Principles for appropriate use of electronic communication in ministry

The use of the electronic communication mediums (such as telephone, email, social networking sites such as Facebook, and SMS) are a part of everyday life for many people in our ministry units. As church workers it is important that we consider how we can use this form of communication appropriately[1].

We need to be mindful of the positional power dynamic that exists between those in leadership and those under their care in pastoral relationships. This applies to all ministry relationships regardless of the age of the people involved.

We need to be mindful that electronic communication may be used to test or step over relational boundaries or even as a way to foster relationships for the purpose of preying on those who are vulnerable. The following principles may be of value to consider when exercising safe ministry practices through the use of electronic communication in a ministry setting.

Practice transparency and accountability in interactions

As electronic communication may be open to misinterpretation, it is vital that transparency and accountability in practice is engaged. The expression of transparency and accountability will vary according to the relationship between those engaged in the interaction. However, where there is a power imbalance such as exists between clergy and parishioners or ministry leaders and parishioners, there needs to be an intentional approach to not just communicating appropriately, but also being seen to communicate appropriately.

Consistent with the spirit of the Diocesan Code of Good Practice church workers must not knowingly transmit, retrieve or store any communication that is discriminatory or harassing; derogatory to any individual or group; obscene, sexually explicit or pornographic; defamatory or threatening; in violation of any licence governing the use of software; for any purpose that is illegal or contrary to the Code.

General considerations:

- It is a helpful practice to ensure that those who hold a position of power in a ministry relationship, copy their supervisor in the case of a lay leader or copy their warden in the case of clergy into email exchanges.

- If the subject matter is deemed to be of a confidential nature, then it may be wise to consider whether communicating electronically is the most appropriate way to interact.

Child and youth-related considerations:

- Where ministry leaders working with children and young people receive personal emails from those under their care, it may be wise to forward a copy of the email to their ministry co- ordinator.

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[1] Adapted from Guidelines for Electronic Communication, Anglican Diocese of Sydney 2010.

- As a general practice in child and youth related ministries it may be wise for ministry leaders to only use email when communicating to a group rather than individual children or young people.

- Similarly, it may be wise to follow the same practices when using SMS messages as a form of communication to and from young people.

- If it is the intention to communicate with children under 16 years using electronic communication (email, SMS, mobile phone), it may be helpful to explain this in either a ministry registration form or in a letter to parents.

- When communicating over the phone with a child under 16 years it may be wise make contact in the first instance using the home phone.

When engaging in an extended pastoral communication, it is important to consider if the interaction could be redirected from a private phone or chat room conversation to a face to face interaction with a second leader or young person present.

Practise courtesy and engage in respectful interactions

In all communications it is particularly important to emphasise the need to act professionally, with integrity, care and diligence, maintaining appropriate confidentiality and demonstrating courtesy, respect and cooperation at all times.

Email considerations:

It may be of assistance to be mindful of the following practices when using email:

- Consider the appropriateness of using email as the medium for the message.

- Provide the receiver with information about you such as name, position and contact details.

- Provide the receiver with a subject line.

- Use a greeting that it appropriate for the interaction, with consideration given to the ministry position of the receiver and the relationship between the sender and receiver.

- Focus on keeping paragraphs short and well-spaced on the page for ease of reading.

- Ensure you re-read your email before sending to check for intended meaning, spelling and grammar.

- Delay sending an email if the subject matter relates to an issue of conflict or disagreement with another person. It may be wise to save in "drafts" folder for a period and revisit the content once emotions have "cooled down".

- Refrain from using email for any form of rebuke, justified or not.

- Refrain from using all upper case in text as it may be interpreted by the receiver as shouting at them.

- Remember that email can be a permanent record and once sent may be forwarded to anyone.

- Consistent with the spirit of the Diocesan Code of Good Practice some inappropriate uses of email would include:
    - Sending or forwarding material which most people would regard as inappropriate, such as messages containing:
        - offensive images, sounds or videos
        - offensive jokes
        - discriminatory comments about race, gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, age or religious and/or political beliefs
        - approaches or suggestions which would be considered as harassment

Practise privacy principles

It is important to be mindful of the ensuring that the privacy of others is protected. This may include, but is not restricted to personal data and photographs

In general, it is important to obtain the permission of another person if it is intended to collect, store or display the following:

- data to be collected and stored, including names and contact details
- photographs taken, stored and/or displayed in hard copy or electronically, such as on a website

Child and youth related considerations:

- Where children are under 16 years, parental permission is required for collection, storage or display of any of the above types of information.
- Where it is planned to take photographs of a ministry event, if the child's parent does not consent to them being photographed, then it is important to ensure that the child is not in the area where photographs are being taken.
- Be mindful of not identifying children in photographs displayed in hardcopy or electronically.
- Ensure that all children are appropriately dressed when photographed.
- If photographs are being taken at a child-related event, it may be wise to have one delegated photographer for the event, using a camera.
- Encourage children to refrain from taking photographs of ministry leaders using any form of electronic communication.
- When interacting with a child or young person in a social networking forum, do not divulge any names or contact details of a young person to a third source.

Practise care in social networking [2]

Additional care should be taken by ministry leaders communicating with people via social networks and other online forums. Again given the power imbalance in a ministry relationship, it may be wise for any online interactions to be monitored by

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[2] Adapted from Social Networking and Youth, Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, 2006.

a person appointed to the role by the parish.

If planning to establish a social network site for a ministry program, it is important that it is established in such a manner that "private conversations" cannot take place.

Ministry leaders should only "write on a wall" of a person they are in a pastoral relationship with, if the site has been established for the parish or the ministry. In essence, they should not "write on walls" of private social network sites.

As a result of power imbalance, ministry leaders should not submit "friend" requests or initiate video chats with to those with who they are in a pastoral relationship.

Participants in a video chat or blog should consider what will be shown in the video such as their surroundings, their clothing/state of dress, etc.

All transcripts of on-line text chats, video chats, blogs or video blogs related to a ministry program or parish should be saved when possible.

All ministry leaders should be mindful that the content and nature of any post that will be read/visible and the voice is often considered the voice of the church, and any opinions given in these forums may be perceived by others as church policy.