

## **Policy and Guidelines for the use of Social Media**

### **1. Introduction**

The aim of these guidelines is to give practical guidance to employees, volunteers and all other parish users as to the appropriate use of social media applications.

The goal is to make the best possible use of these tools of communication, whilst at the same time ensuring that the reputation of parishes, parish organisations and individuals is not adversely affected and that there is appropriate protection for children, young people and vulnerable groups against disadvantageous, unfair or damaging use of social media.

### **2. Glossary and Definitions**

For the purposes of these guidelines, the term 'social media' includes on-line interactive methods of communication that allow parties to communicate instantly with each other in a public forum. Such media are characteristically conversational, publicly visible and open-ended in nature.

Examples of media include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Weblogs with comments allowed and other web-based formats. Social media which allow the uploading of pictures and videos with or without comment include YouTube, Flickr Instagram and Snapchat are also included in these guidelines.

There are other types of on-line communication which do **not** come within these guidelines, but which may usefully be adopted by parishes as communication methods, such as Webpages with 'Forums' that have password protection; Weblogs or Websites that have a 'Members Only' section (again password protected), web interactive communications ('Intranets which again are password protected and/or have a moderator of comments) and email distribution lists and email groups. In these cases, communication is protected in some way, by password, by being an internal, semi-private means of communication or where permissions have been given.

### **3. Opportunities for Better Communication**

It is now recognised that the use of social media apps is an important and widely used opportunity to communicate the mission of the Church in the 21st century. It is used with great effect on a universal, national, diocesan and parish level. For example, Pope Francis has a Twitter account @Pontifex which has over 10 million followers; the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has a Facebook page with useful information including a 'sign-up' for Newsletters, posts and reviews. The Diocese of Westminster has a Facebook page which contains details of events and links to live Question and Answer sessions with Cardinal Nichols. 'Nightfever' outreach group which is a Mission to the people of Sheffield has a Facebook page as has the Journey in Faith group at St. Marie's. There are many other examples of the constructive use of social media as a very useful means of communication.

The Communications Group in the Diocese of Hallam is interested in developing these methods of communication and may help in setting up and training in the use of such media.

### **4. Expectations and Responsibilities**

- i. The nature of social media is that it is an immediate, largely unregulated and public method of communication and, as such, it could lead to spontaneous, ill-considered and even harmful comments and this is partly because the **distinction between the private and the public realm of comment is blurred.**
- ii. The watchwords in the use of such media should be to use with care to protect privacy, 'common sense' and constant awareness that communications are public and difficult to retract.
- iii. The use of media allows all members of the public potentially to see details of those communicating views and ideas, so it is important to be careful in releasing personal details. **Email addresses and telephone numbers should not be disclosed** and it is important to make use of the privacy settings permitted by such media-hosting agents to guard against intrusion and harassment. It is easy for social media to become a

means to bully and intrude on people's privacy. This is especially the case in where messaging in Facebook, Instagram etc. can happen at any time of day and can be read by a wide audience.

- iv. Those thinking of **making unjustified comments** in social media should be aware of and guard against the **reputational harm** such comments can have if they tend to bring a parish, a parish group or an individual into disrepute.

It can be the case that those making comments and engaging in cyberbullying try to remain anonymous which makes such activities even more distressing for the recipient. There are a number of offences which may be committed by those making bullying comments which hurt and can harm reputations: they include harassing or threatening behaviour; malicious communications other criminal actions.

- v. The **law relating to libel** applies as much to social media comments as to other public comment. It has been applied in several serious defamation cases relating to Twitter statements and also to comments on Facebook comments.
- vi. Statements or comments which could cause **harm to children** or put them at risk of harm are subject to disclosure under the Safeguarding of Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 and may also result in prosecution. The person posting such material would have their identity disclosed in any subsequent DBS enquiry.
- vii. The **abuse of social media by employees** to make disrespectful or derogatory comments on fellow employees, to disclose confidential matters, or to post offensive material that is sexually explicit, or to make offensive comments based on race, sex, disability, age or religion is a disciplinary matter which will be dealt with according to the Diocesan Disciplinary Procedures. Action may be taken regardless of whether the breach of these guidelines took place outside working hours and whether equipment used was that provided by the employers.
- viii. The **safe use of social media accounts** is a matter which requires common sense and discretion. Employees may wish to restrict their visibility on social media in order to protect their privacy and their status (being aware that subsequent employers may carry out a social media check against them).

- ix. It is important that on Facebook and other sites that may particularly be used by young people, personal information (addresses, phone numbers, email addresses etc.) should not be disclosed. Social media communications should not be used to send personal messages to children and young people.
  
- x. If a person feels that they are the subject of cyberbullying, then they should report this to the group or person responsible for the social media ( for example, those setting up the Facebook or Twitter account); in order to prevent the bullying from escalating, it is important not to retaliate but to let others know of the misuse of media in this way. We appreciate that this may be sometimes be difficult to do directly, so the matter should be taken up with the parish priest or with the Communications Group of the Diocese who will take appropriate action.