

Social Media Policy for St John and St Stephen's Church, Reading



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

Objectives

Our church uses social media to enhance communication within our church community and to advertise our activities to the wider parish and beyond.

Facebook Page: to provide information about recent activities and forthcoming events to the wider community and to congregation members.

Private Facebook Group: to enable congregation members to request prayer or other help, and to share information about external events that are likely to be of interest to other congregation members. To stream online services.

Twitter: to provide information about recent activities and forthcoming events to the wider community and to congregation members.

Instagram: to provide information about recent events and forthcoming activities to the wider community and to congregation members.

WhatsApp: small WhatsApp groups exist for groups including youth church, Fireside, and Café Communion regulars to plan their meetings.

YouTube: to share online services.

Operation

Admins

The Facebook Page, Twitter and Instagram are operated by the incumbent and the church administrator.

The Facebook Group admins are the incumbent and church administrator, and about four congregation members (currently Chris Jupp, Hamish Bruce, Val Thorne, Simon French and Simon Batchelor)

WhatsApp Groups are operated by church regulars as appropriate.

The YouTube channel is operated by the sound desk lead (Simon French)

Responding to comments

The administrators will:

- Take time to consider comments before responding;
- Seek to respond positively to comments if a response is required;
- Exercise caution regarding unexpected or poorly worded comments or messages;
- Respond to negative comments with a direct message to the author (i.e. to seek to 'take the conversation offline' and avoid an open dispute);
- Consider, with the advice of the incumbent and/or PCC, a public response on the social media platform if this is needed to maintain or protect the reputation of the church, or to address a topic or theme with multiple comments;

- Respond promptly if people request that their information should be edited or removed from the platform.

Social media will be monitored by the incumbent and church administrator on a weekly basis or more often

Guidelines

All use of social media will follow the Diocese of Oxford's guidelines:

1. Legal considerations

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

2. Honesty and transparency

Truth matters – don't repeat unsubstantiated claims without finding out if they are true. Repeating an untruth does not make it true, and you are opening yourself up to the charge of libel and/or slander. When discussing topics relevant to the Church of England or the Diocese of Oxford, 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.

3. 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 trying 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, ask yourself:

- Would I be happy for my mum to read this?
- Would I be happy for God to read this?
- Would I be happy for my worst enemy to read this?
- Would I be happy with this appearing on the front page of a national newspaper?

4. Permanence

Assume what you say is permanent. Even if you delete an online comment, it could already have been seen by other people or republished on other sites. It's 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. Always think carefully and never make personal comments about someone that you wouldn't also say in public or to them in person.

5. 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. Your privacy settings on social media might mean only your "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.

6. Confidentiality

Social media does not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the whole life of the Church. When telling a story that involves someone else, always ask yourself, "Is this my story to tell?" Would it cause distress, inconvenience, or embarrassment to others if they found out you had shared? If in any doubt, do not share it. Similarly, 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.

7. 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 as being representative of the Church – even if you feel you are speaking in a personal capacity. A good name is easily lost, and the reputational damage caused may be widespread. Be aware that controversial or sensitive comments may attract attention of the media. If in doubt, take advice, but please remember that you are responsible for your online activities.

8. Children and young people

Maintain clear boundaries. Remember that the law and [diocesan 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, keep your communications public and send messages to whole groups, rather than individuals. Sharing photographs of children and young people online can put them at risk of harm. If in doubt, don't.

9. Courtesy and respect

Increasingly people use Twitter and other 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?

10. 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.

For Review June 2025