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**Adrian Clements****Relationships and Care in Church life**

*MARY didn't respond. This had happened so frequently before. Once again she felt singled out and humiliated, in public, while she was doing things voluntarily for her church. And any attempt she made to set the record straight was only going to bring further sarcastic and hurtful remarks. She knew others felt the same but no one wanted to stand out from the crowd. They were volunteers and life was too short and they had too many other things to do without taking on that one as well! Eventually someone was going to be scarred by the constant bullying, but the rector probably didn't even realise the impact he was having.*

*Of course there was nothing she could do. The Church had no policy setting out how people in church life should be treated. Ironically, had she been running one of the external organisations that used the church hall every week, she would more than likely have been protected by their national policy on the Prevention of Bullying and Harassment.*

*She had talked to the rector of the neighbouring parish. This woman had been sympathetic, but had revealed that she was in a similar position. She was very unhappy that there seemed to be no understanding in the parish or even in the diocese that the burden of work she now had to cope with had become unmanageable without support; and nobody in the parish was prepared even to listen. Neither the parish nor the rector had ever needed "secretarial support" before – so why now? Opportunities for ministry were being missed and her own health was failing. But there was no formal mechanism to allow her to have her problems addressed.*

*The danger was that the situation would get worse and she would end up like John. He was rector in Ballyquick and had been very successfully and creatively energising the parish until he became ill and progressively more disabled physically and unable to carry on his parish responsibilities. And being young, at an early stage of ministry, he had nowhere to go with his family and three youngsters. The parish had been very understanding at first, but after a while some started to resent the disruption and the lack of pastoral care his illness had caused. And there was no provision to cope with the situation. Nobody knew how to move the matter on.*

**Bishops' commission**

If you can imagine that any or all of these situations might arise in any part of the Church of Ireland, you will be able to appreciate why the bishops commissioned work about a year ago to look at how the Church might consider dealing with them in a consistent, fair and humane way.

Christian principles underpin legislation and good practice in the management of relationships in secular life, and for years the Church has assumed that they will always govern behaviours in Church life. But what happens if something goes wrong? Where are people, clergy and lay, to seek protection? Not everyone involved in church life always understands the impact of their behaviour on others, and, it has to be said, there are some

who possibly don't care enough about how others are affected. We would all confess that we do not always deal with one other in a perfectly saintly fashion, though our Christian profession expects us to strive towards that goal. Until we all get there, church people need to feel they can access the same levels of care and protection that would be expected to be in place in other walks of life.

The brief of the bishops was to “initiate exploratory work around the development of policies and procedures to underpin the support of bishops for their clergy and to make plain best practice in managing the working relationship between bishops, clergy and people in a way that safeguards all and works to the betterment of the Church of Ireland”.

The brief was not to change the Church of Ireland world, or to produce policies for every occasion. It was to commence a process of formalising understanding and best practice.

### **Where to start?**

The working group in Church House began by identifying, and verifying with the bishops, that the areas to be looked at initially would be the prevention of bullying and harassment for all in Church life, and the management of the grievances of the clergy, both of these falling into a general “relationships” category. The third was the development of a church-wide understanding of how to manage issues arising from the long-term illness of a member of the clergy.

A team was set up in Church House, supported by a professional external HR development consultant. Legislation and policies and procedures in the secular world were reviewed as well as those in place and being introduced in Anglican and other churches in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Derived from this research, the Church House team developed ideas and shared them with a Reference Group consisting of a bishop, two archdeacons and the director of the Theological Institute, as well as two diocesan secretaries.

One of the first bits of feedback from the reference group was that it was vital that the policies were clearly grounded in Christian thinking. The rationale for establishing more formal ways of setting down how people involved in church life are expected to behave is the positive expectation that this will assist in demonstrating the Christian way, and reinforce the teaching and behaviour that currently we take for granted.

### **Dignity in Church Life**

This thinking led to the development of an over-arching statement, with the working title of the “Dignity in Church Life Charter”, which seeks to set out the foundations of these (and also possibly future) policies in Christian teaching and the obligation of church people to observe their principles. The Charter has already animated the team's labouring through draft and re-draft of policies designed to be consistent with its precepts. It will be brought to General Synod in May 2015.

So what is so special and so difficult about devising relationship and behavioural policies for an amorphous organisation like the Church of Ireland? One of the difficulties is that we need “outcomes” that are practical for the Church. And we need them to be positive and manageable – not burdensome and off-putting.

### **Long-term illness**

When we think about the task of designing a policy to support clergy and the parishes through a long-term illness affecting an incumbent it is comparatively easy to understand why this might be a good idea. It will be good to have a consistent policy throughout the Church. It will be good for the Church to have a compassionate approach in dealing with this sort of situation. It will be helpful for a parish to know that these problems have been considered before and that there is a plan for the long term.

But what happens to the family in the Rectory? What if they have nowhere to go even though the well-being of the incumbent and their family, and the health of the parish, would all be better safeguarded if the family was able to move on?

Chapter 4 of the Constitution of the Church of Ireland stipulates that if a member of the clergy is incapacitated by “permanent mental infirmity”, and this is confirmed by a Court of the General Synod, then, so long as a retiring annuity is provided, the office can be pronounced as vacated as though the office-bearer had resigned. (No such provision is in place where an office holder is *physically* incapacitated.) For an ancient Constitution, such a provision seems quite advanced, though the appropriateness and qualification of a Court of General Synod to judge permanent mental incapacity is debatable; but for a constitutional ruling in 2015 it certainly seems less than adequate.

So, putting in place a potential solution for long-term illness involves providing in the Constitution for the possibility that this situation can arise, and that not only the clerical family needs to be rescued from the difficulties arising, but also the parish. And this means that the family needs to be enabled to move on, involving financial and residential provision where necessary, and an expectation and obligation built into the constitutional change that the family will move on when that provision is made.

The objective of a long-term illness policy would/will be to provide reassurance to all that the situation can and will be resolved compassionately and in a timely fashion, thus avoiding the sorts of stresses and strains – and even tragedies - that can arise where such clarity is not available. The authority of the Constitution is also needed to ensure consistency and to affirm the obligation for proper provision to be made, including the stipulation that appropriate and competent assessment is made, and the proper supports are in place.

### **Relationship policies**

Providing for the situation where a cleric is ill in the long term is probably a comparatively easy concept to accept, although there are certainly material considerations. But with regard to relationship and behavioural policies, does the Church and do church people really need to be told how to behave? And will the publishing of policies, like all such “politically correct” manifestations, not generate a new industry of irritating, time-wasting, expensive and vexatious non-grievances? And will the existence of such policies resolve all the issues of the Church of Ireland?

My answers are “No”, “ I don’t think so”. and “Yes”, in reverse order.

The two relationship management policies currently proposed are expected to be useful in tackling some of the specific relationship issues they are intended to address. There is no claim that they will solve *all* issues. There may be times when it is better not to use them, and it is hoped that they will not have to be employed very often. The expectation is that the adoption of such policies will encourage earlier and less formal resolution of the issues they are designed to resolve.

There will be investment involved in these, as well as in the Illness Policy, and “operational costs”. It is the considered opinion of the working group that in the cases of all three of these proposed policies the cost of investment in expertise and in potential outcomes will be far, far smaller than the damage done, in human as well as in material terms, if the Church does not have proper means at its disposal to deal with these issues as they arise. Of course there could be vexatious applications to the processes, but these also may lead to resolution which would be for the benefit of all.

And yes – there is no doubt that members of the Church, like everyone else in society, need to be aware of the damage that can be done by allowing problems and grievances to fester, and that this is more likely to happen if there is no clear statement showing that a process exists to deal with the core issue.

### **Prevention of bullying and harassment**

We have been very fortunate if we have not become aware of situations in which someone has been diminished by repeated and consistent verbal or psychological aggression, although we may not have identified it in those terms. In a parochial setting this could happen to the cleric as well as to a member of the laity, and all need to be protected.

In the case of a “bullying” cleric there are already procedures and processes in existence which might be employed, but the new process might also be used. Where the alleged culprit is member of the laity, and their association with the Church is purely voluntary, can or should we do anything about it?

One option is “No” – we shouldn’t do anything about it. This is a church member, a volunteer and perhaps even a vestry member. How can we possibly adjudicate on their behaviour in a formal way? It would be outrageous!

The conclusion we have reached in the working group is different. Surely it is unacceptable if we in the Church allow a situation to persist where there may be damage being done to individuals, lay or clerical, or to the Christian functioning of a parish, by the actions, intended or not, of an individual? Can we possibly tolerate a situation where people might, in some circumstances, feel safer and better protected outside the Church than within it?

So the proposed policy would apply to all church members, and there would be outcomes in church life for lay people as well as clergy if the behaviours persisted. That is new and will make some stop and think. Of course lay outcomes would not include exclusion from Church, but would, at the extreme, involve temporary suspension from involvement in the democratic governance of the Church.

### **Clergy grievances**

In the good old days, said one cleric, clergy just “put up with it” if they had a problem. That was the case in most other walks of life as well. There weren’t processes for resolving difficulties – people in general just put up with things. While, in some cases, that didn’t matter too much, and there was the compensating element that everyone was in the same boat, there can always be cases in which there is real suffering or unfairness, or lost opportunity, if an issue is not dealt with appropriately. The policy proposed is intended to deal with the grievances of clergy; there are existing means of addressing issues caused by clergy.

As with any such process, including the “bullying” process, it is intended to be accessed only where reasonable and mediated approaches have not been successful. It is expected that while the process can operate within the parish, it may also be managed in a diocesan or wider church context where that is appropriate and necessary.

The bishops, who initiated the move towards HR type policies and procedures, realise fully that there will potentially be occasions where clergy will seek resolution of an issue they feel they have with their bishop; and the bishops remain resolute in their support of the idea that the Church, clergy and lay, will be better off having such policies in place than continuing to deny that relationship issues requiring resolution may arise in church circles.

### **Project progress**

The Church House working group has produced drafts of the “Charter”, the policies and the supporting procedures. The principles of these have been taken to the bishops, to the reference group referred to above, and to the Commission on Ministry, and feedback from all of these groups has been built into revised drafts. The drafting process continued as these ideas were then shared with senior diocesan clergy and lay people at five venues round the country, with comment invited from them all. At each stage the feedback has been vital to the development of the ideas which, it is hoped, can be brought to General Synod in May this year.

What will be brought to General Synod will be the overall concept being considered: that it is right for the Church of Ireland to set out policies on these relationship and care issues. It is hoped that enabling legislation can be prepared in time for Synod to allow the final development: approval by Standing Committee and the Representative Body of policies to be implemented at the start of 2016. Care must be taken to ensure that the first policies to be introduced are effective and manageable, and that they can be sufficiently flexible to allow for relevant, necessary and considered adjustment in future years.

### **Practical considerations and conclusions**

To enable consistent and informed implementation of the procedures underpinning the policies, it has become clear that a central, professional resource will be necessary. While the procedures are intended to be operated within the current structures of the Church, it is important that both clergy and lay people have access to professional support from the beginning of any application in respect of any of the procedures.

To enable the provision of practical solutions for clergy families where the cleric is affected by long-term illness, consideration will have to be given to how such outcomes may be funded and how this will apply on an all-Ireland basis.

These commitments, while they have short-term significance in terms of outgoings, have the potential to provide great benefit in the longer term to the Church, its members and its clergy. I believe they are necessary to demonstrate and fulfil our Christian duty of care for all church people.