ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF GIPPSLAND

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

Introduction & Rationale

Electronic communication is now widely used 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 young people should have parental or guardian consent and records should be maintained.
These electronic communication guidelines are in place for all church leaders/workers, parish members and volunteers who work with children, young people and vulnerable people.

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

> **Our Code of Conduct, Faithfulness in Service,** states:
> 5.32 When meeting a child privately, you should:
> - Have parental of guardian consent, where practicable.
> - Ensure, where appropriate, that a parent, guardian or suitable adult is present.
> - Inform another member of clergy, an adult church worker or another adult of the time, location and duration of the meeting.
> - Not invite or have children to your home or visit children in their home when no adult is present.
> - Make a record of time, location, duration and circumstances of any meeting where it is impracticable to follow these guidelines.

1. GENERAL ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES
- Any pastoral care conversations should occur in-person. As a rule, electronic or remote communications (via telephone, videoconference, online gaming chats, etc.) should **not** encompass pastoral care matters.
- Parental permission must be sought before a church worker communicates to a child/young person via electronic communication. Generally, permission should be obtained upon registration for a program or event.
- Church workers must not knowingly transmit, retrieve or store (except when the information is evidence, which must be retained) any communication that is:
    - racist, discriminatory or harassing;
    - derogatory to any individual or group
    - obscene, sexually explicit or pornographic;
    - defamatory or threatening;
    - in breach of 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 Church Codes of Practice.

- Church workers (leaders) must not send any electronic communication that attempts to hide the identity or appearance of the sender or represent the sender as someone else.
- Church workers (leaders) should be aware of the needs of all children/young people, especially those with disability, those who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, those who identify as LGBTQIA+[1], those from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, those experiencing family breakdown or in out-of-home-care and others who may be more vulnerable and susceptible to online harms.

2. VOICE-TO-VOICE COMMUNICATION
- When calling a child/young person call to the home phone if possible, or call the mobile of the parent/guardian.
- 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 matters.

3. 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 happen face-to-face with 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 address. An email address could be set-up for this specific purpose and be monitored by a church leader within the parish. Take care to also forward any 'reply' emails that were not sent as 'reply to all', or at least include the office email again in a reply.
- As far as possible, save all emails to and from children/young people in an electronic folder for record-keeping purposes.
- If emailing to multiple people, always use the BCC option to reduce spam and phishing risks, or inadvertently sharing private information.

4. COMMUNICATION VIA TEXT MESSAGES
- Communication via text messages should generally be restricted to purpose only communication e.g. "meet at this place, at this time"
- If a longer text message conversation begins, phone the child/young person, preferably to the home phone or mobile of the parent/guardian and seek permission from the parent/guardian to speak with the child. If it is an inappropriate time for a voice-to-voice call, suggest that the conversation continue at an agreeable time and place.

5. SOCIAL MEDIA (e.g. Facebook, Instagram etc.)
- **Recent court cases have indicated that in Australia, administrators of public social media pages are 'publishers' of comments posted by third parties and members of the public on their page, for the purposes of defamation law.**
- Think carefully about the reasons for "socialising" with children and adolescents on any social networking platforms.
- Parish Councils are encouraged to maintain a register of social media profiles of church workers engaged in children / youth ministries as part of a conflict of interest risk management.
- Direct messages (inboxes/DMs/private messages) should be restricted to church purpose-only written messages using formal language. Use of emojis is not supported by this policy.

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[1] LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. These terms are used to describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

- Writing messages that can be viewed by others (e.g. writing a comment, tagging someone or a message that appears in the news feed) 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.
- Pages and events that are liked/followed by individuals and organisations are made known to social networks. Content that has been published by others and 'liked' by a person becomes associated with the 'liker' and may be promoted to their network.
- Do not give out any details of children/young people where it can be viewed by others e.g.name of school, email address, home address, phone numbers, etc.
- Do not use social media platforms where a record of the communication is not retained e.g., Snapchat
- Parish websites and social media sites should have a moderator appointed to ensure all content is appropriate and does not breach laws or individual privacy.
- Inappropriate comments. visuals or tags on parish social media sites are to be removed and follow up with the person who posted the comment.
- Parish social media sites should be as public as possible and remind others that it is a public site.

6. INTERNET CHAT ROOMS/PROGRAMS IN-GAME CHATS (e.g. MSN, ICQ etc)
- Church leaders/workers should not enter into closed conversations with a child/young person. If a child/young person invites you into a conversation you should bring in a third party.
- Church leaders/workers should use discernment and wisdom when having a multi-person conversation. Your conversation should be above reproach.

7. VIDEO CALLS (mobile phone/internet/Zoom/FaceTime/Skype)
- Video calls should only be used when face to face contact is not possible e.g., participants are geographically distant, in-person contact is not possible.
- The purpose of the video call must be as part of ordinary ministry duties such as pastoral care or youth and children's ministry programs.
- Two church leaders/workers, or the parent / guardian must be present on the video call for the duration of the call.
- Children/young people should not be left on video calls unsupervised e.g., ensure all participants have left the meeting before ending a video call.
- Where possible ensure you and participants are joining a video call from an open space, for example, the living room of their house rather than their private bedroom.
- Ensure that the parents/guardians are aware of any video call, by seeking their approval before contacting the child/young person.
- If choosing to record the video call, inform all participants and obtain their consent first. Where consent is not given, do not proceed with recording the call, or arrange to speak to those people individually and they may leave the meeting so that recording can happen. Alternatively, they might be comfortable to turn off a video and microphone and simply receive information but not participate in the meeting.

8. 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 or need, the appropriateness and whether the church has consent. A comment ought to be included in the text that says "Consent to publish this image was given" or similar.
- 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.[2]

9. ONLINE SAFETY

It is important that everyone has the right to be safe online and free from harm. Online safety issues should not prevent parishes and churches from utilising the benefits of being online.

The Australian Government has introduced the Online Safety Act 2021, along with the eSafety Commissioner, to protect all Australians online[3].

Online safety issues can include:
- Adult cyber abuse
- Peer to peer abuse
- Grooming
- Cyber bullying
- Image based abuse
- Illegal and restricted content
- Abuse based on cultural or religious beliefs
- Abuse based on sexuality
- Abuse based on disability.

If someone in our church is experiencing online safety issues:
- Consider if it could be misconduct by a Church Worker. If so, contact the Director of Professional Standards.
- If you become aware of child abuse material you must not copy or share this information. This can sometimes inadvertently occur when reporting, however it can be a crime of producing and transmitting child abuse material. To safely report child abuse material, make a voice call or send an email without attaching any evidence. Evidence can then be gathered safely by the authorised people.
- A person experiencing serious online abuse or cyber bullying must first report the material to the service provider or platform. If the service provider doesn't remove the material, a report can be made directly to the eSafety Commissioner.
- Image-based abuse and illegal or restricted content can be reported to *eSafety* straight away.

eSafety works with online platforms to remove the harmful content. This can include social media companies, websites, messaging services, chatrooms and gaming platforms. The harmful content can include posts, comments, emails, messages, memes, images and videos.

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[2] A Child Photo consent form is available on the Diocesan website: childphotopermissions (gippslandanglicans.org.au)
[3] More information on the eSafety commission can be found at: Online safety | eSafety Commissioner

Acknowledgement
These guidelines are an adaption of the Professional Standards Unit of the Anglican Church Dioceses of Bendigo and Sydney. 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 2010. If you are concerned about legal issues you are advised to seek your own legal opinion.

Policy Scope
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 Ministry:

- Privacy Policy
- Safe Church Policy
- Child safety & Wellbeing policy.
- Faithfulness In Service

Policy Responsibility
The Diocesan Corporation (ADG Admin Ltd) is responsible for the implementation and review of these guidelines.
Approved by Bishop in Council 2023