

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social networking has become an increasingly popular form of communication amongst teenagers and young people. For many young people social networking has become part of everyday life and certainly more popular than watching tv. It is estimated that 7 out of 10 young people are now using social network sites sites (MySpace, Freespace, Bebo, Live Journal, Facebook, MSN spaces) which provide each person with their own web page. Most sites recommend that users should be 13+, but this rule is easy to work around.

A typical web page will include a description of the person, a photo gallery, information about their favourite music and films, hobbies, links to friends sites and a blog. They can be personalised with artistic backgrounds, music, and video clips. From their site, users can send and receive instant messages from other sites. Some sites allow users to talk to each other over a web cam.

The potential for young people to post whatever material they like online - no matter how explicit - has raised concern. There is no doubt that not all users are who they appear to be. Some young people have been lured into meeting up with people they have met online. Here in the UK, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) has been set up to look into the dangers.

Within the Church, social networking might be considered a useful form of outreach, but users should be aware of the dangers and protect themselves from allegations or misinterpretation. Clergy, youth workers, children's workers and those working as professionals on behalf of the church in positions of trust and authority, may wish to set up their own social networking web pages either as a form of outreach or simply for personal communication. In these cases the following good practice is recommended:

- Consider the aim and purpose of the site before you do anything
- If you are going to have one it is best to make it specific to a group or project (when the page is about the group, young people being on the site as 'friends' is less of an issue)
- Think carefully about the boundaries between your church 'role' and your 'personal life'
- Spend time looking at the Privacy and Security options contained in whichever site you use
- Inform your PCC about your site and obtain their permission
- Inform parents that you have a site, and assure them that you are not encouraging young people to start social networking themselves
- Work with your young people to explore both the opportunities and risks associated with social networking
- Do not accept or add anything on the site which could bring the name of the church into disrepute
- Do not place or add photographs of under 18's on your web pages

- If anyone under the age of 18 wants to enter into an online communication with you, obtain their parents permission in writing
- Be aware that whilst your site may be totally wholesome, you have no control over the content of your friends' sites which are only one click away

Information for parents and young people can be found on www.ceop.gov.uk

The Bishop's Child Protection Management Committee will review this policy in a year's time. The Archdeacons welcome your comments.

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