Social media and mobile communications

Social media usage is widespread, particularly among younger adults and children: for many young people, the distinction between the 'online' and 'offline' worlds is an artificial one. As some have pointed out, if the Church doesn't engage with young people on social media, then the Church will be missing a major aspect of their lives.

Don't be too restrictive!

The evidence suggests that taking a highly restrictive approach when talking to young people about using social media is unhelpful, as they will usually find a way to use it anyway and may end up taking more risks because their usage is already 'illicit'.

The evidence also indicates that the majority of young people are capable of identifying risks in the online world and avoiding them. It's important to avoid treating the world of social media as 'scary' and of seeing dangers everywhere; for many young people, their social media use is a positive and enjoyable aspect of their social lives.

"We have a WhatsApp chat with parents for our Sunday Church Youth. We have asked the young people, through their parents, if they would like to be part of the Sunday session WhatsApp group. Some who have been younger than 16 have either shared their sibling's phone during the session to access instructions or song playlists together (with parental permission), or they have connected with the session with their parents, through their parent's phone."

Louise McGoldrick, youth worker

Best practice

However, sensible precautions should be taken in the use of social media within a Church context. In many ways, these precautions are simply online versions of safe practice in the offline world.

Avoid 'lone working' in the online world

Practically, this means avoiding one-to-one online chat (e.g. direct messaging) between adults and young people.

Your social media accounts should have two or three admins who can log in and check messages anytime. **On Facebook,** a page or group can have multiple administrators or moderators.

Learn how to give others administration roles on Facebook:

- Facebook page roles

- Group moderators

On Instagram, the login name and password should be shared with at least one other trusted person. It's advisable that one of these is a vicar or senior member of the church leadership.

Maintain appropriate boundaries in the online world

Just as in the offline world, it's important to keep a distinction between our private lives and our work within the church and to pay particular attention to the dynamics of power and influence.

Do not use personal social media accounts to contact children

The simplest way to observe these precautions is to avoid having leaders and young people as 'friends' on social media. Instead, best practise would be to create an official account for the group (such as 'St Andrew's Anywhere Youth Group') and to ask young people to Like or Follow that page or profile. Any news about group events or anything else can be posted on that page. More than one leader should have access to this page, providing accountability and transparency. Conversations between leaders and young people should happen in the public section of these pages (such in comments under posts) where everyone can see them, rather than via direct messages.

- How to create an Instagram profile

- How to set up a Facebook page

- How to create a Facebook group

Behave in the online world as you would offline

Simply put, if you would not say it offline, do not say it online! This includes posting links to offensive or otherwise inappropriate content, making comments about someone's appearance that could be interpreted as either sexual or offensive, or Liking inappropriate content on social media.

"Keeping a shared activity log is a good way to track online engagement among leaders. I also recommend churches consider writing a specific social media policy, with guidelines for each platform, as they're all different they all have their own unique safeguarding challenges to be thought through carefully."

Christian Cole, Youth Missioner for the Diocese of St Albans

Treat online 'consent' the same as offline 'consent'

You will need the consent of the individual and/or their parents to use and store photographs, to retain any information relating to them online, and so on. It's a good idea to make their parents aware of the social media that your church uses and ensure that you have their consent to their child's usage (depending on the age of the child – older young people may be able to consent in their own right).

Read more about sharing and storing images, here.

Other Resources

The world of social media changes rapidly; by the time this blog is written, it can be out-of-date! In this blog, we are provided some general pointers, but it's highly recommended that you familiarise yourself with the following online resources which provide more detailed advice, which is regularly updated:

- Thinkuknow
- Parentzone
- Parents Protect - Internet Safety
- ChildNet International
- A Shared Responsibility: Building Children's Online Resilience by Virgin Media and The Parent Zone.

This blog has been taken from Safer Environments and Activities, Section 4.

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