

Parish of Holy Trinity and Christ Church, Richmond

Policy **Communicating safely online and through social media with children and young people and with adults who may be vulnerable**

Document agreed by PCC, in July 2020

Document prepared by Liz Morris

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Introduction We want our church to be a safe and secure environment for everyone, especially children and vulnerable adults.

Electronic communication and online activities of all sorts have become an integral part of everyday life, particularly for children and young people. For many they are their preferred way of communicating, which they see as an extension of physical face-to-face relationships.

Communicating online can be beneficial both for those involved in leading and organising church groups and activities and for those with whom they are communicating, so it is important that churches engage with their community and worshippers through such platforms. However, all such communication between adults and children/young people/vulnerable adults must take place within clear and explicit boundaries and should follow the guidance in this document. Adults should ensure that all communications are transparent and open to scrutiny.

Who the policy is for

- Leaders of groups and activities that include children and vulnerable adults
- Staff Team members
- Church members who need to communicate to others who they serve alongside through a wide range of groups and activities
- Church members in general.

Leaders of groups and activities and Staff Team members will be briefed on the policy and will, in turn, be expected to make their team members aware of it.

Aims of the policy The aims of this policy are

- To ensure that communication with adults who may be vulnerable, but especially with children and young people, is safe both online and through social media
- To play a part, alongside other policies, in promoting a safe and nurturing environment, especially for children and vulnerable adults.

This document provides specific guidance designed to help in fulfilling the aims of the policy. Given the seriousness of the matters the policy is designed to address, it is important that the guidance is adhered to.

The document draws significantly on material from *A Safe Church*, a manual containing the Diocese of Southwark's policies, procedures and guidelines for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, and responding to domestic abuse.

Practical guidance

- Do not regard online communication as the default form of communication with young people and vulnerable adults. Always consider first whether face-to-face communication would be preferable
- Make sure you adhere to any minimum age restrictions that apply to the use of particular applications (for example, 13 for Facebook, Instagram, Skype and Snapchat, 16 for WhatsApp)
- Maintain good and open relationships with parents and carers regarding communication with them and their children
- If young people want you to have their mobile phone numbers, e-mail addresses or similar, make sure that their parents know and have agreed in writing
- Only give personal contact details to young people that are within the public domain of the church, including your mobile telephone number
- Where you are issued with, or have access to, a church-owned mobile device to help you fulfil your role, it should be used for this purpose only. The only permitted personal use is for making contact in the event of an emergency

- Only communicate at reasonable times of the day and never late at night
- Where possible communicate with a group, not just an individual
- Where possible another adult should be copied into all communication with young people or adults who may be vulnerable. This should be an overt copy rather than a blind copy
- Only contact young people for reasons related to the work of the church and never just to engage in conversation
- Establish a dedicated group with at least two authorised adult users
- Use the highest appropriate level of security setting and restrict membership to the intended group
- Set personal profiles on any social networking sites to the highest form of security to avoid access to personal information
- Do not use a personal account to communicate
- Do not 'friend' or 'follow' children or young people on social media, or allow them to friend or follow you
- Where young people are on a rota ensure that individual contact details are not shared
- Communicate clearly, do not abbreviate or short-cut communications, never use inappropriate language, and avoid the use of emojis or other symbols
- Use an appropriate tone - friendly, but not over-familiar or personal
- Be aware that boundaries of relationships can become blurred on social media
- Be warm and friendly, but do not suggest or offer a special relationship
- Be careful how you sign off. Consider, for instance, how 'love' and 'XXX' might be perceived and misinterpreted by the young person, and never sign off in this way. Use the name you would expect them to call you in person
- Do not share any personal information with a young person, or request or respond to any personal information from the young person, other than that which might be appropriate as part of your role
- Be circumspect in your communications with young people to avoid any possible misinterpretation of your motives or any behaviour which could be construed as grooming
- Do not engage in any form of sexting (the sharing of sexual, naked or semi-naked images or videos of oneself or others, or the sending of sexually explicit messages); Section 67 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 inserts a new section into the Sexual Offences Act 2003 which now makes this a criminal act
- If a young person misinterprets your communication and tries to engage you in conversation, you must end the conversation or stop replying. Suggest discussing the subject further at the next activity which should be in the presence of another adult and, if concerned about the young person's communication, discuss the matter with the PSO
- Make sure that communication would not cause embarrassment if it were seen by the young person's parents or church officials
- Recognise that text messaging is rarely an appropriate response to a young person in a crisis situation or at risk of harm
- When posting to Social Media always: be aware of and comply with copyright laws; be aware of and comply with terms of use; ensure that all content posted is compliant with law, does not encourage or condone unlawful activity, is age appropriate and is consistent with Church of England values

A handy quick reference guide of [Dos and Don'ts for using social media whilst working with children and young people](#) is available elsewhere in the Parish Safeguarding Handbook

Record keeping

- Store e-mail, texts and other messages for as long as possible. If a message contains anything which causes concern, print it out and/or retain on file/hard drive
- Have an agreed supervisor of any group accounts, who young people are aware of, and document this

Important contacts

Parish Safeguarding Officer (PSO) - Anke Marais
anke.marais@htrichmond.org.uk (020 8404 1112)

Parish Safeguarding Officer (PSO) - Graham Bamping
graham.bamping@htrichmond.org.uk (020 8404 1112)

Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser (DSA)
 020 7939 9423 (office hours)
 07982 279713 (out of hours)
 Police 999

Local Authority Single Point of Access (SPA) Team
020 8547 5008 (0800-1715 Monday to Thursday, 0800-1700 Friday)
020 8770 5000 (out of hours)

For further information See Sections 4-28 to 4-35 of the Diocese of Southwark's *A Safe Church*