

Social Media Policy

Marshside Road Church

Introduction

Social networking through the use of Internet based and other electronic social media tools is integrated into everyday life. Use of Facebook, LinkedIn, Blogging, Micro blogging (twitter, Tumblr), Pinterest (pinning an image to a virtual board) and other social media vehicles are common place.

The lines between work, social life and what happens in church, can become blurred. Generally what people do in their own time is a personal decision. However actions that are deliberately damaging or hurtful to the Church, or to an individual or group within it, or that bring the Church into disrepute are already potentially disciplinary matters, whether they are carried out online or not.

Matter of Trust

Methodist discipline relies on trust, these guidelines therefore as far as possible trust in people's common sense.

- Social media do not change our understanding of confidentiality or what is or is not acceptable to say. The Church expects all involved to respect confidences when they are included in them. Similarly, something that would be unacceptable to print in a newsletter or the letters pages of the Recorder – for example – would be unacceptable to publish online.
- Increasingly, people with an existing personal online presence are assuming paid or voluntary roles within the Church. The Church cannot expect that all of this is consistent with what we would want to say on any given topic. How people reconcile their past online writings with their role in the Church is for them and their line manager or other person to whom they are accountable in the first instance.
- These guidelines should not limit or prevent constructive debate or discussion through social media. People should be free to engage in discussions and debates within and beyond the Church on any topic, but should also remember their responsibilities to the Church or to any bodies they are members of when they do so. There is a wide range of opinion within the Church on some topics, and one of the attractive features about Methodism is our ability to disagree constructively.
- There is a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour online, and this line will move with time. One of the benefits of a healthy online community is that it is this community that provides the best guidance to others and to itself. **The aim of the Church should therefore be to foster healthy and active online and social media.**

The core summary of being responsible, respectful and good representatives of the Church remains.

Share information Carefully

- It has been possible for anyone with a mobile phone to exchange messages from within a meeting with someone outside for over a decade, and we have no way of knowing how much of that has gone on. The difference with today's technology is that one person can now share their thoughts with many.

- When a meeting is held, participants are free to use the information received after the end of the meeting, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), may be revealed.”
- Members of governance bodies should not record and share any photographs, video or audio of other members of the body or guests without their permission, and even with permission nothing until after the end of the meeting.
- Members of all governance bodies should remember that speakers may take positions or raise points during debates that are very different from existing Methodist positions or the final position agreed by the body. To share these beyond the room, even without attribution, without the context of the wider discussion or debate runs a real risk of them being misinterpreted, or of being mistaken as “official” when they are not.
- The minister and others may follow the online activities of others even if they do not contribute themselves. In doing so they might come across erroneous claims that ought to be corrected or in appropriate personal information. In these cases, a judgement is required as to what to do with the information. Information that could be useful or should be corrected should be referred to the member of the Team with responsibility for that area or work.
- Respect the law, including those laws governing defamation, discrimination, harassment, and copy right
- it would be wrong for anyone with reason to suspect improper behaviour by a member of the Team to raise it via social media in the first instance. To make a complaint or allegation of that sort of serious wrong doing against a member of the Team without allowing the Church to first hold a proper investigation is unfair to the individuals involved and to the Church’s processes.

Benefits to the Methodist Church

The rise of social media has considerable potential benefits to the Church.

- It can allow us to: spread our messages through our own social media sites; enable a sense of connectedness across the Connexion; and encourage collaborative working amongst people in different parts of the Connexion or even the world. It also enables us to listen to and participate in online “conversations” that might provide a stronger sense of what really matters to the Church or to groups within it.
- Social media are also increasingly the way that young people choose to communicate, or even expect to communicate. For all groups, when well used, social media and other electronic communications can act as levellers – all can participate more equally, regardless of their position in society or the church, their geographical location or any disabilities. It can be a lifeline!

Risks to the Methodist Church

There are also multiple risks and the major ones include:

- a. A member of staff, other employee or someone clearly linked to the Church (e.g. a minister) posts something online that is illegal, defamatory, offensive or otherwise damaging to the Church, its reputation or relationships within it or with partners

- b. Confidential information is disclosed, accidentally or deliberately
- c. An individual within the Church posts comments about colleagues, managers or others that are serious enough to warrant investigation or possible disciplinary action.
- d. Decisions made by governance bodies are undermined or disrespected through continued argument online
- e. The speed of electronic communications, including social media, makes it easy to say something that is later regretted, but which has become permanently online for all to see.

Pastoral issues

Comments made online by staff or others could be signs of deeper occupational health issues. An unhappy employee, or volunteer might first show their frustration or sadness in an online comment, and this raises questions about how to respond.

Private space versus public arena

The use of social media significantly blurs the boundary between what is public and private. Especially for the younger generation this boundary may be porous or even non-existent.

Conversations or complaints about work, policy decisions or anything that previously were restricted to the dinner table or the pub are now played out online, often making them permanently available for all to see .

(depending on the privacy levels set by the user). There have already been cases of people being sacked for complaining about their boss on Facebook that the boss was easily able to read.

The blurring of the boundary between public and private is probably a bigger concern to older generations than younger, and is not necessarily a bad thing. But when one group struggles to understand why private information is being shared online, whilst other regards it as normal, this will repeatedly create problems. And it these are magnified by the speed and permanence of social media.

There is also a problem about people's online comments or actions before they join the Church as staff or office holders. How do we approach this online history in the recruitment or candidating process?

Respecting confidentiality is challenging in this area. Social media do not change the Church's understanding of confidentiality, but do make it necessary to reiterate. The blurring between public and private arises here as well. Someone might make a comment on Facebook about the facts of a confidential decision, which would clearly break our understanding of confidentiality. But they might instead make a comment about how they feel about the decision, which inadvertently gives away some confidential information. They might feel they have done nothing wrong, whilst others would see a breach of confidence.

Church meetings and Christian conferring

The core purpose of all meetings across the Church is to reach decisions for the benefit of the Church and its mission. All participants in meetings owe it to the other participants and the rest of the Church to give their full attention to the matters at hand, to be open to the arguments presented by others and

to be open to God. This Christian conferring is demanding, and others have the right to expect that all participants will give maximum alertness to it. Becoming absorbed in social media is contrary to this, as would be playing a game on a computer or reading a novel, for example.

In the future, we might see social media used as part of meetings, and it is possible to devote most attention to the meeting whilst keeping an eye on Twitter. We don't for example, bar people from sending or receiving text messages during meetings. But a balance needs to be struck, and that should reflect that members of governance and other bodies are there principally to engage in the work at hand, and devoting more than a small amount of one's attention to anything else is not acceptable.

Social media do not and should not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the whole life of the Church. Private conversations or emails, confidential reports to governance or others bodies, closed sessions of the Conference or the Council are confidential, both at the time and after. Only when an item is explicitly released from its confidential state by those able to do so should it be shared. This is as true in relation to social media as it is to any other media or conversation with others

Glossary of useful terms

Blog or Weblog – personal website (sometimes shared with friends) on which regular articles – ‘posts’ - are published and comments are invited. These posts often include links to other ‘blogs’ or social media content. Blogs are free and take minutes to set up - e.g. at www.blogger.com

MySpace – free web space where people (mostly young) share music, photos etc. It includes a message board. www.myspace.com

Facebook – the most popular social networking website, with over 350 million users worldwide. Build networks of ‘friends’: share what you are up to and keep tabs on what they are doing, leave messages, arrange social events, join in groups, campaigns, etc. www.facebook.com

Twitter – Increasingly popular. Sign up for an account and you can upload short messages of 140 characters called ‘tweets’. People commonly ‘tweet’ regularly throughout the day, often using a mobile phone. People can ‘follow’ (i.e. view the tweets, or ‘twitter stream’) of anyone they like. Can respond to tweets. E.g. Sarah Brown is followed on Twitter by over 750,000 people. See www.twitter.com

YouTube – Video sharing website. Free and easy to upload video from your computer or mobile phone. Has caused controversy over copyright infringement. Lots of video is also user-generated, often from cameras on mobile phones. www.youtube.com

Flickr – Upload your photos onto the web. These can be shared with others directly by sending them a link, or via searches for content on particular themes or topics. www.flickr.com

iPhone – A mobile phone from Apple that makes it easy to send emails, browse the internet and upload content to websites / twitter / Facebook etc. In a couple of years it's likely the great majority of phones will have these capabilities.

Trolls and flame wars - A troll is someone who picks, continues, or escalates, an argument on line simply because they like arguing. A 'flame war' is an argument that will never end because at least two of the parties involved will never agree, change their position, or reach a compromise. Both are to be avoided because they can absorb an incredible amount of time without reaching a conclusion or even producing anything interesting or constructive. Both can be dispiriting because they can devolve into bad language or personnel attacks.