

**Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests
(Resolution of Disputes Procedure) Regulations 2014**

**Report of the Independent Reviewer for 2023
to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York**

1. This is the ninth annual report required by Regulation 30 of the Bishops and Priests (Resolution of Disputes Procedure) Regulations 2014 and my first full year report since becoming Independent Reviewer in December 2022.
2. I began the year with a number of conversations and briefings having read the Annual and specific reports of my predecessors and have continued to liaise with the Standing Commission during the year.

Grievances Received under the Regulations

3. No grievances under Regulations 9-15 were referred to me during 2023.

Concerns received under the Regulations

4. I received six letters during the year and I conducted enquiries into two of these.

A parish in the Diocese of Oxford

5. The first of these was received in January 2023 and raised concerns about the operation of the Declaration in respect the appointment of a female curate to a parish which had a resolution in place and the actual or perceived influence of the diocese on the parish in the rescinding of resolutions. The matter clearly fell within my jurisdiction as Independent Reviewer and I therefore went on to consider whether it was of a nature to justify inquiry under Regulation 27.
6. Having reviewed the documents presented to me, and taking legal advice, I concluded that the matter had the potential for wider application and did meet the bar for consideration under Regulation 27.
7. The concerns centred on the timing of an offer of a female self-supporting curate to a parish which had resolutions in place. Specifically the complainant suggested that the offer of the curate could be seen to put pressure on the PCC to rescind its resolutions and that the offer was in contravention of paragraph 23 of the Declaration in relation to the appointment.
8. On review of the documentation it was clear that the matter related to informal arrangements which were being put in place to supplement the curate's experience and that the curate was not being licenced or appointed to the parish. I therefore concluded that the Bishop of Oxford and those acting on the Bishop's behalf had not contravened paragraph 23 of the Declaration in relation to the making of an appointment, however there had been a breach of

paragraph 23 in that insufficient attention had been paid to Canon C 8.2(a) when the initial discussions took place with the parish. I recommended that the diocese review its processes in relation to informal arrangements involving parishes with resolutions in place to ensure that the process is clear, understood and applied.

The See of Blackburn

9. In April I received the second, a substantial submission from WATCH, submitted by the Chair, in relation to the nomination of a diocesan bishop to the see of Blackburn. The concerns raised focussed on the conduct of the nomination process and the failure to fully implement the recommendations of my predecessor's report on the Nomination to the See of Sheffield. The draft report is being checked prior to publication.

The other correspondence

10. The other letters and supporting information received were reviewed to see whether they were within my jurisdiction as Independent Reviewer and, if they were, whether they met the criteria for action under Regulation 27 of the Declaration. They were:
 - a. The first of these letters was received in January and was from an individual questioning the conduct of the Annual Parochial Church Meeting and assembly of the Electoral Roll in a parish which had resolutions in place. The complainant was seeking to make a 'formal complaint for investigation' however the matter did not meet the Regulation 8 criteria as it was made by an individual not a Parochial Church Council. I explained this to the complainant. I requested further information in order to be able to decide whether the matter met the criteria for enquiries under Regulation 27. Having reviewed that information I remained of the view that the matter did not meet the criteria for further consideration.
 - b. In February I received correspondence from a retired priest in relation to the conduct of his parish priest towards him. Both shared the same views in relation to the exercise of priestly ministry by women, the parish had resolutions in place and this was a personal matter between the individuals and the diocesan bishop and not a matter concerning the arrangements in place for ministry in the parish.
 - c. In June I received a letter from a priest who had been nominated for an honour but had not been awarded one. The letter contended that the honour had been blocked due to the individual's theological position in relation to the priestly ministry of women. After taking advice I responded indicating that this was not a matter within the jurisdiction of the independent Reviewer.

- d. In December, a priest wrote to me about the conduct of his Area Dean, reporting that they had been making 'offensive comments' about the Five Guiding Principles and citing other poor behaviour towards him and others who share his view on the exercise of ministry by women. Having reviewed the correspondence and taking legal advice, I concluded that the matter did not concern arrangements under the Declaration but was a matter for consideration under the disciplinary processes of the Church of England.

Other correspondence received

11. Towards the end of the year, I received and accepted an invitation, to meet with the Dean of Women's Ministry in Sheffield diocese, one with an unusually high proportion of parishes under Extended Episcopal Oversight, to hear about the work of their Mutual Flourishing Group.

Other activity

12. I have also met with House of Bishops Standing Commission and separately with the Chair and Vice-Chair, to discuss the interrelation of our work and taking forward of recommendations, and with the Secretary General.

Maggie Swinson

January 2023