Basic Information

Title	Social Media
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Status of Paper	Final
Resolutions	1. The Conference commends Part 1 *Connexional Social Media Policy* to the whole Connexion as guidelines for good practice in engagement with social media.
	2. The Conference directs that Part 1 be made available on the Connexional website, together with Part 2 as a background paper to provide more detail as required.

Summary of Content Subject and Aims	This report aims to provide clear guidance for the Connexional Team in engaging with social media and to suggest good practice for the whole Connexion in this area.
Main Points	Social media presents great opportunities for both sharing the Gospel and furthering the work of the Connexional Team.
	These guidelines aim to help the Connexional Team and others to avoid any pitfalls.
Background Context and Relevant Documents	This report was requested by the Connexional Leaders Forum and discussed at the February and April 2010 meetings of the Council. The April Council adopted part 1 as guidelines for Council employees. It refers to *Speaking for the Methodist Church and With Integrity and Skill*, as well as the Connexional Team policies on use of IT equipment, email and whistle blowing.

Impact	These guidelines need to be shared with existing Methodist officers and staff, and form part of their induction processes. Persistent violations would be the basis for disciplinary action.
Risk	Failure to provide guidelines risks both damaging online actions and also missing the opportunities offered if too restrictive.

Part 1: Connexional Social Media Policy

Introduction

1. This applies as policy to lay employees of the Methodist Council. It is good practice guidance for Ministers and other office holders or those with a representative role within the Methodist Church.

2. All new forms of communication provide opportunities to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in the world. They come, however, with new values. Whereas the printed word has a certain finality of declaration about it, social media is interactive, conversational and open-ended. Moreover, it happens in a public, not private, space. The Methodist Church therefore encourages the user to use social tools as a means of engaging in an interactive conversation with people of all faiths and none. As Gospel people, our conversation should be 'seasoned with salt' (Colossians 4:6)[1], and these guidelines aim to help us to do so.

3. The principles applied to this are:
   i. Be credible. Be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.
   ii. Be consistent. Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation.
   iii. Be cordial, honest and professional at all times. Be responsive. When you gain insight, share it where appropriate.
   iv. Be integrated. Wherever possible, align online participation with other communications.
   v. Be a good representative of the Methodist Church. Remember that you are an ambassador for Christ, the Church and your part of it. Disclose your position as a member or officer of the Church, making it clear when speaking personally. Let Galatians 5:22–26 guide your behaviour[2].
   vi. Be respectful: respect confidentiality. Respect the views of others even where you disagree.

Policy

4. You should participate online in the same way as you would with other public forums. You take responsibility for the things you do, say or write.

5. Never share personal details like home address and phone numbers except with someone you know and trust, and if you decide to do so then use a private message. Be aware an address can be disclosed in many ways for example via photos or a GPS position as well as in written form.

6. Always remember that participating online results in your comments being permanently available and open to being republished in other media. Once something is posted to a blog or other internet site, it should be assumed to be still available even if it is later deleted from the original site.

7. Stay within the legal framework and be aware that safeguarding, libel, slander, copyright and data protection laws apply, as well as the Constitutional Practice and Discipline (CPD) of the Methodist Church, available online at: http://www.methodist.org.uk/cpd

8. For general guidelines on confidentiality, refer to *With Integrity and Skill*[3] – if telling a story about anyone, ask yourself *Is this my story to tell*?

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[1] Colossians 4 v 6 (NRSV): "Let your speech be always gracious, seasoned with salt, so you may know how you ought to answer everyone."
[2] Galatians 5:22–26 (NRSV): [22]By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, [23]gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. [24]And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. [25]If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. [26]Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another".
[3] http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=churchlife.content&cmid=2288

9. Be aware that this may attract media interest in you as an individual, so proceed with care whether you are participating in an official or a personal capacity. **If you have any doubts, take advice, but remember that you are responsible for your online activities.**

10. Staff should be aware of and act in line with *Speaking for the Methodist Church*, the *Team email policy* and the Team policy on the *use of IT equipment*, as well as *With Integrity and Skill* and the *whistle blowing policy* where necessary.

Part 2: Understanding social media and applying the guidelines

Introduction

1. Social media – online communities or discussion forums – offer great opportunities for the Church, both in the way we communicate with the wider world and how we discuss matters amongst ourselves.

2. Online media is faster, cheaper and more widely available than "old media" but does not change our understanding of confidentiality, responsibility or Christian witness.

3. The nature of social media means the distinction between public and private conversations can be blurred. Communication in this form also happens a lot more quickly than many other forms of communication.

Private space versus public arena

4. The use of social media significantly blurs the boundary between what is public and private: for the younger generation especially this boundary may be porous or even non-existent. Conversations or complaints about work, policy decisions or anything that previously was restricted to private conversation may now be played out online, often making them permanently available for all to see (depending on the privacy levels set by the user). The safest assumption is that any use of social media is public.

5. This blurring is highlighted in the relationship between employer and employee, but also applies to individuals and any groups or bodies they belong to. Whilst an individual may feel that what they see or do in their own time is their own private business, social media blurs or removes this line between private and public.

6. The Methodist Church already expects certain standards from staff, and the Conference paper on *Racism is a denial of the Gospel* reports that "the Development and Personnel Office of the Connexional Team is in the process of developing a Code of Conduct for all Methodist Council employees. This will focus on the kinds of behaviour which is expected of employees, and staff members who transgress the code, of which racism will be one area, will be liable to dismissal for gross misconduct."[4] Although this is an extreme example, a Council employee expressing racist views on their own blog in their own time could nonetheless face a disciplinary process if the Code of Conduct is adopted.

7. This blurring of the boundary between public and private is probably a bigger concern to older generations than younger, and is not necessarily a bad thing. But when one group struggles to understand why private information is being shared online, whilst other regards it as normal, this may create tensions.

Confidentiality and consultation

8. Respecting confidentiality is challenging in this area. The existence of social media does not change the Church's understanding of confidentiality. Within the life of the Church there are private conversations, confidential processes and private or closed meetings. All involved

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[4] http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/coun-1023-racism-and-extreme-views-200110.pdf

have a right to expect that others will respect confidential information they receive in any context. Breaking a confidence is as wrong when using social media as it would be by any other means.

9. However, people might inadvertently break a confidence. Someone might report on Facebook about the facts of a confidential decision, which would clearly break our understanding of confidentiality. Alternatively they may make a comment about how they feel about the decision, which inadvertently gives away some confidential information. They might feel they have done nothing wrong, whilst others would see a breach of confidence.

10. "Information wants to be free" was a rallying cry for early users of the web, and that tradition continues today. It means "free" in the sense of not being charged for and also in being unbounded and able to move freely. Different online users will differ over whether they assume something can be shared unless it is marked confidential. However, it only takes one person to assume something can be shared for it to be spread, and others may then follow that lead.

11. This means that organisations need to make explicit where internal paperwork or information should not be shared unless cleared to do so in the appropriate way. However, our understanding of final papers for some governance bodies, such as the Conference and the Council, is that papers are public unless marked 'Confidential' once sent to members of those bodies.

12. All papers, reports etc. produced by the Team should clearly state on their cover sheet their status (draft, final, for consultation etc.), whether they are confidential, and if so to whom the paper is restricted. Any paper marked confidential should not be circulated beyond the stated list without the permission of the originator. Staff must also respect any temporary restrictions given verbally or in a covering email. Confidential papers should ideally carry that word on each page. If in doubt check the cover sheet or the originator.

13. The Team should, where possible, consult on pieces of work. Whilst recognising that proper consultation takes time, it is a better way to work in almost all circumstances and if done well produces better results and greater engagement in and ownership of the final proposals. The document *Performing Consultations: Guidance for Connexional Team Members* sets out good practice in this area. Social media can form part of a consultation.

14. Everyone should be sensitive and sensible about sharing information gleaned from conversations, emails or meetings with others not originally involved. If in doubt, check with the originator. Anyone who wishes something they say or write to remain confidential should make that clear to the recipients at the time.

15. Social media does not and should not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the whole life of the Church. Private conversations or emails, confidential reports to governance or other bodies, closed sessions of the Conference or the Council are confidential, both at the time and after. Only when a confidential item is explicitly released from its confidential status by those able to do so should it be shared. This is as true in relation to social media as it is to any other media or conversations with others.

16. All organisations rely on the respecting of confidences, and the Church is no different. Professional conduct demands this, and the Church has a right to expect this from both employees and office holders.

Anonymity

17. As noted below, there is no legal protection offered by posting either anonymously or under an alias. While many bloggers use an alias either for themselves or as a shorthand way of referring to their site, most make their true identity easy to find. Some sites, such as

Facebook, use people's real names throughout, although of course it is always possible to register using a false name.

18. The blogging community has mixed views of anonymity. In general, it is frowned upon, mainly on moral grounds (in that is only fair to identify yourself) but also on practical ones (if several different people in a discussion are posting anonymously, it quickly becomes hard to track who is saying what). However, it is wrong for official comments from an organisation to be made anonymously. When someone is commenting or writing on behalf of the Methodist Church, they should make their true identity clear from the start. It is also wrong to use anonymity as a way of evading responsibility for online activities. It should therefore be only used when personal safety is at stake.

19. Participation in social media by Connexional Team staff should never be completely anonymous, and this is also best practice for all others. However, in the online world some people have an established alias that works as shorthand for them or their site, or where multiple people share a site. For example the Twitter feed @MethodistMedia is run jointly by the two media officers in the Connexional Team as part of their work. Using such an alias is acceptable, as long as the real identity and position within the Church are easily discoverable by anyone visiting the site. Team members should only use an alias where it would be more confusing not to, but use a consistent alias across conversations to help others engage and always make it easy to identify the real person and the role in the Church. The use of an alias (or different aliases) to disguise, hide or confuse an identity is not acceptable. Taking responsibility for online actions requires people to be identifiable.

Risks of social media

20. The High Court recently served a court order on an anonymous Twitter user via their Twitter feed (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8285954.stm). This forced the anonymous Twitter-user to reveal their identity. This follows an earlier court case brought by The Times newspaper which forced a blogger using an alias to reveal their true identity (http://www.theregister.co.uk/2009/06/16/times_blogger_anonymity/)

21. Defamation law in England and Wales currently states that each time a web page is viewed it becomes a published entity, and anyone defamed by it has 12 months from that point to bring an action. Web pages are essentially permanently open to libel actions until 12 months after they are taken offline. The situation in Scotland is similar, and in Scottish law there is a defence against defamation that the comments were made in the heat of an argument.

22. In libel cases the defendant has to prove that the comments were justified – in other words they have to prove their own innocence. The plaintiff only has to prove that their reputation was damaged. Defamation is a civil matter, and damages are potentially unlimited, although awards above £100,000 are rare. The costs of defending against defamation are very high, so many people settle out of court.

23. There are also a range of additional hazards associated with using social media channels of communication, including:
    a) A member of staff, other employee or someone clearly linked to the Church (e.g. a minister) posts something online that is illegal, defamatory, offensive or otherwise damaging to the Church, its reputation or relationships within it or with partners
    b) Confidential information is disclosed, accidentally or deliberately
    c) An individual within the Church posts comments about colleagues, managers or others that are serious enough to warrant investigation or possible disciplinary action.
    d) Decisions made by governance bodies are undermined or disrespected through continued argument online.
    e) The speed of electronic communications, including social media, makes it easy to say something that is later regretted, but which has become permanently online for all to see.

Humour

24. Humour is an important part of any ongoing relationship or conversation. When talking to someone, or a group, we all use verbal or physical cues that we are making a joke, and we receive immediate feedback in the form of a smile or laughter (or the lack of) to let us know if the others treated it as humour. Online many of these cues are missing, and so it is easy for a joke to be taken seriously or misinterpreted. Make sure that it is clear when you are joking, not only to those reading it immediately, but also to people you don't know, who might come across it later.

25. Also remember that it is not acceptable to pass off intentionally offensive comments as "just joking." Humour is a great gift and an essential part of life, but should not be used to exclude, bully or offend in any situation.

Pastoral care

26. Comments made online by staff or others could be signs of occupational health issues. An unhappy employee might first show their frustration or sadness in an online comment, and this raises questions about how to respond. On a wider scale, this is also a matter for those with line management or supervisory responsibility across the Connexion. There are limits on how much time a supervisor or manager should spend monitoring the online postings of others. It cannot be appropriate that individuals use this medium to air such matters relating to their employment.

27. CPD book VI, part 2, Section 17 sets out guidance adopted by the Conference in 2008 from the report *With Integrity and Skill*. This sets out the Church's best practice on dealing with confidentially in pastoral care situations. It mentions social media amongst many other ways that information can be conveyed.

28. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and some other social media tools are based on the idea of "friends" or "followers", in which one user agrees to become a friend or follower of someone else. Depending on the settings chosen by the user, some or all messages can only be seen by friends. For some people, having as many friends or followers as possible is a goal of being online, which means that they might "befriend" people they only slightly know or with whom they have a professional or other relationship in real life that would not normally be considered friendship. This can lead to one user revealing information to someone they wouldn't in other contexts share it with. It is possible, even inadvertently, to use an online relationship to manipulate or be manipulated into unwanted or improper real world behaviour.

29. Particular care must be taken in social media links with children and young people. Refer to existing policies on safeguarding, including the frequently asked questions and the information specifically relating to online activities.

Church meetings and Christian conferring

30. The core purpose of meetings for the Methodist Church is to reach decisions for the benefit of the Church and its mission. All participants in meetings owe it to the other participants and the rest of the Church to give their full attention to the matters at hand, to be open to the views presented by others and to be open to God. Participants should not be preoccupied by anything else, such as engaging in social media.

31. At the heart of this issue is a simple one of courtesy. In a meeting of any kind, persistently or deliberately to give attention to something other than the speaker is discourteous to them. It is better to wait for a scheduled break or a transition when it is clear that there will be no business for a short period of time. In the future social media might become part of how meetings are conducted. But for now in meetings all have an obligation to give their attention to the matter at hand and the speaker currently speaking.

32. The paper "Expectations of various groups" sets out the terms under which different bodies meet, including the Conference, the Council, the SRC, the CLF and the Strategic Leaders. It makes it clear that the Council, the SRC and the Strategic Leaders all meet under the principle of collective responsibility.

33. Public meetings, such as the Conference in open session, can be "live blogged" by anyone in the public gallery. However, governance and other bodies should consider adopting the following depending on their particular needs:
    a) The prime duty in participating in a governance body is to contribute to this body's Christian conferring and decision making.
    b) All governance bodies, committees and other bodies of the Church should make clear to members, visitors and supporting staff the terms under which they meet.
    c) Any confidential matters, items discussed in closed session or personal or staffing matters should not be discussed at all outside the room.

Monitoring and reporting other online activity

34. Staff, ministers and others may follow the online activities of others even if they do not contribute themselves. In doing so they might come across erroneous claims that ought to be corrected or inappropriate personal information. In these cases, a judgement is required as to what to do with the information. Staff who come across something that might be of interest to others in the Team should send it to them, unless they have earlier had a polite request not to do so.

35. In the case of pastoral issues, care should be taken. Concerns should not be ignored, and if the person is known to the reader then a private personal contact is the best first course of action. If the reader does not know the writer well enough to feel comfortable to this, then it is best to send the information to the writer's line manager or equivalent.

36. Book VI Part 2 Guidance, Section 17, of CPD (Volume 2) contains guidance on handling sensitive or confidential pastoral care issues, including advice on social media, and should be studied by anyone involved in such matters.

Whistle blowing

37. The whistle blowing policy for Connexional Team staff makes clear that anyone who suspects fraud or other impropriety by a member of the Connexional Team should, in the first instance, raise the matter confidentially with one of the office holders listed in the policy. This initial contact can be in person, by phone or by email and the policy guarantees that the matters will be dealt with confidentially and respecting the anonymity of the original whistle blower where possible. Once raised, the issue will be investigated, followed by a preliminary investigation by the person receiving the complaint, and then a full investigation if the complaint appears to have foundation. The original whistle blower will be kept informed of the final conclusions and any action taken, and can appeal to the SRC if she or he is unsatisfied by the outcome. The policy makes it clear that all concerns raised will be taken seriously and acted on promptly, and that it demands that all staff in all areas of work operate to high standards of conduct and integrity.

38. In keeping with this policy, it would be wrong for anyone with reason to suspect improper behaviour by a member of the Team to raise it via social media. To make a complaint or allegation of that sort of serious wrong doing against a member of the Team without allowing the Church to first hold a proper investigation is unfair to the individuals involved and to the Church's processes.

RESOLUTIONS

21/1   The Conference commended Part 1 *Connexional Social Media Policy* to the whole
        Connexion as guidelines for good practice in engagement with social media.

21/2   The Conference directed that Part 1 be made available on the Connexional website,
        together with Part 2 as a background paper to provide more detail as required.

Appendix: Supporting information

Context and Glossary of Terms

Social media in a Methodist context

1. The last decade has seen a rapid growth in what is broadly known as social media. This
    includes personal weblogs, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and other web-based formats, some
    little known, some fading former giants and some new ideas that might become huge in the
    future. They enable ordinary people to put their own views, opinions or ideas online, or to
    make links through to other websites. Most of these are based on websites accessed through
    a computer, but increasingly some (notably Twitter) can be updated from an ordinary mobile
    phone. At the same time, increasingly powerful mobile phones such as the iPhone enable
    people to both read and write to these websites on the move or from in a meeting.

2. Websites such as YouTube and Flickr also make it easy to share and to view videos and
    photos free of charge. These are also easily shared amongst social networks through Twitter,
    Facebook etc. and can be viewed on iPhones and other advanced mobile phones.

3. The social dimension is based on the premise that people will use it in part to engage with
    others, whether those are friends or complete strangers. This is mainly done either by
    responding to other people's ideas on your own site, or by leaving a comment on other
    people's sites. Most sites give people a degree of control over comments: they can allow or
    deny comments altogether; they can allow them to be anonymous or require a username;
    they can choose to allow the comments to appear immediately unedited, or to apply some
    control over what does or doesn't appear.

4. There are tremendous opportunities presented by social media, as well as potential risks. We
    celebrate the opportunities presented by these new technologies and urge people with an
    interest to explore how they might use them in their own lives and as part of the mission of
    the Church, while responsibly considering the risks.

5. Social media technology is changing rapidly, and so are the social attitudes that accompany
    it. This is especially but not only true of younger generations. As a result, any attempt to
    generate rules based on current technology may be quickly out of date. These guidelines do
    not recommend any changes to Standing Orders since any attempt to be specific is likely to
    be quickly out of date. Instead they rely on the use of common sense, and on existing
    supervision structures within the Church, as applicable.

6. Methodist discipline relies on trust, rather than policing. These guidelines therefore as far as
    possible trust in people's common sense and that they will take responsibility for their
    actions.

7. Actions that are deliberately damaging or hurtful to the Church, to an individual or group
    within it, or that bring the Church into disrepute are already potentially disciplinary matters,
    whether they are carried out online or not (e.g. Standing Order 1100(1) refers to "ways which
    are damaging to themselves and others and which undermine the credibility of the Church's
    witness" as examples of things that give rise to complaints*.)*

8. These guidelines do not replace or supersede any existing Standing Orders.

9. Social media does not change our understanding of confidentiality or what is or is not acceptable to say. The Church expects all involved to respect confidences when they are included in them. Similarly, something that would be unacceptable to print in a circuit newsletter or the letters pages of the *Methodist Recorder* – for example – would be unacceptable to publish online.

10. The guidelines should not limit or prevent constructive debate or discussion through social media. People should be free to engage in discussions and debates within and beyond the Church on any topic, but should also remember their responsibilities to the Church or to any bodies they are members of when they do so. There is a wide range of opinion within the Church on some topics, and one of the attractive features about Methodism is our ability to disagree constructively.

11. There is a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour online, and this line will move with time. One of the benefits of a healthy online community is that it is this community that provides the best guidance to others and to itself. The aim of the Church should therefore be to foster healthy and active online and social media engagement.

Glossary

Blog or Weblog – personal website (sometimes shared with friends) on which regular articles – 'posts' – are published and comments are invited. These posts often include links to other 'blogs' or social media content. Blogs are free and take minutes to set up – e.g. at www.blogger.com

Facebook – the most popular social networking website, with over 400 million users worldwide. Build networks of 'friends': share what you are up to and keep tabs on what they are doing, leave messages, arrange social events, join in groups, campaigns, etc. www.facebook.com

Flickr – Upload your photos onto the web. These can be shared with others directly by sending them a link, or via searches for content on particular themes or topics. Flickr is the largest of these photo sites, but there are others.

MySpace – free web space where people (mostly young) share music, photos etc. It includes a message board. www.myspace.com

Smart phones – A mobile phone that makes it easy to send emails, browse the internet and upload content to websites / twitter / Facebook etc. In a couple of years it's likely the great majority of new phones will have these capabilities. Current brands are the iPhone, Blackberry and Android-based phones.

Trolls and flame wars – A troll is someone who picks, continues, or escalates, an argument online simply because they like arguing. A 'flame war' is an argument that will never end because at least two of the parties involved will never agree, change their position, or reach a compromise. Both are to be avoided because they can absorb an incredible amount of time without reaching a conclusion or even producing anything interesting or constructive. Both can be dispiriting because they can devolve into bad language or personal attacks.

Twitter – Increasingly popular. Sign up for an account and you can upload short messages of 140 characters called 'tweets'. People commonly 'tweet' regularly throughout the day, often using a mobile phone. People can 'follow' (i.e. view the tweets, or 'twitter stream') of anyone they like. Can respond to tweets.

YouTube – Video sharing website. Free and easy to upload video from your computer or mobile phone. Has caused controversy over copyright infringement. Lots of video is also user-generated, often from cameras on mobile phones. www.youtube.com