



Pastoral Guidance

for clergy facing potential
breakdown of relationships in
church life



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[to be read alongside ‘Relating Well Together’]

1. The Church is both the body of Christ and a place that broken people come to be reshaped by the Gospel and community of believers. It is to be expected that conflict will emerge both as the church expresses God-given difference and as our brokenness manifests in more or less obvious ways. As clergy and church members, we recognise that conflict exposes our wounds, and we pray for the help of the Spirit as we care for one another. **Our Diocesan Parish Support Team seeks to become a learning organisation**, where complaints or criticism enable us to grow, adapt and improve the service we offer to God and our communities. We hope that PCCs will adopt the same posture.

2. Conflict is not a problem to be solved, but something that is always there. However, there is good conflict and bad conflict: healthy ways of handling difference and growing through it, and destructive ways of suppressing difference and enabling one party to win. Our approach as a Diocesan Parish Support Team is to **face conflict calmly and hopefully**. We will support PCCs to adopt the same attitude.

3. The Diocesan Parish Support Team recognise that conflict evokes strong feelings, sometimes disproportionate to the level of disagreement, perhaps as a result of past trauma. Leaders may find that conflict triggers high stress responses in themselves or others. Supervision, coaching or confidential counselling can help us reflect upon and increase the choice of responses available to us. **The Diocese of Ely undertakes to offer appropriate support for those in leadership.**

4. The Diocese of Ely offers training in working with conflict. It is highly recommended that all clergy and lay leaders avail themselves of that training. Details of training courses can be obtained from the Ministry & Mission Department.

5. Through our teaching office, clergy can normalise the expression of difference. Our Bishops encourage clergy to teach from the scriptures that **conflict is normal**, and an opportunity to learn and grow (e.g. *1 Sam 8; Gal 2.11-21; Matt 18*). If we deny the existence or usefulness of conflict, we make it harder for people to disagree well, and foster win/lose types of conversation or avoidance. Conflict co-exists with love; conflict divides us, but love pulls us together (*Col 3.14*).

6. As conflicts emerge, clergy and Diocesan Central Support Team can adopt a non-anxious presence, characterised by listening, asking questions, humility and prayer. **Modelling inquisitiveness** instead of defensiveness allows discernment. Trying to help people articulate what is causing pain aids the flourishing of the body of Christ.

7. Even as the Diocesan Parish Support Team and parochial clergy try to lead, proposing plans and initiating change, it is important to **invite disagreement**: giving time for people to ask questions, encouraging open disagreement, purposefully including the voices of those who perceive any change as negative, deliberately consulting the quiet and those often excluded.

8. When tempers become frayed, as often they will in matters of significance, we are all responsible for keeping participants safe. Determining **ground rules** before discussing difficult issues helps to contain conflict. Checking in with people after meetings where conflict has been exposed, can also help people process their emotions healthily. The Code for the Conduct of Clergy has helpful guidance in this area.

9. Conflict may manifest in many ways: shouting, silence, emails, social media posts, gossip, withdrawal. In general, the approach of moving towards people who express unhappiness (sometimes called “**moving towards conflict**”) is better than avoidance. It is usually better to speak to people than send emails or letters. The Diocesan Parish Support Team will seek to model this behaviour.

10. Conflict sometimes indicates that processes are not clear, or procedures have not been explained. Written terms of reference for groups, complaint policies, simple explanations of ecclesiastical processes all help people to understand when, where and how to make their voice heard. As a diocesan parish support team, we will endeavour to model transparency and clarity in our processes, whilst recognising that every complaint is an opportunity to clarify these processes. We will ensure that the Diocese of Ely has a **complaints policy** that is publicly available; we encourage PCCs to do the same.

11. Typically, when hostile comments are made via written communications, it is wise not to respond immediately (even on social media, where comments can escalate quickly). **Seek advice quickly** if complainants threaten to escalate conflict or involve other parties. Advice might be sought from: your Archdeacon or Rural Dean, a cell group, a mentor, or diocesan parish support team, including the Communications Officer, if complainants threaten to involve the media.

12. As soon as conflict rises above simple disagreement, and high emotions seem to be involved, it is wise to **keep a written log** of the episode: save any emails sent or received, keep a diary, make a written note of conversations. Processing information in this way may help you determine a course of action; it may also help you if you experience bullying or a complaint is made against you. Data protection regulations need to be observed.

13. Handling conflict can be exhausting and stressful. Leaders need to **share the burden** of responsibility, find places to process strong emotions and have protected time and space from the pressure of handling angry or hurting people. Forming a team around the leader can be achieved either within the traditional structures of parish life (e.g. staff team or clergy and wardens) or via extra-parochial structures (e.g. chapter, cell group, Sheldon Hub, counsellor or mentor). Clergy can ask for a mentor at any point in their ministry (contact the Mission and Ministry Dept) or seek professional counselling or support (via **clergy.counselling@elydiocese.org**).

14. Bishops and Archdeacons may have to oversee processes in a formal or informal complaints. Nonetheless they also seek to offer pastoral care to the clergy and churchwardens involved. Sometimes this will lead to conflicts of interest, which will be managed by **clear division of responsibilities**: i.e. one senior clergy offering pastoral care, whilst another conducts the formal process.

15. Clergy and churchwardens are encouraged to **involve senior clergy** early in any potential relational breakdown despite legitimate concerns that the same clergy may have to assume a formal role at a later stage. Usually, different senior clergy will conduct processes, if colleagues have been involved in support earlier. Rural Deans will always remain outside any disciplinary process, so that they can support clergy colleagues.

16. We live in an increasingly litigious and assertive culture; the Church of England has not always handled complaints well. As we start to use more formal processes to handle complaints, we may see complaints rise. Therefore, an attitude that sees complaints as part of a healthy culture of feedback will serve us better than one where complaints are seen as failure. Both formal and informal complaint processes assume that clergy will often be accompanied in the investigation process. Clergy are invited to consider the benefits of **joining a trade union** and **taking out insurance against CDM** (available from EIG).

17. The boundary between legitimate complaint and bullying can quickly become blurred as tempers rise or hopes are not met. The Diocese of Ely **Bullying and Harassment Policy** gives guidance in how the Diocese will support those who feel that they are the victims of bullying and harassment. Familiarity with the legal definitions of bullying and harassment in that policy may help catch situations earlier, before lasting damage is inflicted.

18. Your Bishop, Senior Clergy and the Diocesan Parish Support Teams are also learning and want to hear the concerns, experiences and complaints of Diocesan Clergy, Lay Leaders and members of our communities. We will ensure that complaints concerning ourselves are handled openly and fairly. Your Bishops, Senior Clergy and the Diocesan Parish Support Team want you to be assured that we hold ourselves accountable for your wellbeing and that of your family. Please tell us where and when we are letting you down. We value your feedback!

- *The Rt Revd Dr Dagmar Winter, Acting Bishop of Ely, Bishop of Huntingdon,*
- *Archdeacon of Cambridge,*
- *Archdeacon of Huntingdon and Wisbech,*
- *Diocesan Secretary,*
- *Director of Mission and Ministry*

30 January 2025

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The review period for this guidance is **1 year**.
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