

Guideline Leaflet L18: Use of Social Media for Churches

This guideline leaflet relates to churches' use of different forms of social media, and the benefits and risks of your online activity.

This Guideline Leaflet is regularly reviewed and updated. To ensure that you are using the most up to date version, please download the leaflet from the BUGB website at www.baptist.org.uk/resources

The date on which the leaflet was last updated can be found on the download page.

L18: USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CHURCHES

These notes are offered as guidelines by the Legal and Operations Team to provide information for Baptist churches.

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[L17 Legal and Operations Team – Regulatory Information](#)

These notes can never be a substitute for detailed professional advice if there are serious and specific problems, but we hope you will find them helpful.

If you want to ask questions about the leaflets and one of the Baptist Trust Companies are your property trustees, you should contact them. They will do their best to help.

If your church property is in the name of private individuals who act as trustees they may also be able to help.

INTRODUCTION

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. Colossians 4:6 NIV

This guideline leaflet relates to the use of social media by churches who belong to Baptists Together¹. It has been written to provide encouragement and guidance in the appropriate use of social media so your ministry may be enhanced. Using different forms of social media offers us new ways to communicate the Gospel and our faith journeys in a public space. These guidelines also remind us it is a public space and rules and etiquette apply here as much as anywhere.

The Charity Commission has produced some new guidance for charities about using social media, which can be found [here](#). All BUGB member churches are charities in their own right, and so it is also important to consider how your church – its minister, staff and volunteers - use social media in a way which is going to further your charitable objectives, and that your posts are in the best interests of your church charity.

Social media is the umbrella term used to describe websites and applications which allow users to share content (such as words, images, videos and web links) with others and/or to participate in social networking. The best-known platforms are Facebook, Instagram, X (formally Twitter) and YouTube, but the term and these guidelines also cover online forums and blogs.

We invite and encourage churches to explore, adopt and utilise these exciting platforms for communicating and sharing the Gospel. When used well social media applications are effective communications tools, providing online spaces for conversations, wider exploration, learning and discussion on issues of faith, church, and society. They also offer opportunities for forming and deepening relationships locally and globally.

Social media is interactive, conversational, and open-ended. It happens in a public, not private, space and though it feels different to traditional forms of written communication, comments are permanent, and we are personally liable for them. Used well, social media is a means of engaging in an interactive conversation with people of all faiths and none. Due to the swift, conversational style of social media, writing comments we may later regret is a common pitfall. It is here the words of Colossians 4:6 serve us well. Our words must always be full of grace so even in difficult situations we will know how to answer well.

¹ The Baptist Union are grateful to the United Reformed and Methodist Church in allowing use of their Social Media Policies as a source for some of the material used in this document.

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. Galatians 5:22-26 NIV

We offer this guideline leaflet to encourage churches to engage with social media – and use it effectively, safely, understanding both the benefits and the potential dangers.

Baptists Together have several national social media channels which can be used as useful resources for your own social media pages:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/baptistuniongb>

'X' (formerly Twitter): <https://twitter.com/BaptistTimes> and

<https://twitter.com/BaptistTimes>

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrsEH8yVjLkIst8QtjSfdgg>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/baptiststogether/>

LinkedIn - <https://www.linkedin.com/company/81851598>

TikTok – @baptiststogether

Threads - baptiststogether

Flickr - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bugb/albums>

BASIC PRINCIPLES

1. The golden rule: remember you are a representative of Baptists Together, your church and other ministry settings – therefore it is important you are a responsible ambassador for Christ, the wider Church, and your part in it.
2. If you are a charity trustee in your church, you have a legal duty to act in the best interests of your church charity. Using social media can be a powerful communication tool for charities but it can introduce risks to the reputation of your church charity.
3. If you have *any* known public role within your church, for example Deacon, Worship Leader, Elder, then when you post, you are posting as a representative of your church. This applies whether you're posting in an official capacity on a church account or on a personal account – you are representing your church and cannot hide behind statements made on personal social media accounts. What you say will reflect on you, your church and Baptists Together.
4. Although it may appear the internet has little or no regulation, all content is subject to the same laws. You are completely responsible for the things you post and so could fall foul of the laws relating to data protection, copyright and defamation.
5. There is an internet code of conduct. Although not an exclusive list, some specific examples of legally prohibited social media conduct include: posting commentary, content or images which are defamatory, pornographic, proprietary, harassing, libelous, or any material could be seen to create a hostile environment.
6. It is important to remember any content you post to social media could attract wider media interest – so be prepared for additional publicity, both positive and negative. If you do receive media interest, then do feel free to contact the Baptist Union's press and media line for advice. Contact 01235 517709 or email media@baptist.org.uk
7. Social media is fast-paced and if you do decide to enter the arena, then stay present and active – monitor your output, keep it fresh and up-to-date, and regularly review information about your ministry. For more about this please see our '[First Friday](#)' Videos from May, June and July of 2023.
8. It is important you separate your personal social media account(s) from church or workplace account(s). Where possible use a separate device for personal use as this reduces issues around

security or posting accidentally.

9. Double check your privacy settings on social media platforms. There are privacy policies and settings on each platform, including explanations of the different levels of privacy. When you post, bear in mind what effect your levels of privacy will have on who will or could see your post.

SOME DOS AND DON'TS

- Do be respectful of theological viewpoints you do not agree with. Public arguments between Christians are to be avoided as these can be hurtful and damaging to the reputation of your church.
- Do be credible, fair and honest.
- Do respect the privacy of your congregation. Discussion of pastoral care in relation to individuals may not only contravene data protection law but, for ministers and church employees, could become a disciplinary matter.
- Do make sure you have the written permission of parents/guardians when posting photographs of children. See section on 'Using images of children' later in the guidelines for more information.
- Do use social media to share good news of church life, congregation members or workplace heroes – first checking the people involved are happy for their news to become public. Before posting ask yourself: 'Is this my story to tell?' And if it's not, then ask permission first.
- Do post or share appropriate stories, reflections, prayers marking key events in the Christian calendar/ life of Baptists Together. All posts on the Baptists Together social media accounts can be freely shared.
- Do monitor church community group pages on sites such as Facebook – take care to quickly remove posts by others are visibly offensive, threatening or indicative of bullying.
- Do stay within the legal and charitable framework and make yourself aware of safeguarding issues; respect copyright, defamation and data protection laws.
- Do bear in mind what you post has the potential to be misinterpreted or misread: emotions and attitudes are hard to convey in writing – so be careful how you phrase things.
- Check out what others are posting - seeing what works, and feel free to try similar things yourself.

DON'T:

- Don't respond to or censor every remark just because you do not like it. Make a judgement call between someone who is expressing a view you don't hold and someone who is writing abusive comments.
- Never make any comments which could be considered racist, sexist, or homophobic, or engage in any other conduct that would be considered unacceptable in a Christian environment.
- Never engage with posters who are being deliberately hateful. Remove the post. It is also advisable to keep a copy of the post prior to deletion.
- Don't gossip or engage in conversations about personal/pastoral matters which directly

relate to individuals. Do not disguise gossip as 'prayer points'. If it's not your story to tell, then don't tell it. Remember there are data protection and safeguarding considerations, and anything published online is subject to defamation law.

- Don't engage in verbal aggression via social media. You can correct misinformation but do it with grace. Remember, people are entitled to their opinions – but they are not entitled to share abusive or derogatory opinions and comments.

SAFEGUARDING

Social media can be used to bully, harass, intimidate, or groom children, young people and adults at risk. Make sure your online connections and friendships do not give easy access to children and adults at risk in your church. For example, we strongly recommend wherever possible, links between young people and church workers are only made on a church or youth group organisational page and not a personal page. Your online content and use of social media should align with your church's safeguarding policy and guidance around setting appropriate pastoral boundaries.

SAFEGUARDING AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Under the Data Protection Act 2018, organisations must take care how they take and use photographs or film footage of people. This does not mean pictures should not be taken or filming should be prohibited. However, certain protocols should be followed in order to comply with the legislation, and in order to safeguard children, young people and adults at risk.

Using images of children

Ensure you ask the permission of the parent/carer before taking pictures/videos of children and ensure the parent/carer signs consent forms. Depending on the age of the child, the parent/carer must be informed of how the photos/videos will be used. Data protection law doesn't specify an age at which a child is considered capable to exercise their own rights, although 12 years old is typically given as a guideline. This should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Even with permission, it is advisable to use group photographs of children rather than individuals. When captioning photos/videos of children, never include any personal details about them, including their names.

Using Images of adults

Always remember to ask the person's permission before you take and use their photo or image in video footage, and explain how you plan to use it. Be aware of issues such as domestic abuse or online abuse might mean individuals do not want to have their pictures published in the public domain. Further information is available through www.baptist.org.uk/safeguarding

CODE OF CONDUCT

Do use a code of conduct on your church social media pages; setting out what you feel is appropriate behaviour. Here is an example which can be adapted:

Code of conduct

Thank you for visiting us on Facebook!

The following is a list of guidelines for commenting on our posts – we're basically asking you to show respect for all users, stay positive and generate good conversations. So:

- *Please stay on-topic*
- *No offensive language*
- *No personal attacks (hostile, derogatory or deliberately insulting comments toward a specific*

individual or group)

- *Don't say things to people in a way that you wouldn't want them said to you*
- *No bullying, intimidation or hate speech*
- *No flaming (posting comments intended to induce an angry response)*
- *No spamming*

It is important to remember that the misuse of social media can be harmful to individuals and to the reputation of your church. A breach of the code of conduct or church social media policy may give rise to a complaint to your church charity trustees under your church's complaints policy and action taken under your HR policies and procedures.

COPYRIGHT

It is important you do not use content which is subject to copyright. Please take great care in all you publish – and never publish items you don't have permission to publish (e.g. poems, prose extracts, song/hymn lyrics and pictures). If you do want to publish something which is protected by copyright, please seek written (or emailed) permission from the copyright holder before you post it on your church website, social media or print it in your newsletter.

Do not download images from the web and assume it will be ok, it almost certainly will not be.

Do acknowledge the photographer/artist, even when the image is copyright free. And, of course, you can always take your own photos.

Useful sites with images which can be used copyright free are:

<https://unsplash.com>

<http://www.gratisography.com>

<https://pixabay.com>

www.flickr.com (search under 'Creative Commons')

The Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) website (<http://ccli.co.uk/copyright/>) is an excellent source of information on copyright law.

More information can be found in our guideline leaflet L14 – www.baptist.org.uk/resources/L14.

IDEAS TO GET YOU STARTED

If you don't have a church website, or are looking for an easy-to-use alternative, an organisational Facebook page could be the answer. Such a page could be used to promote your church, give information on service times, events etc and is easy to update. (And, if you do have a website, remember social media channels can also be used in conjunction with it. You can set up social media feeds to automatically feed your posts to your site – and you can also direct people to your website via your social media posts.

- Report on your community and outreach projects.
- Post videos (subject to safeguarding and copyright checks).

- Share any good news and you will start to build a following/develop relationships.
- Start a discussion about a particular topic or issue at the church or your activities.
- Remember, social media offers two-way communication (but be prepared for positive and negative feedback – and respond to comments and queries (quickly)).

Association Trust Company	Contact
Baptist Union Corporation Ltd East Midland Baptist Trust Company Ltd	Baptist Union Corporation Ltd Baptist House PO Box 44 129 Broadway Didcot Oxfordshire OX11 8RT Telephone: 01235 517700
Heart of England Baptist Association	Heart of England Baptist Association 480 Chester Road Sutton Coldfield B73 5BP Office Mobile: 0730 505 1770
London Baptist Property Board	London Baptist Association Unit C2 15 Dock Street London E1 8JN Telephone: 020 7692 5592
Yorkshire Baptist Association	17-19 York Place Leeds LS1 2EZ Telephone: 0113 278 4954
West of England Baptist Trust Company Ltd	West of England Baptist Trust Company Ltd Little Stoke Baptist Church Kingsway Little Stoke Bristol BS34 6JW Telephone: 0117 965 8828

This is one of a series of *Guidelines* that are offered as a resource for Baptist ministers and churches. They have been prepared by the Legal and Operations Team and are, of necessity, intended only to give very general advice in relation to the topics covered. These guidelines should not be relied upon as a substitute for obtaining specific and more detailed advice in relation to a particular matter.

The staff in the Legal and Operations Team at Baptist House (or your regional Trust Company) will be very pleased to answer your queries and help in any way possible. It helps us to respond as efficiently as possible to the many churches in trust with us if you write to us and set out your enquiry as simply as possible.

The Legal and Operations Team also support churches that are in trust with the East Midland Baptist Trust Company Limited.

If your holding trustees are one of the other Baptist Trust Corporations you must contact your own Trust Corporation for further advice. A list of contact details is provided above. If you have private trustees they too should be consulted as appropriate.

Contact Address and Registered Office:

Support Services Team, Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist House, PO Box 44,
129 Broadway, Didcot OX11 8RT
Tel: 01235 517700 Fax: 01235 517715 Email: legal.ops@baptist.org.uk
Website: www.baptist.org.uk Registered CIO with Charity Number: 1181392

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