

Guidance for volunteers and other workers with children and young people on the use of Social Media

Use of social media by volunteers and paid workers

Introduction

This guidance is for everyone who works, on behalf of the Church, with children and young people, whether as a paid worker or as a volunteer. Throughout this guidance, such workers are generally referred to as “volunteers” as the majority are in fact volunteers, but the guidance is equally applicable to paid workers. Also, for the purposes of this guidance note, references to children and young people are to everyone under the age of 18.

The use of various social media websites and applications has become an essential part of everyday life for many young people and churches. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, What’s App and Snapchat are widely available and accessible to young people through their mobile electronic devices including smartphones and tablets. As such, social media has substantially changed the way organisations, communities, and individuals communicate with each other. Whilst it can be both an essential and valuable communication tool for those providing services for people in the Church, it also presents significant challenges if the user is to avoid what can be quite significant pitfalls in practice. As the purpose and use of these applications are continually evolving and expanding, often without adequate checks or controls, various difficulties and challenges can arise.

How does being a volunteer children’s worker or youth worker affect how I use social media?

The use of social media is open to different interpretations and perceptions of what is appropriate and what is not. It can involve the transmission of words, sounds, moving and still images, all of which have the potential to be harmful in a safeguarding sense, hence the importance about making joint decisions and seeking advice from your group leader or Safeguarding Coordinator.

For those working with children and young people in congregations, most of the challenges surrounding social media revolve around maintaining responsible boundaries between the volunteer leaders and the children/young people they come into contact with. By working with children/young people, whether teaching or assisting in Sunday schools, youth groups, holiday and other clubs etc., you are making a commitment to being a Christian witness and teacher to them. Your role involves (amongst other things):

- the safety, security and welfare of the children/young people in your care;
- sharing the Gospel message with them;
- teaching them about Christ;
- advising them on spiritual matters; and
- instructing and guiding them in their Christian walk.

As such, you are in a position of trust with these young people. Your role is one of ‘Regulated Work with Children’. Becoming a member of the PVG Scheme is one part of ensuring that those who engage

in this work are suitable for it. As a Christian organisation, it is important that in addition to having our volunteers and paid workers join the PVG Scheme, we also provide safe and suitable environments and boundaries to ensure all our volunteers and paid workers comply with the legislative requirements. However, most of all we must apply Biblical wisdom to our conduct, and the way we interact with young people. It is important to bear in mind that some of the challenges volunteers may face relates to how the conduct of leaders towards children/young people might be perceived by others as potentially harmful or inappropriate.

The perceptions of an individual or an organisation are governed by beliefs, values, attitudes, life and professional experience etc. Consequently, what may look or sound OK to one person may be misunderstood or misconstrued by another and might well be considered harmful and inappropriate. This is especially true when it comes to communication and interaction on social media. The following guidance is written from a safeguarding perspective and seeks to identify good practice with a view to preventing harm or abuse to children/young people and minimising the likelihood of it happening. It identifies several underpinning principles, and these have been used to generate a set of questions that volunteers and paid workers should ask themselves.

So what CAN and CAN'T I do??

It is impossible to produce a complete list of “dos and don'ts” to cover every situation and circumstance that arises out of using social media. Whilst there are express boundaries and clear warnings relating to some conduct, there will also be situations that will require common sense and the application of general safeguarding principles. Below are provided 3 areas of guidance to help you:

- 1. Principles of Good Practice** – these will provide a framework for you to use and apply to every scenario, along with common sense.
- 2. Safeguarding Checklist Questions** – these will provide you with a list of specific safeguarding considerations you should look at carefully when using social media.
- 3. Specific Boundaries** – these will provide clear direction on issues and areas which you must follow.

1. Principles of Good Practice

It is helpful to consider our Christian witness when volunteering with the Church and apply principles of our faith and walk with Christ as good practice to follow:

- Integrity – as Christians we are called to live Christ-like holy lives. We should not distinguish between following Christ privately and publicly.¹ Therefore whatever words, images and videos we share with others online, whether privately or publicly, should be consistent with our faith and Biblical teaching.²
- Transparency - we should be transparent with all our social media accounts and profiles, remembering that as Christians we have just as much responsibility for our actions to the world over the internet as we do for our actions in person.
- Privacy - we should be aware of our privacy settings and what information is available to our friends and family, but also to the public in general (including children, young people, parents, and other leaders) who may search for your profile. This is not to be mistaken as contradicting the previous points. Instead, it is an important aspect of controlling what information about

¹ “Whoever says he abides in Christ ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” – 1 John 2:4-6

² Read Ephesians 5:1-21 which is particularly applicable in this context.

you, and especially about your work with children, is accessible and available to the general public.

- Sensitivity and Confidentiality - 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.

2. Checklist before using Social Media

The checklist below is designed to be point of reference before any type of social media is used, or to review its ongoing use. This checklist should be considered as a generic safeguard for using mobile phones, Facebook and other social networking sites, mobile phone text messaging, the taking of digital photographs or recording videos etc. It should be a tool for leaders to help ensure they are keeping themselves and those they are working with safe.

Questions

1. WHAT information do you want to capture, store, transmit, communicate or use?
2. WHY did you choose this particular type of media?
3. WHAT is the purpose of using this social media?
4. WHAT privacy settings and controls have you set for the media? (Specifically - Is the information you are about to share personal/confidential? Can the person be identified (by words or images)? If yes, get permission).
5. WHO is the target audience? (a defined group of people or everyone?)
6. WHO can see the information posted – anyone or have safeguards or tools been used to set limits e.g. closed Facebook group rather than public Facebook page?
7. WHO is identified (images/words/sounds) in the communication?
8. WHOSE consent is required? (Parental consent applies to anyone under the age of 18)
9. HOW will you get their consent? (consent form?)
10. HOW might others interpret the information? Can the information you want to share be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted. If in doubt check with your group leader or Safeguarding Coordinator and get a second opinion. Re-read before sending/ posting.

3. Specific Boundaries

When using social media in the context of your work with children/young people, there are specific rules and responsibilities which must be followed so as to protect both yourself as a leader and the children/young people themselves.

Whilst following the above Principles of Good Practice and Checklist would be ordinarily be sufficient, unfortunately further restrictions now specifically have to be put in place. Sadly, some of these

restrictions, which may appear excessive, have actually arisen as a result of previous abuses perpetrated by volunteers in other organisations. As such, it is important that we recognise the need to safeguard ourselves from potential pitfalls. Therefore, specific boundaries have been created in respect of certain types and areas of social media that could cause difficulties for leaders:

- **Communication with children/young people** – there should be no electronic communication between leaders and children/young people in their care. Whilst an emergency contact number of one leader may be provided if there are any outings or day trips planned for the group, it should only be used for that purpose. Your overall group leader should take responsibility for providing an emergency contact number so there should be no need to give any child/young person your own personal number
- **Facebook Groups** – if you decide to use Facebook to keep in touch, the best option is to create a closed Facebook group for your group and co-ordinate with your group leader and Safeguarding Coordinator on how to maintain and moderate this. The privacy controls should be set up so that only children/young people and leaders have access to any videos and photographs. There should also be an option in place for allowing/inviting parents who may wish to join the group to see their child's activities.
- **Friend Requests** - you should not accept friend requests from any child/young person under the age of 18, unless you have checked with their parent or guardian. You should not send any friend request to any child/young person under the age of 18, unless you have checked first with their parent or guardian.
- Any communication with children/young people under 18, other than during your group activity should only be done with the consent of parents.
- **Private Messaging** – there is the possibility that a child/young person may send personal private messages to you without being accepted as a 'friend' and you cannot prevent this from happening. Whilst some children/young people may be contacting you for spiritual guidance or advice, others may be contacting you to confide in you about something they heard at a church activity, or in response to another situation. It is not possible to produce a definitive list to cover every eventuality, and therefore it is vital you remember that your responsibility as a leader continues after church activities are over, and as such you should advise and seek guidance from your group leader or Safeguarding Coordinator. Applying the Principles of Good Practice is essential here as transparency is especially important in this area and so all private messaging conversations should be stored and not deleted.
- **Personal Information** - you should not have the personal mobile number, email address or any social media username of a child/young person. Whilst contact numbers may be required in the event of an emergency for any planned outings away from church premises, this should be done under the instruction of the group leader only and any numbers stored should be deleted at the end of the activity.
- **Snapchat/Photo sharing Apps** - you should not add, or accept invites to join, any photo sharing applications with children/young people. Applications such as Snapchat are open to abuse by users and specifically do not store records of what has (or has not) been shared. This could cause difficulties should any allegation be made regarding the use or abuse of this application.
- **Consent** - get permission from all involved (parents/guardians/representatives) if words or images are to be transmitted and made public or shared with a selected group of people

There may be certain exceptions to the advice contained in this guidance. If you have unanswered questions (or if in doubt) seek advice from your group leader and/or Safeguarding Coordinator.

Most importantly, keep a written record of any decisions made by you and your group leader/Safeguarding Coordinator about your use of social media where there may be room for misunderstandings or misinterpretation. Keep an audit trail of all communications (if any) you have with children/young people, e.g. do not delete records of phone and email communication.

Use of social media and mobile phones by children and young people

It is now highly likely that all children/young people (with the exception of the very young) will own a mobile phone or other electronic tablet/device which they may have with them at some church activities, and that device will be linked to various social media platforms. To monitor the use of these devices would be an impossible task for any leadership team. Therefore, the group leader should have the responsibility of deciding what restrictions (if any) are in place for the children, young people and volunteers in their group. This will be dependent on the age group and type of activity, where limitations will be required to differing degrees.

1. Mobile Phones

Access and use of mobile phones should be carefully regulated at church events/activities. For example, some children/young people would use their devices for playing games or using other applications during the event/activity. A central part of many church activities is interaction between the young people themselves, and also with the leaders. There are some young people who, if given the choice, would opt solely for communication by messaging apps instead of talking – even if you were in the same room! Therefore, it is especially important that children and young people are encouraged to fully immerse themselves in the activities in question, without the use of their mobile phones. Leaders should lead by example in this area also! The use of mobile phones should not feature and instead should be discouraged. Below are some points for you to consider in managing the use of mobile phones at church activities, where this is an issue:

- **Security** – some mobile phones, especially the latest smartphones, are worth hundreds of pounds. If phones require to be stored by leaders, then this should be done securely.
- **Leaders' use** – leaders are reminded to set an example when it comes to interacting with children/young people.
- **Bible Apps** – careful consideration should be taken if mobile phones are permitted to be used as Bibles. This could be open to abuse by some young people, who may use them to distract themselves or disrupt others. On the other hand, we would not wish to discourage young people from reading the Bible on their phones completely, therefore the practicalities in each individual situation will require to be worked out by the leaders. Examples of current practice include: having a Bible reading together and then asking everyone to switch off their phones and put them away; or (where available) using a projector screen to display the readings; or asking young people to use or share hard copy Bibles.

2. Social Media including photo/video sharing

The general restrictions that apply to mobile phone use above also apply to social media use, whether on mobile phones or other electronic tablets/devices.

- **Taking photos/videos** – the church should be considered a safe area, which means both children/young people and volunteers can expect a level of privacy. Any photography or filming should only take place with prior written parental consent, and should only be carried

out by volunteers who have been specifically authorised to do so by the group leader. Children and young people should not be allowed to take photos/videos of leaders and other children/young people without their consent. If children/young people have been allowed to take their phones for specific use in activities, e.g. day trips/outings, then the restrictions can be relaxed for those purposes

- **Posting photos/videos online** - There have been instances of photos/videos being taken of children/young people and volunteers (who were unaware) and that media then posted online without any consent. As above, when in church premises and engaged anywhere in church activities, the privacy of children'/young people and volunteers must be respected. The group leader should decide if any activities can be photographed or filmed by volunteers and then arrange the appropriate means by which that can be shared with the children/young people.
- **Cyberbullying** – Some applications such as 'What's App' provide the opportunity to create groups and it has been known for some young people to create group chats but exclude one or two members of the group. The purpose of this can be to talk about that person, gossip or bully that individual. As above, careful consideration should be taken, and volunteers should be vigilant if it appears any devices are being used by children/young people for malicious purposes.

Conclusion:

As has been alluded to throughout this guidance, volunteer leaders play a significant role in setting an example on how they interact with each other through using (and not using!) electronic devices and social media. The interactions between volunteers with each other, and also their interaction with children and young people directly will be a means by which your Christian witness is observed by all. Please be aware of how your use of mobile phones, photography, video recording and all aspects of social media use can be observed by children/young people and other volunteers and the possible impact that can have on them. Finally, in relation to the use of any type of social media: **if in doubt, don't use it.**