

GENERAL SYNOD

PRIVATE MEMBER'S MOTION – BULLYING BY LAY OFFICERS

That this Synod, recognising:

- a) that bullying is unacceptable behaviour within the Church of God, whether by clergy or lay people, and where it exists needs to be addressed; and*
- b) the serious pastoral problems and unfairness that arise while clergy can be subject to penalties for bullying that include prohibition and removal from office but there is no means of disqualifying a churchwarden, PCC member or other lay officer who is guilty of bullying from holding office;*

request the Archbishops' Council to bring forward legislative proposals which would enable a churchwarden, PCC member or other lay officer who was found to have conducted him- or her-self in such a manner to be disqualified from holding office.

Summary

Bullying should have no place in any environment, least of all in the Body of Christ, the community of those who are redeemed by the Cross and bound together by Christ's command to love one another. Yet the lives of clergy and lay people are scarred by bullying behaviour in church which would not be tolerated in other contexts.

This PMM addresses the subject of bullying behaviour in church contexts and addresses a fundamental unfairness between the treatment of clergy and lay officers. If a priest is guilty of bullying behaviour the priest can rightly be disciplined, resulting (in the most serious cases) in prohibition and removal from office. However lay officers guilty of persistent bullying can neither be removed from office nor disqualified from future election.

This lack of effective sanction means that bullying behaviour is allowed to go unchecked with deeply harmful consequences which affect laity as well as clergy and can blight the life of a parish. Whilst welcoming the Chelmsford motion, calling for consideration to be given to a code of practice for PCCs, this motion goes further. It seeks actual legislative change which would allow a churchwarden, PCC member or lay officer found guilty of bullying to be disqualified from holding office in the church.

Introduction

1. Bullying and harassment are unacceptable behaviours in any environment – and none more so than in the Church, a community bound together by the command of Christ, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' (John 13.34). St Paul wrote, 'Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.' (Romans 13.10) Though love should therefore be second nature to us as Christians, tragically evidence from across the Church shows that some laity and some clergy are repeatedly subjected to unacceptable behaviour.
2. As Exeter Diocese's *Clergy Dignity in Ministry* policy¹ helpfully reminds us, ultimately all power comes from and belongs to God who, through the Holy Spirit, creates, nurtures,

¹ Exeter Diocese, [Clergy-Dignity-in-Ministry-July-2022.pdf \(anglican.org\)](https://www.anglican.org.uk/media/1000000/2022-07-20-clergy-dignity-in-ministry-policy-2022.pdf), p6

enables and empowers human beings. This is power in its perfect form, flowing in relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. It is the power which sets people free to become all that God intended them to be. Clergy have access to a variety of different sources of power such as by virtue of their ordination, their role as an office holder (not employee) and as the Chair of a trustee body. Pastoral care of people at vulnerable times of their lives such as crisis, sickness or bereavement also involves imbalances of power that need to be borne in mind.

3. Power in the context of human relationships is having agency and influence and may be used for good or ill. It includes the capacity to influence the behaviour, thoughts, emotions and attitudes of other people. This is the power to make things happen in human society or to resist and prevent change and is derived from a variety of sources. It is life enhancing when used well but is damaging and potentially dangerous when used to dominate or control. There is a greater risk of power being used badly when:
 - We do not recognise that we have power or how we are using it.
 - We fear losing it or try to possess it, rather than sharing it and allowing it to flow amongst the community, for the good of all.²
4. Bullying and harassment involve the misuse and abuse of power. They are more likely to arise where there are significant power differentials (or perceived power differentials), power structures are complex, or there are many informal sources of power and where people feel threatened, anxious or insecure.³

What is bullying?

5. The words bullying and harassment are often used interchangeably. Harassment is defined in the Equality Act 2010 and is illegal in relation to certain 'protected characteristics'⁴. Unlike harassment, bullying is not defined by law, but may be characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power, through means intended to undermine, humiliate or injure the recipient.⁵

What is the effect?

6. Since raising this subject in General Synod in July 2022 I have been inundated with distressing correspondence from clergy and clergy spouses who have been subjected to bullying and harassment. One typical priest described the situation as follows:

It's the drip, drip, drip – not one major incident but constant attempts to undermine, criticise, and exercise control that defines my experience of a bully in the congregation. Moving to a new parish with over 30 years ordained ministry behind me, I'd negotiated tricky situations in the past so felt I had the experience to deal with most circumstances. But right from the off there was continual criticism of my approach to worship and mission 'we don't do it like that here', and I was publicly 'told off' for a new approach I had taken. I take a collaborative approach to leadership; decisions agreed by the team, were reversed after meetings without any reference to me. The bully would only work on their terms with a certain group of likeminded people. People I had encouraged to take part were dismissed and replaced.

² Ibid, p6

³ See also, *Clergy Dignity in Ministry – Bullying and Harassment Policy*, Diocese of Blackburn, 2023

⁴ [Harassment - Discrimination at work - Acas](#)

⁵ Ibid.

Once the bully had eventually left the church others came forward and acknowledged they had felt frightened, and their views dismissed. The senior staff, although pastorally extremely supportive, openly acknowledged that 'they couldn't do anything'. There was access to good counselling resources to deal with the aftermath, but there was nothing to help before I got to that point, it's sink or swim. You feel you are on your own with it.

7. At the same time there are many disturbing examples of lay officers bullying other lay members of the congregation. This in part has given rise to the Chelmsford Diocesan Synod motion, asking for a review into the possibility of a Code of Conduct for PCC members. It is important to note that the origin of the Chelmsford motion came not from clergy seeking control, but from churchwardens in a deanery who found themselves unable to remove a PCC member whose behaviour repeatedly fell short of acceptable standards.
8. The impact of bullying and harassment can be devastating, on mental health, on physical health, on the breakdown of relationships, and the blighting of local Christian communities. If a churchwarden or lay officer is exercising controlling or bullying behaviour it is not just the priest who is the victim – the rest of the PCC and the congregation also experience the same behaviour and are frightened to speak out or stand up to a person who is abusing their power or role. Indeed there are some parishes which bishops are reluctant to recommend to prospective applicants, knowing that a series of previous incumbents have been hounded out of office.
9. In today's society such behaviour is not tolerated, neither in the workplace nor in the Charity Sector nor other organisations with paid workers and volunteers. For example the Scout organisation, which has a large volunteer workforce, has clear policies and procedures in place, and many NHS trust have policies to deal with physical and non-physical aggression.⁶ In the Church we should be no less diligent in protecting our ordained staff and our lay volunteers from bullying behaviour. We already have a clear procedure in cases where a member of the clergy is the cause. The Clergy Discipline Measure (soon to be replaced by the Clergy Conduct Measure) can be invoked which provides a range of possible penalties ranging from Rebuke to, in extreme cases, prohibition and removal from office. Similar approaches are available in respect of laity employed within the Church through properly structured grievance procedures. However where the bully is a lay officer or PCC member there is no effective sanction.
10. A great deal of work has been undertaken inside and outside Synod to reform the working of the Clergy Discipline Measure to provide a better, speedier and fairer way to handle complaints of unacceptable behaviour by the clergy. Now it is time for Synod to give its attention to providing effective legislation to deal with situations where a lay person is guilty of bullying behaviour. This will remedy the current injustice and greatly improve the wellbeing of the clergy, to which Synod has committed itself, most recently in the Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing, as well as providing protection for laity who may find themselves being bullied by lay officers.⁷

What is lacking in current legislation?

11. Where a bully is an elected lay person (in any capacity), neither the Churchwardens Measure nor the Church Representation Rules provide a means of disqualification. Under

⁶ For the Scout Association see [Volunteer Anti-Bullying and Harassment Policy & Procedures | Scouts](#); for the NHS see, for example, [security-and-management-of-violence-and-aggression-policy.pdf \(solent.nhs.uk\)](#)

⁷ The Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing was made an Act of Synod in February 2020. [Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing | The Church of England](#)

the Churchwardens Measure 2001 the only powers to disqualify a candidate relate to one of the following:

- a) being disqualified from being a charity trustee under section 72(1) of the Charities Act 1993
- b) if their name is included in a barred list (within the meaning of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006)
- c) if they have been convicted of any offence mentioned in Schedule 1 to the Children and Young Persons Act 1933
- d) being disqualified under the Incumbents (Vacation of Benefices) Measure 1977.⁸

12. The last of these is the only one which could be used to address bullying by lay officers. The Incumbents (Vacation of Benefices) Measure allows the Bishop, where satisfied that the behaviour of a churchwarden or PCC member has contributed to the breakdown of the pastoral relationship, to disqualify them from office.⁹ However this legislation has proved unsatisfactory on a number of counts and because it is almost never invoked does not provide an effective, timely or proportionate remedy.

13. There is a power under the Churchwardens Measure to suspend a churchwarden for a period, but only if they are arrested on suspicion or charged with an offence involving a minor or vulnerable adult.¹⁰ The original draft of the Churchwardens Measure gave the power to the Bishop to remove a churchwarden in certain other circumstances but this provision was removed at Drafting stage, before the Measure was approved by the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament. This has created a situation that is manifestly unfair, where clergy who bully lay people can rightly be disciplined, but lay officers who bully or harass clergy or laity face no sanction or redress.

14. In relation to PCC members the situation is almost identical in that there are no powers to remove them from the PCC unless they are convicted of an offence involving a minor or vulnerable adult. Again they can be suspended while such an allegation is investigated.¹¹ Elected officers guilty of such behaviour could of course be voted out of office at the next election, but this does not provide a satisfactory remedy when other members of the congregation may be afraid to stand up to the individual concerned, or no one else may be willing to stand for election.

15. This private member's motion seeks to start the process of properly addressing this injustice and demonstrating that bullying behaviour, whether by priests or lay people, is unacceptable behaviour within the Body of Christ.

What about a Code of Conduct?

16. Synod members will also be aware of the Chelmsford diocesan synod motion, which would ask Archbishops' Council to consider drawing up a Code of Conduct for PCC members and lay volunteers.

17. Many dioceses already commend the good practice of having a PCC code of conduct, reviewed and approved by the PCC at the first meeting after the annual parochial church meeting, and some dioceses provide a template for such a code. If a PCC votes to approve a Code of Conduct at the start of each year, it provides a useful reference point for any

⁸ Churchwardens Measure 2001, (Section 2), [Churchwardens Measure 2001 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹ Incumbents (Vacation of Benefices) Measure 1977, Section 10, [Incumbents \(Vacation of Benefices\) Measure 1977 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁰ Churchwardens Measure 2001, (Section 6a), [Churchwardens Measure 2001 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

¹¹ The Church Representation Rules 2022 (Rules 68-71 inclusive) [Church Representation Rules online - part 7 | The Church of England](#)

PCC member to refer to when the behaviour of another member contravenes that code of conduct.

18. If the Archbishops' Council is minded to do so, drawing up a Code of Conduct could be part of its response to this motion. However legislation would also be needed, as a code of conduct in itself is insufficient to deal with the issue of bullying. Without any effective legal sanction (such as disqualification) there would remain a fundamental imbalance between the treatment of clergy, who can be removed from office after due process, and lay officers who (at present) cannot.

What about licensed lay ministers?

19. Reference has been made above to the need for legislation which would cover bullying behaviour by churchwardens and elected PCC members. However there is another important category of lay leader within a parish, namely that of licensed lay ministers and lay workers, who also exercise power and responsibility. Licensed lay ministers and lay workers give of themselves hugely in the service of Christ, but again abuses of power do occasionally occur. The bishop does currently have the right to remove a licence in certain circumstances, but it would be wise for the rules governing licensed lay ministers and lay workers to be reviewed as part of a joined-up anti-bullying policy for the Church as a whole.

What is now required?

20. This motion does not specify the specific way the current unfairness should be resolved. It simply asks the Archbishops' Council to bring forward legislative proposals which would enable a churchwarden, PCC member or other lay officer who is found guilty of bullying to (in the most serious cases) be disqualified from holding office.
21. There is a wealth of experience to draw on in the grievance procedures and bullying and harassment policies of current organisations, both religious and secular. An approach is needed that provides for a proper and impartial consideration of the facts and evidence (including the views of those thought to be causing the problem and those affected) as would be the case in any contemporary grievance procedure.
22. There would be a range of possible outcomes. One outcome might be a conclusion that no adverse behaviour has actually been demonstrated. Where adverse behaviour is found to have taken place, in some cases a rebuke or formal warning may be the appropriate outcome. However in more serious cases a PCC needs to have the right to remove from its membership a member who consistently fails to uphold acceptable standards of behaviour. And, in extreme cases, the Bishop should have the power to disqualify a person from being elected to office again as a churchwarden or PCC member or holding office as a lay officer.
23. This motion trusts the wisdom of the Archbishops' Council to consult appropriately and bring appropriate legislative proposals to a future Synod. In so doing, I pray that this will help to remove a grievous stain on the life of the church, and enable all clergy and lay leaders to work together safely and without fear for the furtherance of God's Kingdom.

Venerable Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn, GS 69

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