

## Sample Electronic Communication Guidelines

### Rationale

The use of the telephone, email, social networking sites (eg Facebook) and SMS are a part of everyday life for many young people and children. The rate of technological advancement increases each year and in twelve months' time there will no doubt be new ways of connecting with others. With this comes challenges in the way we communicate and it is important to be aware of appropriate and positive ways of using these means to ensure we communicate in a safe manner.

In some ministry situations electronic communication is a useful tool, such as general communication and general pastoral care and support.

However, electronic communication may be used by those seeking to harm children, young people and vulnerable people. Electronic communication may be used to test or step over relational boundaries. We need to be mindful of the positional power dynamic that exists between those in leadership and the children, young people and vulnerable people under their care. The following guidelines for the safe use of electronic communication may be used as part of existing Safe Church practices.

### 1. GENERAL ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

- a. Interaction with children/young people in these forms should be kept to a minimum
- b. Safe ministry is about ministering in teams, therefore interaction with children/young people in electronic forms should be carried out in a team context. The use of group emails, SMS from the team is good practice, indeed for all forms of electronic communication. (Any personal emails sent from a church worker to a child/young person should also be sent to a supervisor (cc'd))
- c. Where possible and practical, parental permission should be given before communicating with children/young people with an electronic communication tool. (This could be through Permission Forms, Registration Form etc)
- d. Church workers (leaders) must not knowingly transmit, retrieve or store any communication that is:
  - a. Discriminatory or harassing
  - b. Derogatory to any individual or group
  - c. Obscene, sexually explicit or pornographic
  - d. Defamatory or threatening
  - e. In violation of any licence governing use of software
  - f. For any purpose that is illegal or in contradiction to your conduct code
- e. Church workers (leaders) must not send any electronic communication that attempts to hide the identity of the sender or represent the sender as someone else
- f. Pastoral Care or deeper conversations with children/young person should be face to face

## **2. TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION**

- a. When telephoning a child/young person, call on the home phone if possible.
- b. Whenever possible ensure that the parents/guardians are aware of the phone call, e.g. phone the parents and ask if it is ok to speak with their child.
- c. Mobile phone use should be kept to a minimum and never be used for long calls, especially for pastoral care:
- d. If a child/young person initiates a mobile phone call requiring a long conversation, at an appropriate time transfer the call to the home phone line.

## **3. EMAIL COMMUNICATION**

- a. All emails to children/young people should have a church email address carbon copied into them. Note: As carbon copying the church address into youth emails will clog up that mail box, the staff may wish to create a purpose address for leaders to cc into their email.
- b. Emails should generally be restricted to purpose only emails e.g. "meet at this place" or general conversations e.g. "how was the excursion today?" Pastoral care/ deeper conversations regarding more personal issues should be face to face.
- c. As far as possible save all emails to and from children/young people in a separate folder.
- d. It is not preferable for pictures and other "junk mail" be sent or forwarded.

## **4. SMS COMMUNICATION**

- a. SMS communication should generally be restricted to purpose only communication e.g. "meet at this place, at this time".
- b. If a longer SMS conversation begins, phone the child/young person, preferably on the home phone.
- c. Record or save text messages that you send or receive from a young person. This would include the content, time, date and the recipient/sender

## **5. SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION**

### **(e.g. Facebook, Myspace etc)**

There are numerous social media tools that are now used. No doubt this will grow in years to come. Below are numerous social media tools that young people use. The recommendations given in the "Facebook" section would also cover the majority of the other social media sites.

### **Facebook**

- a. All church workers (leaders) should be very careful as to whom they interact with and what is on their profile.
- b. It is advised that church workers (leaders) do not actively seek out young people to be "friends" with but it is OK to confirm positively if they are "friend requested".
  - i. Current Facebook policy is for those aged 13+, we would recommend not accepting 'friend requests' from those aged under 13 as per Facebook policy.
- c. It is recommended for your particular ministry setting to create a specific FB Page related to your ministry, and that all communication to young people be via this page.
- d. Posting written comments, photos, or videos of a personal nature should be done with the utmost care. Thinking through how comments, photos, or videos may be seen by other people is important to understand.
- e. Posting on other people's profiles should be general and kept to a minimum, particularly with young people and only of a broad nature e.g. "hey, hope you're having a good week, cya

Sunday” or other light conversations. It is best to keep conversations public so other people can see what's going on.

- f. When using Facebook Messenger, it is recommended that no private messages be sent and if messages are to be sent, they be purpose only and have at least one other church worker (leader) in the conversation. If you receive a Facebook message, a quick reply message to move the conversation to either face to face or via telephone is recommended.
- g. Comments to young people, whether on their profile or in comments, are to be kept to a minimum. They are not to be crude or rude and are to be done in a way that will not be misconstrued by a third-party viewing them.
- h. Do not post any private details of a young person on any other “wall”, “profile” or “event”. Please check with other church workers (leaders) if they are happy for their details to be published in an open forum also. e.g. name of school, email address, home address, phone numbers, etc.
- i. It is recommended that “offline” be the default position of youth influencers regarding FB chat.
- j. Regarding “Photos” please see the “Photo” section.
- k. Be conscious of what you write and how others may interpret it. Sarcasm, irony, and jokes can seem funny in your head but can be misinterpreted by others.
- l. Do not write negatively about other people or organisations.
- m. Set an example of good behaviour, in verbal and visual form.
- n. Do not publicly express anger, disappointment and other such emotions when posting. As gratifying as it may be FB is not the place to do this.
- o. Keep a close eye on the ever-changing privacy settings.

### **Twitter**

On one hand Twitter is more private than FB. It does not enable an overabundance of photos, it requires short posts, and the content is mainly driven by the user rather than others. In this case the following advice is recommended.

- a. Be careful what one posts and the way in which it can be interpreted.
- b. Ensure that care is taken with who you ‘follow’ due to people being able to see who it is and their posts on your profile.
- c. Be an example of good Twitter use in all your tweets.
- d. Do not post negative comments about people or organisations.

### **Formspring**

It is recommended that no church workers (leaders) within your church use Formspring to interact with young people, as it is far too anonymous and prone to cyber bullying. (Formspring.me is a simple social media site that enables people to ask questions of you which you can reply to)

### **Instant Messaging (MSN, FB Chat, Google Chat etc)**

- a. All church workers (leaders) are to avoid personal chat with a young person where possible. It is preferable to move the conversation to another form.
- b. If a church worker (leader) and a young person do use instant messaging make sure that it is possible to record or save the conversation somewhere.
- c. If a conversation is occurring in an instant messaging application then inviting a third person into it is highly advisable.

### **Snapchat**

It is recommended that no church workers (leaders) within your church use Snapchat. Snapchat is a photo- and video-sharing app with a twist. The media you send disappear seconds after they're viewed—you get to decide how long a photo will “live,” from 1 to 10 seconds, after it's viewed. As the messages and photos aren't available after the set time, it is prone to bullying and the sending of inappropriate images.

### **MySpace**

- a. Take as much care as possible and follow the instructions used in the Facebook guidelines.
- b. Delete followers who may not be appropriate and who you do not know.

### **7. VIDEO PHONING (mobile phone/internet, FaceTime, Skype etc.)**

- a. Church workers should not enter into conversations of this nature with children/young people.

### **8. PHOTOGRAPHY**

- a. Any photos of youth/children's ministry activities should be taken by someone appointed by the Minister and with parental consent:
- b. Do not photograph any child/young person who has asked not to be photographed:
- c. Photography should focus on the activity and not on a particular child/young person:
- d. Photos should focus on small groups rather than individuals:
- e. Do not identify in writing the person/s in the photograph:
- f. All children/young people must be appropriately dressed when photographed:
- g. Never post photos of children/young people on the internet:
- h. If you do find a photo of a youth/children's activity posted on the internet by a young person, gently ask them if they have permission from everyone in the photo to post it. If they don't then advise them to either seek permission or remove it from the internet.
- i. Do not allow children/young people to take a photo of church workers with their mobile phones:
- j. Do not take photos of children/young people with your mobile phone.

### **Acknowledgements & Contributors**

These guidelines are an adaptation of the Professional Standards Unit of the Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney and “Electronic Communication Guidelines” by Jon Coombs ([www.joncoombs.com](http://www.joncoombs.com)). We thank them for their work in this area and their willingness to share it with the wider church.

### **Disclaimer**

This is not legal advice but rather good practice advice for holistic Safe Church ministry produced by the NCCA-SCTA Unit 2015.

If you are concerned about legal issues you are advised to seek your own legal opinion.