

Draycot Benefice

Social media guidelines

Within our church community, more and more people are using social media as part of their ministry. We are part of the Diocese of Bristol and the wider Church, which embraces this, acknowledging the value of social media as an important missional tool. We have signed up to the Church of England's Digital Charter (<https://www.churchofengland.org/terms-and-conditions/our-digital-charter>): this helps to make social media and the web more widely positive places for conversations to happen. 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, office holders, paid staff and volunteers, who are already active on social media (or thinking about it!), to fulfil, with confidence, their role as online ambassadors for our local parishes, the wider Church and our Christian faith. We are grateful to the Dioceses of Bath and Wells, and Worcester, for providing the principles on which these guidelines are built.

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

1. 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. You have a responsibility to maintain clear boundaries: communicating directly online with someone, for example with private messaging, is like meeting them in private. 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. Make sure you communicate appropriately with young people and be aware of the risks to them of on line bullying. You are advised to send messages to groups, rather than individuals, or share them publicly. Be on your guard about fake friend requests and phishing scams.

Refer to the Draycot Benefice Safeguarding Policy and Codes of Conduct for further guidance and information.

2. Don't rush in

The immediacy of social media is one of its benefits – we can respond quickly to questions, correct misunderstandings, or 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?
- Could this be 'Fake News'?
- Would I want my mum to read this?
- Would I want God to read this?
- Would I want to see 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.

3. Sharing Photos

There's nothing wrong with sharing photos online, and it's often the best way to show off your church and what you do. You just need to make sure you have permission from anybody who features in the image before sharing, especially parental permission for children (ideally written permission). Be ready to remove an image as quickly as possible if requested. Please be aware that sharing photographs of children and young people can put them at risk of harm. If in doubt, don't.

4. 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.

Even if you delete it later on, it may have been seen and re-published or referred to elsewhere.

5. You're an ambassador

Like it or not, if you are a licensed minister (ordained or lay), an office holder (e.g. a churchwarden or Parochial Church Council member), lead in or are employed by the church others will see you as a representative of the Church. Your comments and opinions will be watched, valued, scrutinised and criticised. Therefore it is important to maintain honesty, courtesy, transparency and respect. Take care with humour and tone, and avoid controversial or sensitive comments. If talking about a church matter, make it clear that these are your personal opinions and not those of the Church of England, the Diocese or your parish.

6. Blurring of public/private life boundaries

In everyday ministry, the distinction between public duties and private life is difficult to draw. It is no different online. There are risks associated with personal opinions being seen as public statements, a minister's private life being invaded and the difficulties of detaching from work. Setting up different accounts for ministry and personal use to help set definite boundaries is something to consider, but this won't work across all social media channels and is difficult to maintain. Use privacy settings wisely.

7. Don't hide

Anonymity and 'hiding' behind aliases when using social media is frowned upon. This is also at odds with what we consider the main reason for using social media networks. How can anyone really connect with an alias? On any social media platform, if you choose a username or profile different to your real name, include brief personal details in the about section.

When the account is a shared one, for example, a Facebook page, ensure people can easily find out who is responsible for the content.

Never forget the value of face to face relationships.

8. 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.

The Code of Conduct for Pastoral Ministry, the Clergy Discipline Measure, and standards and policies stipulated in the diocesan Clergy Handbook also apply.

9. Confidentiality

Use of social media does not change the Church's understanding of confidentiality. Within the life of the Church there are private meetings and conversations, particularly in terms of pastoral work. Breaking confidentiality is as wrong as it would be in any other context. Arguably, it is worse as via social media a broken confidence could spread rapidly and be impossible to retract. Remember: *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).

10. Be mindful of your own security

Be careful about the personal details you share on line – assume that anything you share 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.

For advice and guidance on any aspect of social media, the Bristol diocesan communications team have provided a helpful website: <https://www.bristol.anglican.org/communications-media/>

These guidelines were adopted at a meeting of the Draycot Benefice Council on 2 October 2019.