

Bulletin 77: SOCIAL MEDIA

The Help & Advice Group was set up by Synod in 2009, to support local churches in being informed and effective in their life and mission. The group was disbanded in 2014, as part of a simplification of Synod committees, and its work continues through the Trust Officer, under the oversight of the Trust's Property Subcommittee. We are willing to try to provide specific advice on particular topics. Please get in touch if you have questions or suggestions.

This article is part of a series giving an overview of particular subjects of interest for local churches. We also circulate general updates from time to time. Bulletins are also posted on the website <https://www.urc-northernsynod.org/resources/legal>, with direct links to other websites.

Where readers are directed to web-based resources, the Synod Office is willing to respond to reasonable requests for printed out information for readers without web access, although they may find it more satisfactory to follow up their interest through their local library's web access.

Social Media

This is a growing area of communication around the world, and churches too are using social media to engage with members and their wider communities. Applications include Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger, TikTok, YouTube, Vimeo, Pinterest, Flickr, and many others.

The Charity Commission has recently updated its guidance on social media for charities: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charities-and-social-media/charities-and-social-media>. The guidance acknowledges that social media can be a powerful communication tool for charities, to raise awareness and funds and to better engage beneficiaries. It can help charities reach a much wider audience, much more quickly, than traditional methods of communication. However, it can also introduce risks:

- its fast pace can increase the risk of posting content that is inappropriate or harmful
- content, once posted, can be hard to undo
- professional and personal lives can overlap, and the line can become blurred

Accordingly, the Commission recommends that social media be used *purposefully*, and that trustees (in our context, elders) consider what the church aims to achieve and how best to manage the risks. It is a good idea to formally resolve to operate social media accounts in the name of the local church, and to adopt a policy covering its use. The Charity Commission provides a useful checklist, and CharityComms has developed a possible template. Bear in mind that this is aimed at large charities as well as smaller ones, and not all of it will be relevant or appropriate for a local church.

Those appointed to blog or post on behalf of the church should be aware of your social media policy.

The guidance recognises that trustees, employees and volunteers have freedom of expression as regards their own personal social media accounts. Nonetheless, if you are closely associated with the church, things that you post in a private capacity may impact on the church. *If you identify yourself as an elder or minister*, for example, on your personal account, it may be wise to clarify that views you express there are your own, and not necessarily those of the church.

The Commission also points to things to consider before posting online, such as copyright, data protection, libel, overly emotive or political content, reputational damage and mission creep (that is straying into areas beyond the church's purpose). Ideally, your social media output should be consistent with the church's "brand", its mission and its offline activities.

The United Reformed Church has previously issued simple social media guidelines and (on the second tab) a digital charter for local churches using social media. You may find this a useful starting point for your own policy:

<https://urc.org.uk/your-church/church-guides/getting-your-church-online/social-media-guidelines-and-digital-charter>.

andrew.atkinson@urc-northernsynod.org: 4 October, 2023