

Appendix 13

DIGNITY IN THE CHURCH POLICY

Adopted by The Conference, 2009

“Human beings are made in the image of God, having value and worth, and reflecting something of God’s glory. It therefore follows that each person has the right to be treated with dignity and respect, a right to be heard, and a right to complain if they feel that they have been treated unfairly, demeaned or dishonoured.” (Methodist Church in Britain: Conference Agenda 2007 p.364)

All within the church, as within any other organization, are entitled to an atmosphere free from bullying and harassment in which the dignity of individuals is respected. This applies to ministers, office holders, lay workers, and those participating in any way in congregational life. The Methodist Church in Ireland regards any form of bullying or harassment as unacceptable.

2.0 Bullying

2.1 What is bullying?

Bullying can take many forms. It is generally understood as unwanted behaviour that offends, persecutes or excludes someone. It includes treating individuals in a manner perceived by them to be demeaning and unacceptable. It can be intimidation, insult, or a misuse of power to undermine, humiliate, threaten or cause injury.

A key characteristic of bullying is that it usually takes place over a period of time. It is regular and persistent inappropriate behaviour which is specifically targeted at one person or a group of people. It may be perpetrated by someone in a position of authority, or among peers.

Bullying occurring outside church premises is covered by this Policy, provided the perpetrator was acting *in the course of church activities*, such as at a home group, conference or social event.

2.2 What bullying is not

An *isolated incident* of inappropriate behaviour (such as an occasional bout of anger or a conflict of views) may be an affront to dignity but, as a single incident, is not considered bullying.

Fair and constructive criticism of performance, conduct or attendance does not constitute bullying.

Complaints relating to instructions issued by a supervisor or line manager, assignment of duties, terms and conditions of employment or other matters which are appropriate for referral under normal grievance procedures do not constitute bullying. Complaints that are appropriate for referral under normal grievance

procedures are usually relatively straightforward to formulate as they refer to a specific issue or incident.

Legitimate responses to crisis situations which require immediate action do not constitute bullying.

2.3 Examples of bullying

The following are some examples of the type of behaviour which may constitute bullying. These examples are illustrative but not exhaustive:

- Constant humiliation, ridicule, belittling efforts – often in front of others
- Verbal abuse, including shouting, use of obscene language and spreading malicious rumours
- Showing hostility through sustained unfriendly contact or exclusion
- Inappropriate and systematic overruling of a person's authority, without prior discussion or explanation
- Persistently and inappropriately finding fault with a person's work and using this as an excuse to humiliate the person rather than trying to improve performance
- Constantly picking on a person when things go wrong even when he/she is not responsible

3.0 Harassment

3.1 What is harassment?

Harassment is inappropriate conduct towards a person or group of people, based on a specific characteristic, such as race, sex, religion, or age.

Any conduct may constitute harassment, including spoken words, gestures, or the production, display, or circulation of written words, pictures or other material if the conduct is unwelcome and could reasonably be regarded as offensive, humiliating or intimidating.

Such conduct may be persistent or a single incident. The key is whether the conduct is viewed as demeaning and unacceptable by the recipient.

An act of harassment occurring outside the church premises is covered by this Policy, provided the perpetrator was acting *in the course of church activities*, such as at a home group, conference or social event.

3.2 Examples of harassment

The following are examples of conduct which may constitute harassment. These examples are illustrative but not exhaustive:

- Verbal harassment, such as jokes, derogatory comments, ridicule or song
- Written harassment, such as faxes, text messages, e-mails or notices
- Physical harassment, such as jostling or shoving
- Intimidatory harassment, such as gestures or threatening poses

- Inappropriate visual displays, such as posters, emblems or badges
- Persistent, negative body language
- Ostracising a person
- Unwanted physical conduct of a sexual nature, such as unnecessary touching, patting or pinching or brushing against another person's body
- Unwelcome verbal conduct of a sexual nature, such as sexual advances, propositions or pressure for sexual activity, continued suggestions for social activity after it has been made clear that such suggestions are unwelcome, unwanted and offensive flirtations, suggestive remarks, innuendos or lewd comments
- Non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature, such as the display of pornographic or sexually suggestive pictures, objects, written materials, emails, text messages or faxes.
- Unwanted or derogatory comments about dress or appearance
- Leering and suggestive gestures

3.3 How does harassment differ from friendly banter?

The unwanted nature of the conduct distinguishes harassment from friendly behaviour, which is mutual and welcome.

Each person has the right to decide what behaviour is welcome, irrespective of the attitude of others. That a person has previously tolerated the behaviour does not stop that person from later deciding that it has now become unwelcome.

The intention of the person engaging in the unwelcome behaviour is irrelevant – the effect of the behaviour on the person concerned is what matters.

4.0 Bullying or harassment by outsiders on church premises

This Policy is also designed to protect people from bullying or harassment perpetrated by outsiders with whom they may come into contact on church premises.

Bullying or harassment by outsiders on church premises may result in exclusion from the premises or the imposition of other appropriate sanctions.

If someone feels that s/he has been subjected to inappropriate behaviour by an outsider on church premises, s/he should bring the matter to the attention of the minister or other appropriate person so that the matter can be investigated and appropriate action taken.

5.0 Responsibilities

5.1 Responsibilities of the Church

Local churches, through their Church Councils, are responsible for promoting respect and dignity, and for dealing effectively with complaints of bullying and harassment.

The General Committee is responsible for

- communicating this Policy throughout the Connexion, so that all will be informed of the need to create an environment free from bullying and harassment;
- appointing Support Contact Persons to provide confidential advice and support to those who feel that they are being subjected to, or are being accused of, bullying or harassment;
- providing ongoing support to Support Contact Persons;
- reviewing and monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of this Policy; and
- providing, as required, an appointment with an Occupational Health Doctor and counselling sessions from an appropriate qualified counsellor.

Edgehill College is responsible for providing appropriate training for

- Superintendents of Circuits, to enable them to communicate this Policy to their ministerial colleagues and lay workers, and to deal with complaints; and
- Support Contact Persons.

The Board of Examiners is responsible for ensuring that this Policy forms part of the induction process for all ministers.

5.2 Responsibilities of ministers and lay workers

All ministers and lay workers have a responsibility to help maintain an environment in which the dignity of all individuals is respected. All ministers and lay workers must comply with this policy and ensure that their behaviour does not cause offence to those with whom they come into contact during the course of their work.

Ministers and lay workers should discourage bullying and harassment by objecting to inappropriate behaviour. They should inform the Superintendent of the Circuit, or other appropriate person, if they are concerned that a colleague is being bullied or harassed.

5.3 Responsibilities of Superintendents of Circuits and line managers

Superintendents of Circuits, and line managers of lay workers, have a particular responsibility to implement this policy and to make every effort to ensure that bullying and harassment does not occur.

Superintendents of Circuits, and line managers of lay workers, have an obligation to deal promptly and effectively with any incidents of bullying or harassment of which they become aware.

Superintendents of Circuits, and line managers of lay workers, should:

1. Explain the Dignity in the Church Policy to all staff, and ensure that they understand the definitions of bullying and harassment, their roles and responsibilities and how the complaints procedure operates;
2. Explain the Policy and complaints procedure to new staff members;
3. Promote ongoing awareness of the Policy amongst the staff;
4. Communicate the Policy, by ensuring that posters and leaflets are prominently displayed and copies of the Policy are readily available;

5. Set a good example by treating all staff (and any other person with whom they come into contact) with courtesy and respect;
6. Be vigilant for signs of bullying and harassment and intervene before a problem escalates;
7. Respond sensitively to any member of staff who makes a complaint of bullying or harassment;
8. Respond promptly to requests from staff members to intervene, and seek to resolve the matter informally where appropriate;
9. Facilitate Support Contact Persons to carry out their role;
10. Ensure that a person is not victimised for making a good-faith complaint of bullying or harassment;
11. Monitor and follow up the situation after a complaint is made so that the behaviour complained of does not recur; and
12. Keep a record of all complaints and how these were resolved.

5.4 Responsibilities of Support Contact Persons

Support Contact Persons are responsible for providing information, advice and support to those who feel that they are being bullied or harassed or against whom complaints have been made.

6.0 Complaints Procedure

Occasions may arise when those involved in the life of the Church feel that they have not been treated appropriately and wish to make a complaint. Any complaint should be taken seriously. All matters relating to any complaint should be treated confidentially by all involved.

Where possible, attempts should be made to resolve the complaint quickly and informally. Where an informal resolution cannot be found, the following procedure should be followed:

1. The Complainant (the person making the complaint) should set out the reason for the complaint in writing, naming the Respondent (the person about whom the complaint is being made), and give this to the Minister of the Society concerned, who shall act as Recipient.¹
2. When the Recipient receives the written complaint s/he shall advise the Respondent that a complaint has been received and furnish her/him with a copy of the complaint.
3. The Recipient shall then appoint a panel of two suitable people to investigate the complaint.

¹ Where the Minister is the Respondent the written complaint should be given to the Circuit Superintendent. Where the Circuit Superintendent is the Respondent the complaint should be addressed to the District Superintendent. Where the District Superintendent is the Respondent the complaint should be addressed to the President.

4. The panel investigating the complaint shall, at the earliest opportunity, meet separately with both the Complainant and the Respondent in order to ascertain the circumstances surrounding the complaint. They may also meet with any other witnesses or relevant parties. A written record of these meetings shall be kept.
5. Following their investigation the members of the investigating panel shall make in writing their recommendations for the just and satisfactory resolution of the complaint. These shall be sent to the Recipient. Examples of recommendations might include that the Complainant or the Respondent make amends in some way, that a process of mediation be encouraged or that the matter be further dealt with under the Church's disciplinary procedures.
6. The Recipient shall advise both the Complainant and the Respondent of these recommendations and of any action which s/he proposes to take as a result. If the Respondent and the Complainant are agreed to this course of action the matter is considered closed.
7. Should either the Complainant or the Respondent not be satisfied with the course of action proposed s/he is entitled to appeal to the District Advisory Committee or the President's Advisory Committee, as appropriate, setting out in writing the grounds of the appeal. The Committee shall receive all documentation relating to the Complaint and meet with the Complainant, the Respondent, the Recipient and any other relevant party. The Committee shall then determine whether the course of action proposed by the Recipient should be endorsed or altered in some way. The Chair of the Committee shall communicate the Panel's decision in writing to all concerned. There shall be no further appeal.

7.0 Monitoring and Review

This Policy comes into operation on 1 July 2009 and will be reviewed by the General Committee after two years. Each Circuit Superintendent shall monitor the effectiveness of the Policy at local level and ensure the availability of the support and infrastructure needed for such monitoring.

APPENDIX I – ROLE OF THE SUPPORT CONTACT PERSON

The Support Contact Person is to provide information and emotional support -- in a confidential, non-judgmental and off-the-record discussion(s) -- to any who feel that they are being subjected to bullying or harassment, or against whom a complaint of bullying or harassment has been made.

The Contact Person only offers emotional support and advice concerning Irish Methodist Church-related issues of bullying or harassment. The role does not extend to non-Church-related bullying or harassment, or to any other grievances or personal problems.

The Contact Person may not act as an advocate or representative on behalf of the person s/he is supporting nor can s/he direct the person as to the best course of action to take.

The aim of the Contact Person is to help the supported person clarify what s/he is experiencing and to empower him/her to decide what course of action, if any, s/he may wish to take.

A Contact Person may not approach the alleged perpetrator/complainant on behalf of the person s/he is supporting.

The Contact Person may offer support to someone who feels that s/he is being subjected to bullying/harassment or against whom the complaint of bullying/harassment has been made but not both. If a Contact Person is approached by both parties, s/he should support the first person who requests support and refer the second person to another Contact Person.

The Contact Person will treat these discussions as completely confidential and will not be requested to disclose information to a third party. However, in a crisis situation of potential danger (e.g. assault or risk of suicide) appropriate professional assistance should be sought.

Meetings should take place in a suitable room where privacy can be assured. The Contact Person will not retain any notes or records of these discussions.

Meetings should generally last no longer than 45 minutes to an hour and no more than 3 to 4 meetings with any one individual should ever be needed. More than this number could mean that the Contact Person is being drawn into a counselling relationship.