults at risk

1   Never to communicate via social media or mobile phones, with children in Year 6 or below, other than within one's immediate family. What follows is designed for those working with young people in Years 7 to 13 and assumes an official church account will be used.

2   To exercise appropriate discretion but never to promise total confidentiality in any mobile or internet-based communication.

3   Not to contact any young person by means listed here just before or during normal school hours or after 9.00 pm. *[possibly an earlier time for Years 7 to 10]*.

4   To inform young people that no leader is under any obligation to respond to any communication immediately and especially if they are at work, at family events or, for church staff, on their day off.

5   Where possible, to hold conversations with young people face-to-face rather than by email, text or phone. Contact by these means should be related to church work and not used for private conversations or socialising. Where social media are used, screen-shots or copies of conversations should be kept for future reference.

6   To only provide contact details that are within the public domain.

7   To immediately inform the church's Safeguarding Officer should any communication by any means listed here raise safeguarding issues.

8   To understand that this policy is overseen by *[small group]* who are authorised by the Trustees to ensure that all church workers comply with it, and who have authority to monitor the use of whatever electronic media are used for communication within the church. Leaders are asked to agree to such monitoring on their appointment.

9   To ensure that team leaders are kept aware of the types of communication being used by leaders within their team, and to immediately report to the team leader any inappropriate material received.

10   To ensure that leaders word their personal profiles in a responsible way, knowing that these will be accessed by young people and their parents who will see the leaders as role models for the church and the Christian faith.

11   Not to 'like' or comment on inappropriate or offensive items or photographs.

4: Parental permission for young people's work

1   Parents and guardians will first be asked to consent to young people having contact with leaders by means of email, texts and mobile calls according to this policy.

2   They will also be asked to give consent to their child connecting to their group's Facebook page.

3   They will also be asked to give consent to the use of photographs of their child as authorised by the church appearing in church publications, the church website, a Facebook group and displays provided such adhere to the church's policy on the use of children and young people in photographs *[which needs a separate policy]*.

4   They will be informed of the type of electronic communication being used in their child's group, and asked to confirm their agreement on these issues on an annual basis.

5: Use of particular social media with young people

Facebook

1   No leader should, without formal authorisation, be friends with an under-18-year-old with whom they work or for whom they are responsible within their leadership role.

2   There should be no hidden communication through private messaging or use of any leader's personal social media account. Only allow friends to post on your time line. *(Some might see this as too cautious but in this case a proper record needs to be kept for accountability.)*

3   Facebook groups set up with due authorisation by the church must strictly adhere to the church policy for groups which should include the following.

- All groups should be closed, for over 13's only, and set up with a secure profile.
- Each group should be monitored by two church adults who have been authorised by the Trustees. They should have admin rights.
- Photographs of events and people of all ages may be posted but only once authorised by the group's monitors and with privacy settings set so that only group members can see them, unless there is signed agreement otherwise.

X (formerly Twitter) and equivalent

1   No leader should, without formal authorisation, follow an under-18-year-old with whom they work or for whom they are responsible within their leadership role, although young people may follow adults.

2   There should be no hidden communication with young people through direct messaging (DM). *(See note to point 2 under Facebook above.)*

3   Leaders who tweet must be aware that their tweets may be monitored as above.

Other

1   No church adults should connect with young people on Snapchat.

2   No church adults should subscribe to any young person's YouTube channel.

6: Zoom and young people

1   Use of video conferencing sites for one-to-one communication with young people is not permitted. *(Some would see this as too cautious but, if so, there need to be additional guidelines such as only calling from a public place.)*

2   It is permissible to use them for conference calls or group meetings when first authorised or hosted by a team leader or monitor.

3   Wherever possible Zoom and equivalent calls should be made to a family computer in a main living area and not to a private computer in a young person's bedroom.

7: Emails to young people

1   Always ensure a team leader (not your spouse) is copied in to any message to a young person and do not use the bcc line. Do not use email to recruit to the group.

2   Emails sent and received should be via an official church address and kept on file for *[an agreed length of time]* so that they cannot be hidden and can be checked. For leaders with no access to a church address, all emails should be copied to a team leader who does have one.

3   Leaders may hold email addresses of young people in a personal address book but only as long as they remain an authorised leader of a church group or activity.

4   No member of church staff may use private email accounts for any communication with church young people but only church accounts kept on a central server.

8: Texting and mobile use with young people

1   Authorised leaders may communicate with young people by text or phone call within the guidelines given above.

2   Text communication should be kept brief and factual (eg. the date of a meeting) rather than providing comment or holding a discussion.

3   Leaders may hold young people's contact details in their phone's memory but only data already in the public domain. All such details should be immediately deleted once the leader steps down from office or the young person leaves the group.

4   No leader should ever send an inappropriate image of themselves to a young person.

5   The aim should be to save messages in text files to ensure an open record exists.