



Church of Ireland – Parish Handbook

RESOLVING CONFLICT

POSITIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

It is important to maintain a positive working relationship among select vestry members. Members should try to demonstrate positive working relationships, as well as show a willingness to take appropriate action to improve things when there are difficulties. This is part of their duty to ensure the parish is effectively managed.

Remember that all members have a valuable role to play. Diversity of differing backgrounds, skill-sets, experience and personalities can be a source of strength for the select vestry.

CONFLICTS WITHIN THE SELECT VESTRY

It is accepted that select vestry members are likely to have varying opinions on the matters before them, or react to situations with differing emotions than their fellow members. However, members are expected to work together for the benefit of the parish even where this means setting aside their own personal feelings about a matter.

Select vestry members who do not agree with decisions taken by the select vestry as a whole are entitled to have their opposition recorded in the minutes. However, once a decision is taken, all members are expected to support the resulting work or activities and the individuals involved.

It is possible that at times the select vestry will face a period of conflict. Not all conflict is damaging; healthy conflict, in which conflicting viewpoints are openly debated, can be of significant benefit. Conflict enables the select vestry to be open and responsive, to adapt to change and to review its own performance. However, it must be well managed to ensure it does not become damaging conflict.

If allowed to persist, damaging conflict can harm the ability of the select vestry to best serve the parish; it can divert energy, demoralise members, undermine the work of the select vestry, put finances and decision-making at risk, put off potential members from serving and generally damage the select vestry's reputation.

DIGNITY IN CHURCH LIFE

Every select vestry member should be treated with respect, have the opportunity to express their views and be listened to. It is important to remember and appreciate the service of each member. The Church of Ireland's Dignity in Church Life Charter emphasises the importance of:

- Valuing everyone's human dignity before God
- Harmonious relationships which are underpinned by respect
- Process of reconciliation when disagreement or conflict arises

All individuals participating in the life of the Church have a duty under the *Constitution of the Church of Ireland* to uphold this Charter.

CODE OF CONDUCT

In addition to understanding the Dignity in Church Life Charter, it may be useful for the select vestry to consider putting in place a code of conduct. A code of conduct may simply acknowledge and accept the principles of the Dignity in Church Life Charter, or go further to govern aspects of member behaviour and set out standards and actions to which all select vestry members should agree to adhere.

It may be effective to hold a discussion on the meaning of the Dignity in Church Life Charter or, if the select vestry has one, the code of conduct. Consideration of how it can be applied to a typical or specific situation may be helpful in emphasising the standard of behaviour that is expected from select vestry members.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

If conflicts do arise, it is generally regarded as the responsibility of the chairperson (the officiating member of clergy) to deal with any matter of conflict which may arise between members of the select vestry.

If the situation is such that the chairperson is themselves involved in the conflict, select vestry members may wish to nominate someone from their membership to take the lead responsibility for trying to resolve the situation.

All members have a duty to act in the best interests of the parish and it is in the best interest of the parish that those responsible for decision-making are able to carry out their activities in a healthy and productive working environment.

HOW TO TACKLE CONFLICT

CLARIFY ROLES AND BOUNDARIES

- Make sure everyone is aware of their remit and role. Often problems arise where it is not clear in what capacity a person is acting. Clarify which 'hat they are wearing' and what their responsibilities are.
- Clarify limits of authority for delegated tasks and decision-making, and, in particular, which decisions must be taken by the whole select vestry (and not by individuals or sub-committees).
- Ensure new members are sufficiently informed and able to make meaningful contributions.
- Consider the perspective of a member who may feel resentful towards a newcomer perceived as trying to change things without appreciating the organisation's history but clarify that the select vestry must accept change and development.
- Try to make sure people's skills are being used. This increases member participation and engagement and widens the expertise available to the select vestry as a whole.

FOCUS ON COMMITMENT TO THE PARISH

- Highlight what actual/potential damage to the parish is risked by the conflict to help focus members on resolution.
- Actively involve all members to help strengthen their commitment to the select vestry and the parish.
- Refocus the select vestry on the purpose of their role and keep in mind at all times the requirement to act in the best interests of the parish.

LISTEN AND SUPPORT

- Listen to all concerns raised in order to try to identify root causes of conflict.
- Resist dismissing concerns on the basis they are contradictory to the established understanding.
- Support individuals who raise concerns out of a sense of duty or who may find it difficult to speak up, particularly if they hold a minority opinion.

REVIEW HOW MEETINGS ARE RUN

- Often the way in which meetings are run, decisions are made and how members participate has a significant impact on the opportunities for damaging conflict. Have a look at the RCB guidance on 'making meetings effective' to ensure the select vestry makes the most of their meetings.

SEEK ADVICE

- Whilst respecting the privacy of the individuals concerned, an appropriate discussion about the situation can help to clarify the issues at stake and identify suitable options for addressing the conflict.
- If a conflict cannot be managed by the select vestry then the issue should be raised with the diocesan secretary to explore options available to the parish. Don't be afraid to ask for help; confidences will be respected.

TIPS FOR HANDLING A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Whatever the circumstances of the conflict or the matter being discussed, it may be helpful for all parties to keep in mind the following:

- Be calm and reasonable
- Avoid point scoring
- Confirm what's really at the root of the conflict
- Try to identify an outcome which has something in it for everyone
- Follow established procedure, where possible
- Seek help if and when required
- Keep focused on the best interests of the parish

TIPS FOR MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Sometimes the behaviour of certain individuals can threaten the harmonious workings of a select vestry. The following are examples of 'types' of problem behaviour, and ideas of how to respond.

WHERE A MEMBER ACTS ON THEIR OWN & WITHOUT CONSULTATION:

- Remind the individual of their remit, role and what their responsibilities are to the select vestry as a whole.
- Clarify limits of authority for delegated tasks or roles, decision-making and reporting. In particular, clarify which decisions must be taken by the whole select vestry (and not by individuals or sub-committees).

WHERE A MEMBER DOESN'T ATTEND OR CONTRIBUTE AT MEETINGS:

- Review how guidance or induction information on the role and responsibilities of select vestry members is provided to the member.
- Talk to the individual directly to confirm the reasons for non-attendance, being sensitive to personal circumstances.
- Consider the basis and reasonableness of the expectations of the individual and of the group.

WHERE A MEMBER IS VOLATILE, SPEAKS OUT OF TURN OR TAKES OVER MEETINGS:

- Agree a code of conduct that governs how meetings and discussions are run, to clarify expected behaviour.
- Establish an agreed approach for each agenda item, consider time limits and make it clear when interruptions are not welcome and when items are open for discussion.
- Reiterate the importance of all members being able to contribute.
- Ensure the chairperson is equipped to effectively manage contributions from all attendees.