

The Diocese of Carlisle

Guidance on use of social media for clergy and others



With all new forms of communication come opportunities to share our Good News and have interactive conversations with people we might not otherwise connect with. The Diocese of Carlisle welcomes the enthusiasm of many clergy to use online social media (please see the appendix below if you need explanation of what social media means), but it is necessary to outline a few issues all clergy should bear in mind when communicating online.

Electronic communication, particularly social media, takes us into new territory where we have to think differently and more carefully about what we say – unlike printed matter, it is interactive, conversational and open-ended, and it always happens in a public space. However, it should not change our understanding of confidentiality, responsibility and Christian witness.

1. 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 access what you have written it is highly likely that the law would 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 in the local newspapers, or in front of a meeting or in Church, you certainly shouldn’t say it online.

2. Assume that what you say is permanent

Even if you delete a comment you have made on a website, it could still have already 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, but it could remain permanently online 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.

3. Assume that everything electronic is insecure

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.

4. Be sensitive about confidentiality and the risk of intrusion

Social media does not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the whole life of the Church. When telling a story about a situation which 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 very 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.

Particular care needs to be taken over prayer chains; of course it is good to pray for others but you should assume that information about a person’s illness is confidential unless you have their explicit permission to share it. Sometimes prayer chains are invoked in an emergency – this is not a good time to ask for or get consent for sharing; indeed those directly caught up in the situation are probably very vulnerable. Instead keep the information in the prayer chain very general: “X has been taken ill; please pray for X and for Y (spouse).” God, who hears and answers prayer, does not need us to tell Him the details.

5. Remember that the distinction between public and private lives is blurred

Whether you like it or not, as 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. Be aware that any controversial or sensitive comments you make may attract attention of the media. If in doubt, take advice, but please remember that you are responsible for your online activities.

6. Have clear boundaries when communicating with children and young people

Remember that the law and diocesan policies around safeguarding 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 it is appropriate in your own setting that 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. Maintain a record of messages sent: social media and SMS texting can automatically keep logs; make sure that they are doing so, and don’t delete the logs.

7. Be mindful of your own security

Be careful about the personal details you share online – again, assume anything you share about yourself is in the public domain.

8. Remember the value of other forms of communication!

It can become very easy to hide behind an online persona and neglect other relationships – while social media is an exciting forum which presents many new opportunities, the value of face-to-face relationships should never be forgotten.

If you need advice or guidance on any aspect of social media please contact:

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communications@carlisle-diocese.org.uk

or

Archdeacon Richard Pratt on 01900 66190
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Appendix: Some common social media tools

Blogs: these are online diaries or personal websites where the owner will publish regular posts, and comments are invited.

Twitter: this is the most common micro-blogging site, where users publish short messages (140 characters max), known as “tweets”. Users can choose to follow other users, meaning they receive a stream of all the updates made by the people they are following. Private and public messages can also be sent between users.

Facebook: this is the most popular social networking site worldwide. Users can build networks of friends, find people with similar interests and backgrounds to them, organize events and social gatherings, send messages and joint campaigns. Users can select the levels of privacy they wish to have, but the mechanisms for doing this have received widespread criticism for being complicated and confusing. Other social networking sites include Ning, MySpace and Bebo.

Flickr: this is a photo sharing website. Users upload pictures and can share them with others. You can also search for photos uploaded by other users on a particular theme.

Forums and discussion boards: many websites have discussion boards or forums. These allow users to discuss, debate and ask questions. Many are open to registered users only, but some are fully public.

Youtube: this is a video sharing website. It is free and easy to upload video from a computer or mobile phone. The site has caused controversy over issues of copyright infringement.

*The Communications Officers
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