Drouin Presbyterian Church
Knowing Jesus and Making Him Known

Internet Usage and Electronic Communication Policy

1. Purpose

1.1 Drouin Presbyterian Church is committed to the care, safety, welfare, and protection of all people, of all ages, within the congregation.

1.2 This policy sets out expected practice for ministry leaders within the church and provides guidance for those within the congregation with regards to safely and wisely using the internet (e.g. online resources, social media), and electronic communication.

1.3 This policy and related guidelines are designed to be an encouragement to use God-given wisdom in ways that honour the reputation of Christ and his gospel, knowing that one day we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

1.4 This policy and related guidelines are designed to enhance the benefits of internet usage and electronic communication in multiple ways, including the following:

- Communication regarding upcoming events
- Organisation of meetings and other activities
- Establishment of an online presence for the church
- Conduct of online worship services, Connect groups and meetings as necessary

1.5 This policy and related guidelines are designed to reduce the potential dangers and risks associated with internet usage and electronic communication in multiple ways, including the following:

- Cyber-bullying
- Breach of copyright
- Predatory behaviour
- Reputational damage due to the posting of information online in a public setting
- Exposure of young people to inappropriate material and interactions

2. Principles

2.1 We share life together in Christ ….

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

The Bible describes the church as God's household of dearly loved children, God's people bought with precious blood of Christ, a body with Christ as its head. Because we share life together in Christ, we must conduct ourselves with each other in lives of love and truthfulness. In our dealings with one another, there is no room for sinful anger, envy, slander, gossip, sexual immorality, and bitterness.

Rather, we should speak the truth to each other in love, clothing ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. God did not save us to be isolated individuals, but to belong to his church. Therefore, we should relate to each other in a way that reflects this reality with love.

In addition, we should give ourselves to think about "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8).

2.2 We represent Christ in the world ….

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

As people who have experienced the great mercy of God, we now bear the privilege of representing Christ in the world so that others can come to experience that same mercy. Although we are to live as aliens and strangers in the world, we are conscious that we are always being watched by the

world and there is no anonymity on the internet. Therefore, we are to live such good lives that people see our good deeds and praise God our Father. We must take care that our conduct does not bring dishonour to Jesus. In all that we do and say, we must be eager to maintain our reputation with those outside the church for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2.3   Therefore ....

Ministry leaders have a duty of care and responsibility to all those under their leadership and are held accountable by God to a higher level of godliness as well as specific requirements from Australia's governing bodies (e.g. mandatory reporting). As such, the appropriate, transparent, safe and wise use of the internet and electronic communication is critical to their role within and for the church, taking care that online/electronic conduct does not bring dishonour to Jesus.

The internet and means of electronic communication provide valuable tools for interaction with one another and groups within the congregation, in addition to interaction with the wider community. Although these resources can bring many benefits and creative ways of interaction, there are also risks and dangers associated with their use.

3.   Scope

3.1   This policy is specifically relevant to those who hold ministry leadership positions within the church but is also a resource for all those within the congregation at Drouin Presbyterian Church Victoria.

3.2   This policy should be read in conjunction with the PCV's *Safe Church Code of Conduct* and *Online and Smart Phone Usage Guidelines.*

4.   Definitions

4.1   *PCV* refers to the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.

4.2   *Ministry leaders* refers to ministers/pastors, elders, youth pastors and other staff members, as well as lay leaders of any church group who hold some form of pastoral responsibility and therefore power over others (e.g. Connect group leaders, youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, children's ministry leaders, prayer group leaders).

4.3   *Elders* refers to the appointed leaders within the church, with *Session* being the name given to the collective of elders.

4.4   *Young people/person* refers to any person under 18 years of age and includes all infants, children and youth associated with Drouin Presbyterian Church.

4.5   *Online resources* refer to all websites accessible via the internet.

4.6   *Social media* refers to online applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, blogs, etc.

4.7   *Electronic communication* refers to email, text messaging, What's App and Facebook Messenger, and includes video conferencing applications such as Zoom, Skype and Facetime.

4.8   *Virtual world* refers to any form of internet or smart-phone interaction, communication, or information sourcing.

4.9   *Physical world* refers to interactions between people, groups and community that are face-to-face and have a physical presence.

4.10 *Personal details* refer to information such as an individual's surname, home address, email address, phone numbers, date of birth/birthdays, personal bank account details and other private information.

5.   Policy

5.1   Online/electronic interactions – general

5.1.1   Healthy and safe boundaries with one another are to occur in the virtual world just as required in the physical world.

5.1.2   Bullying, threatening behaviour, stalking behaviour, predatory behaviour, and any unwanted attention are inappropriate and not tolerated in the virtual world, just as they are not acceptable in the physical world. Where there is evidence of such behaviours on any online/electronic platform, the church elders are to be informed and will act accordingly, with the potential for legal authorities to be involved.

5.1.3 Laws involving duty of care responsibilities and mandatory reporting of any suspected abuse/threats/neglect/exploitation of young people, the elderly and other vulnerable adults apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.

5.1.4 The PCV's *Safe Church* policies that relate to ministry with children equally apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.

5.1.5 All users of online/electronic communication need to be aware that there are 'sexting' laws in Victoria that make certain types of online/electronic communication a criminal offence.

5.1.6 All those at Drouin Presbyterian Church are to be aware that any form of online/electronic communication is not confidential as it may be shared or reposted at any time to other people.

5.1.7 Information relating to the personal details of any person may only be shared on the internet or included in electronic communications, with their permission, and only as required of ministry leaders and contacts for church-based ministries and events. This includes church group emails or social networking groups associated with the church.

5.1.8 To ensure the privacy of an individual's emails, the blind carbon copy (bcc) field should be used by ministry leaders when sending group emails as this prevents email addresses being shared without permission.

5.1.9 Ministry leaders who are taking photos or videoing events for public use or for online media need to make participants aware of this prior to proceeding and secure media release forms from adults and parents/guardians of young people involved for any images that are to be published in any format. Names of young people are not to be published and under no circumstances are photos or videos to be used of people in compromising situations.

5.2 Online/electronic interactions – with young people

5.2.1 When conversing with young people through online/electronic means, the normal PCV Safe Church principles apply, including:

- o Acknowledgement that God is listening and that all conversations should be honouring to God

- o The young person's parents should always feel comfortable if they were to hear or read conversations taking place without any concerns about the content

- o Transparency is essential in all circumstances, including online interactions

- o When dealing with issues that a leader feels are beyond their ability to deal with, they are to refer the young person to another leader who is better equipped to deal with the issue

- o Care being taken to ensure an appropriate balance of transparency and confidentiality so that the private concerns of others are not disclosed or revealed improperly.

- o In ordinary circumstances, whilst providing pastoral care to, or working with members of the opposite sex, striving to do so in an environment that allows visual surveillance and, where reasonable, having other people within hearing distance.

5.2.2 The safety of young people is to be prioritised whenever interacting with anyone under 18 years of age, whether in the virtual world or the physical world.

5.2.3 Due to the power imbalance between ministry leaders and young people, it is important to always seek transparency in communication. In the physical world, this involves windows and the presence of other ministry leaders. In the virtual world, it involves *two ministry leaders* maintaining visual contact with each other whenever they engage in group ministry with young people via video conferencing and multiple leader inclusion whenever engaging in online/electronic communication with the group.

5.2.4 Session authorisation is required for any formal group ministry to young people using video conferencing. For the protection of young people and ministry leaders, two ministry leaders are to be present before a young person is 'accepted' to join the group and all young people are to leave the group prior to both ministry leaders leaving and closing the group event.

5.2.5 Emails and text messaging are best to be used as a 'one-way' form of communicating factual/event information with a group – this being clearly communicated to the group participants – and ministry leaders must include other ministry leaders and parents/guardians into any correspondence, ensuring that 'bcc' is used to protect privacy.

5.2.6 It is recommended by the PCV Safe Church Unit that ministry leaders not use social media sites to interact with young people in order to reduce the known risk to child safety from grooming and to acknowledge that some parents/guardians have a 'no social media' rule for their children.

5.2.7 Parents/guardians of young people participating in online ministry are required to provide permission for their child to be involved. Permission can be in the form of an email, letter, or via an approved form to Session and/or ministry leaders.

5.2.8 It is recommended that young people engage in video conferencing/communication in an open part of their home for maximum security. Parents/guardians are to be aware of the details of the online ministry and the relevant people to contact if they have concerns.

5.2.9 Any direct one-to-one communication by telephone/mobile must have prior parental/guardian permission, must be between a leader and young person of the same gender and is to be conducted in an open area where other adults could potentially overhear the interaction.

5.2.10 Use of video conferencing for one-to-one communication is reserved for exceptional circumstances and then only with prior permission of Session.

5.2.11 Due to the disparity of power, ministry leaders are not to send 'friend' requests to young people or accept 'friend' requests from young people. All requests of the latter are to be directed to the online church-sanctioned group for public communication. (Adults within the congregation who are not ministry leaders need to be discerning regarding 'friend' requests with young people and should err on the side of caution.) It is recognised that some ministry leaders and other adults in the congregation may have legitimate pre-existing relationships with young people (e.g. they are related), however all interactions need to adhere to the basic Safe Church principles when interacting with young people for the safety of all involved.

5.2.12 It is not considered appropriate for ministry leaders to ordinarily use messaging apps or in-game messaging to communicate individually with young people under their ministry leadership, however, if messaging through social media platforms needs to occur it must have parental knowledge and permission and all interactions must have the inclusion of a second ministry leader, who has the ability to observe but may remain silent, throughout the whole communication.

5.2.13 If a situation arises where a young person sends an inappropriate image or message, whether publicly or privately, to a ministry leader via any form of online/electronic communication, the ministry leader must not reply under any circumstances. The ministry leader must not delete the message/image and must immediately notify a minister/pastor or elder, who will then contact the Safe Church Unit for advice as to how to proceed. These matters must be treated seriously irrespective of the person's motivation for sending the message.

5.3 Specific online/electronic conduct – social media

5.3.1 Some social media options available, such as Facebook, are a helpful way for the entire church group to converse in a public setting. If such groups are utilised, stringent privacy settings are required to protect and shield all those involved in the group from viewing content that may be inappropriate or misconstrued, or that may expose privacy information to potential online predators.

5.3.2 Online groups need to clearly communicate the required behavioural agreements for involvement in the group. Issues addressed in the behavioural agreements may include the following:

o Appropriate language

o Eligibility of membership to join the social networking group (e.g. age restrictions, member of church)

- o   Reasons for removal from social networking group (e.g. moving away, leaving the church community, becoming too old for the youth group, ministry leaders leaving to minister elsewhere or exclusion from ministry for other reasons)

- o   Appropriate and inappropriate behaviour (e.g. no cyber-bullying) and the consequences for inappropriate behaviour

- o   Who, how and when photos and video can be added to a group (e.g. people may tag themselves but must not tag others)

- o   Compliance with mandatory reporting laws regarding suspected abuse

5.4   Specific online/electronic conduct – video conferencing

5.4.1   Any church meeting conducted via video conferencing involving, or with the potential to involve, young people must be protected and operate as a 'private event' by using a Meeting ID *and* password. This helps to prevent 'bombing' by unauthorised and uninvited participants.

5.4.2   The host is responsible for checking the identity of each person entering the meeting. Use of a 'waiting room' facility will easily facilitate this.

5.4.3   Ministry leaders and anyone posting videos or participating in video conferencing need to consider the appropriateness of their surroundings, state of dress, language and others who may be visible during the meeting.

5.4.4   Two ministry leaders must be present in any Drouin Presbyterian Church video conferencing events with young people, and if using breakout rooms, at least one ministry leader and at least 2 or more young people are required to be present in each breakout room.

5.4.5   It is recommended that the in-meeting chat facility, file transfer and screen-sharing options are disabled for public events and only used by the host if necessary. This is particularly important if young people are involved to prevent any unsolicited content being displayed. Shared links are also not to be clicked on in an 'open' meeting. In a 'closed' group meeting, these options may be enabled at the host's discretion.

5.4.6   Recordings of video conferencing meetings is an option and users of video conferencing must take care to be aware of the recording status. If recording is conducted, clear, documented and informed consent is required from participants. In the case of recording when young people are involved consent is required from both the young person and a parent/guardian. Informed consent requires an understanding of the potential benefits and harms of producing a permanent record of conversations. Requests for consent must include a clear explanation of how the recording will be stored, used and transmitted.

5.4.7   It is important that a minister/pastor or elder remains with any unidentified person who has joined a church 'open' group meeting, and only those who are known and identified can be placed into 'breakout' rooms.

5.4.8   It is important that the host of any video conferencing meeting makes the group members aware that inappropriate behaviour will result in an individual's video being turned off or a meeting will be immediately ended for everyone involved. The latter will occur in the instance of any offensive material being posted.

5.4.9   Due to the unavailability of end-to-end encryption on Zoom, all those using this platform for communication need to be mindful of what they share, write, transfer or screen-share. Information shared must not be considered confidential as there is no anonymity on the internet.

6. **Policy Implementation**

6.1   This policy is to be distributed to all those in ministry leadership roles at Drouin Presbyterian Church.

6.2   This policy, is to be available on the church website. Information regarding its existence, location and the need for it to be read by all those involved in electronic church communication/interaction is to be promoted in church newsletters twice a year.

7. **Policy Review**

    7.1   This policy is to be reviewed every two years by the elders at Drouin Presbyterian Church.

    7.2   The next review of this policy is due to be conducted in November 2027.

8. **Other Resources**

    8.1   Presbyterian Church of Victoria – Safe Church Unit: www.safechurchpcv.org.au

    8.2   eSafety: www.esafety.gov.au