

# The Presbytery of Lanark

## Guidelines on the use of Social Media

*The following guidance relates to ministers, deacons and parish workers on the use of Social Media. It may also prove helpful for other members of Presbytery.*

With all new forms of communication come opportunities to share our Good News and have interactive conversations with people with whom we might not otherwise connect. The Presbytery of Edinburgh welcomes the enthusiasm of many ministers and deacons 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 office holders 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, in front of a meeting or in the parish magazine, 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. **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. 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.
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 Church of Scotland 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.
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 – remember that while social media is an exciting forum which presents many new opportunities, the value of face-to-face relationships should never be forgotten.

### 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 Presbytery of Lanark is indebted to the Presbytery of Edinburgh and the Diocese of Carlisle for permission to reproduce their guidelines.*

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