

## **Social media use - feedback from St Albans Diocesan Synod groupwork March 2019**

Over an extended coffee break, groups of Synod members discussed:

- a) Ways in which digital means could help their parishes to deliver Living God's Love;
- b) How their parishes might make a Christian response to tackling the issues arising from digitalisation.

They prepared one 'question' and one 'opportunity' arising from their discussion to feedback, as detailed below. They didn't always feedback exactly in this format, hence there are not twenty opportunities and twenty questions. All the feedback, is however, valuable and gives an insight into the needs of parishes in this area as well as their current level of engagement and experience. It is apparent that the current use of social media by parishes in the diocese is patchy and variable.

At the foot of this document is the result of an analysis done by Kate Ford, Communications Assistant and digital practitioner to support the work of the Communications Department in this area.

The feedback should be read in the light of these questions:

What is the purpose of supporting/encouraging parishes to engage with social media?

Is this in line with the purposes of Living God's Love? With which theme(s) can social media connect?

To what extent can synodical structures in the diocese be of use in spreading information and good practice about using social media in ways that are in line with Living God's Love?

### **Feedback from Deaneries**

1. We should do what makes us more human, looking for opportunities around creating presence and community - e.g celebrating Corpus Christi outside the church building - which was shared on social media.
2. Small, ageing and struggling churches find it hard to engage with social media. Maybe we need to be more counter-cultural, real, authentic.
3. Can digital media can help parishes with marketing? The church can also help with better protecting the vulnerable at risk from social media misuse.
4. Can the diocese help us to get more effective on Instagram? Can social media help us to be there for people when they need us. We should 'create circles of security'?
5. Can we tell stories from parishes which are working digitally. We must hold on to old forms of communications alongside new, mainly to help older people.

6. How can the church engage with non-PC users? Rural churches could use webinars, skype etc to maintain links with parishioners, especially the housebound?
7. Can we provide training on using appropriate platforms for virtual house groups etc - to create community? Could we also promote and support digital detox?
8. We need to bridge the gap between digital and non-digital worlds as well as use the opportunity to reach those who can't get to church.
9. If a church provides a communal space how does confidentiality get preserved? Would a webcam service let people link in?
10. We need to develop ethics and distinctiveness on social media. We need to use social media to drive people to face-to-face encounters.
11. We should ensure we include those who are not connected. With the speed of electronic communications how do we build in time for reflection? We must use social media to reinforce but not replace communities.
12. Christian parents have a responsibility to children. How can children help parents enhance their role as responsible parents given they don't understand much SM?
13. Could we have more training. We like new uses of video. Social media provides opportunities for creating community providing opportunities for co-working as well as offering detox.
14. Parishes need to learn how they can use it: suggest 80% of time is spent telling stories. We are concerned about people on phones not talking to each other.
15. Every parish should email out pew sheet. Can we use social media to listen to what's going on? Do we have to put limits on membership to limit abuse of them?
16. Can social media support young people in resilience and strength? We need to be using all tools where people are. Are there people beyond our communities who have time to put in quality posts - can we find who those people are?
17. People need to sign up for communications. We have used Church Suite - to support digital communication.
18. Can we learn from sister churches a more joined up approach? We need to take the temperature of congregations and find out how many are tech-savvy.
19. If this a priority, what resources are available? Young people have hunger for spirituality can this be met through media at deanery level?

20. We must consider digital safeguarding. Digital media should remind us that face to face is important.

### **Observations on parishes' feedback** (*Arun Kataria*)

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Among the ideas and opportunities, the needs that were self-disclosed were:

- A need for training
- A desire for clarity of purpose
- A need for knowledge about effective uses to which social media could be put as well as some clear insights into the value of social media, especially reaching those with whom the church is not in contact (...use SM for marketing, use SM for webinars and online services/talks, reinforcing community but not replacing it)
- There were inevitably some misunderstandings and confusions about how to run groups which were closed and other fora which are open and public. Both are possible, but require clear ground rules.
- A desire to be of help to those who were suffering through wrong uses of social media
- A desire to be promoters of digital media use and digital detox is not seen as conflicted - and this may be right. As well as using social media, the church should have a prominent place in promoting its right and safe uses.

Overall, the responses from Synod present, not unexpectedly, a mixed picture between people who see the potential to inhabit a different community as it is and bring the salt and light of Christian faith to it and those who see it as an opportunity to present the church exactly in the form it takes in the real world, but digitally. There is no doubt this is possible and effective to some degree, but misses the opportunity to create 'digital fresh expressions' which are better suited to the digital environment. Below are some practical ideas from Kate Ford.

### **Observations on parishes' use of Digital Media**

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(*Kate Ford*)

Having recently spent some time visiting the websites and social media pages for every church in the diocese, I have a number of observations:

- A big gap in online presence:
  - A number of parishes (10 or so) using the web and social media really well – connecting and conversing with their congregations and effectively promoting their church and its mission to others.
  - A large section in the middle who have a website and maybe one or two social media accounts, but these are not attractive or engaging, not regularly updated, not outward-looking in their focus, a basic bulletin board for their congregation rather than a welcoming shop window for others.
  - Some parishes with absolutely no web presence – no website or social media, and the very basic listing on ACNY with no services or additional information listed. As far as google is concerned, do they exist?!

What are the hurdles?

- Why are parishes struggling to get to grips with the web and social media?

- Lack of skills – both the technical expertise to get a website and/or social media accounts set up, and the communications know-how to keep these up to date and engaging.
- Lack of time - clergy who are time-pressed and don't see this as high enough up their priority list to get to grips with.
- Lack of understanding – fear of the unknown, negative portrayal of social media in the press.
- Lack of confidence – “we couldn't do that here, we're all over 70”.

#### What's possible?

- Using completely free tools, it is possible to set up a network of digital media channels to promote a church in a very time-efficient way:
  - A free Wordpress website, which is straightforward to update with new posts, articles, notices of services and events, reports etc, which then automatically:
  - Creates a post on a linked Facebook page
  - Creates a tweet in a linked Twitter account
  - Automatically generates a MailChimp e-newsletter which is sent weekly, fortnightly or monthly to a mailing list, (which could be, with their permission - the electoral roll, baptism and funeral families, wedding couples, toddler group parents, and any occasional visitors whose e-mail addresses can be collected)

This would require some technical skill to set up, but once it was up and running could be managed by someone with basic IT skills and understanding of social media, (ie someone who has their own personal Facebook account).

- To start with the simplest possible social media presence:
  - They begin with their own events/articles etc being automatically posted from their website.
  - We provide them with a schedule of posts they might like to share, or ready-made posts which they can copy and paste or edit if they wish.
  - As they get more familiar with running their accounts, we train them in sharing more personalised content – photos of the life of their church, starting conversations, reaching out to their local community through local groups, etc.
- An idea – could we recruit some 'digital angels' – web-savvy volunteers from thriving/younger parishes to partner up with a church with no digital skills to help them get an online presence?