



Electronic Communication Guidelines

ADOPTED WADCorp 14/12/2017

Introduction

Electronic communication is in prevalent use in the community especially amongst adolescents. However, electronic communication has the potential to be misused to test and over-step relational boundaries.

Any communication with children or adolescents should have the consent of parents or legal guardians and records should be maintained. Therefore electronic communication guidelines apply to all church leaders/workers, Parish members and volunteers who work with children, adolescents and vulnerable people.

The scope of our policy

These guidelines apply to all Church leaders/workers, Parish members and volunteers associated with ministry in our church. The guidelines should be read in conjunction with other Diocesan policies designed to embed Safe Church principles:

- Safe Church Policy
- Privacy Statement (Safe Church)
- Privacy Policy
- Communication Policy
- Codes of Conduct

Responsibility

The Corporation of the Diocese of Wangaratta is responsible for implementation and review of the Electronic Communication Guidelines.

These Guidelines aim to:

1. Provide clear direction in relation to appropriate electronic communication between children/young people, and with children/young people by any adult in the Church.
2. Raise awareness about the practice of Grooming, which is an offence under law.
3. Maintain integrity and safety of all church members, the Diocese and parish organisations, by establishing clear boundaries in communication, particularly in interactions with children and vulnerable people.
4. Provide a level of consistency and safety in all our communication ensuring communication is aligned to the values of the Church and Safe Church principles.
5. Encourage relevant, lawful, appropriate and respectful information sharing.

Legislative Environment

The *Crimes Amendment (Grooming) Act 2014* makes it an offence in Victoria to groom a child under the age of 16 years for sexual conduct. This includes:

- *The offence of grooming concerns predatory conduct undertaken to prepare a child for sexual activity at a later time.*
- *The offence applies where an adult communicates, by words or conduct, with a child under the age of 16 years or with a person who has care, supervision or authority for the child with the intention of facilitating the child's involvement in sexual conduct, either with the groomer or another adult.*
- *Grooming does not necessarily involve any sexual activity or even discussion of sexual activity – for example, it may only involve establishing a relationship with the child, parent or carer for the purpose of facilitating sexual activity at a later time.*
- *The sexual conduct must constitute an indictable offence. This includes offences such as sexual penetration of a child, indecent assault and indecent act in the presence of a child. It does not include summary offences such as upskirting or indecent behaviour in public.*

(Source: Betrayal of Trust Fact Sheet)

Pastoral care and general communication is an integral part of youth and children's ministry and something that is to be encouraged in ministry. Pastoral care for youth and children will be primarily through face to face contact. However, this is not always possible and church workers may need to communicate with children and young people through electronic communication. Section 5 of Faithfulness in Service outlines Standards and Guidelines for relating to children and young people.

Guidelines for Electronic Communication

General Electronic Communication Guidelines

- Parental permission must be sought before a church worker communicates to a child/young person via electronic communication (use Parental Consent Form). Generally, permission should be obtained upon registration for a program or event.
- Organisers of child or youth focused programs, services or activities must seek written consent from a parent or legal guardian every 12 months using the Parental Consent Form.
- Church workers must not knowingly transmit, retrieve or store (except when the information is evidence, which must be retained) any communication that is:
 - discriminatory or harassing;
 - derogatory to any individual or group;
 - obscene, sexually explicit or pornographic;
 - defamatory or threatening;
 - breach an individual's right to privacy;
 - in violation of any licence governing the use of software;
 - for any purpose that is illegal or contrary to the Diocese's Codes of Conduct.
- Church workers or leaders must not send any electronic communication that attempts to hide the identity of the sender or represent the sender as someone else.

Telephone Communication

- When telephoning a child/young person call to the home phone if possible.
- Whenever possible ensure that the parents/guardians are aware of any phone call, by seeking their approval before making contact with the child/young person.
- Mobile phone use should be kept to a minimum and never be used for long calls, especially for pastoral care.

Email Communication

- 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 and appropriate records maintained.
- All emails to children/young people should have a church email address copied into them. Note: When copying (cc) the parish email address consider the most appropriate email box. An email address could be set-up for this specific purpose and be monitored by a church leader within the Parish.
- As far as possible, save all emails to and from children/young people in an electronic folder for record keeping purposes.

SMS Communication

- SMS communication should generally be restricted to purpose only communication e.g. “meets at this place, at this time”
- If a longer SMS conversation begins, phone the child/young person, preferably to the home phone and seek permission from the parent or guardian to speak with the child.

Social Networking (e.g. Facebook, Myspace etc)

- Think carefully about the reasons for “socialising” with children and adolescents in such social networking forums.
- Internal mail (inbox) should be restricted to church purpose -only messages.
- Writing on ‘walls’ should be kept to a minimum and only of a broad nature e.g. “hey, hope you’re having a good week, cya Sunday” or other light conversations.
- Do not give out any details of children/young people on ‘walls’ e.g. name of school, email address, home address, phone numbers, etc.
- Do not use social media tools where a record of the communication is not retained i.e. Snapchat and similar applications.
- Parish websites and Facebook pages should have a moderator appointed to ensure all content is appropriate and doesn’t breach laws or individual privacy.
- Inappropriate comments on Parish Facebook pages are to be removed and follow up with the person who posted the comment.
- Parish Facebook pages should be as public as possible and remind others that it is a public site.

Internet Chat Rooms/Programs (e.g. MSN, ICQ etc)

- Church leaders/workers should not enter into a closed conversation with a child/young person. If a child/young person invites you in to a conversation you should bring in a third party.
- Church leaders/workers should use discernment and wisdom when having a multiperson conversation. Your conversation should be above reproach.

Video Phoning (mobile phone/internet)

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

Photography

- Taking photos of children/young people by any person at church activities without consent, whether on a mobile phone or other device is to be discouraged. Publishing, posting or distribution of images of children/young person could present a risk to the child/young person's safety in certain circumstances.
- Any photos of youth/children's ministry activities should be taken by someone appointed by the Minister or ministry coordinator and with parental consent.
- Do not photograph any child/young person who has asked not to be photographed.
- Photography should focus on the activity or small groups rather than individuals.
- Do not identify in writing the person/s in the photograph without consent. Generally, identification of children should be limited to first name only.
- All children/young people must be appropriately dressed when photographed.
- Never post photos of children/young people using applications such as Snapchat, Instagram etc.
- Before posting or publishing any photos of children/young person, careful consideration should be given to the purpose/need, appropriateness and whether the church has consent.
- 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.
- Discourage children/young people from taking photos of church workers and leaders. Photos should only be permitted in the context of a church related activity.

Acknowledgement

These guidelines are an adaptation of the one developed by the Anglican Diocese of Bendigo. We thank them for sharing their work with us.

Disclaimer

This is not legal advice but rather good practice advice for achieving safe church principles. If you are concerned about legal issues please seek your own legal counsel.

Distribution

- Registry staff
 - Trustees
 - All ministry units
 - Licensed clergy
 - Parish councils
 - Clergy with Permission to Officiate
 - Synod
 - Director of Professional Standards
 - Area Deans
 - Archdeacons
 - Director of Vocations
 - Ordination candidates
 - Recruitment material
 - Induction material (clergy, paid staff and volunteers)
 - Public, via the diocesan website
-

Review of this policy

This policy is scheduled for review in February 2018.

This policy will be reviewed every 12 months. The annual review process will provide an opportunity for staff, volunteers and members of the church community to contribute.

A review will also occur in the event that any incident arises that is in breach of this policy to identify if any aspects of the policy should be amended to make sure it remains relevant, accessible and effective.