

General Synod Speech – Bullying by Lay Officers

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We have had two helpful debates about Codes of Conduct yesterday. This debate is different. It is not about how to improve conduct in general, but about to address the very specific issue of bullying, and in particular how to remedy the serious pastoral problems and unfairness that arises when clergy can be subject to penalties for bullying that include removal from office, but there is no means of disqualifying a churchwarden, PCC member or lay officer who is guilty of bullying from holding office.

Bullying is not the robust exchange of divergent views in a debating chamber. Bullying is a persistent act normally against one person who has been singled out by the bully. Bullying is defined by ACAS as

as unwanted behaviour from a person or group that is either:

- offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting
- an abuse or misuse of power that undermines, humiliates, or causes physical or emotional harm to someone¹

Those who experience bullying are always made to think it is their fault. Victims of bullying resonate with Spurgeon's dictum quoted in Friday's Presidential Address, 'A wolf can always find in a lamb's discourse a reason to eat him.'

Bullying and harassment are unacceptable behaviours in any environment – and especially in the Church, a community bound together by the command of Christ, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' (John 13.34). St Paul wrote, 'Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.' (Romans 13.10)

Yet since I first raised this difficult and sensitive issue I have been inundated with stories from victims and survivors, stories which have moved me sometimes close to tears. I know many are listening to our debate today.

A recurring theme in the correspondence has been where a priest has stepped in to tackle a person who is bullying other members of the congregation only to find themselves becoming the victim.

With permission I quote from one survivor,

Early in my new incumbency I sought to sensitively intervene in a bullying issue involving a Churchwarden who was causing harm to a number of vulnerable members of the church community. Very quickly I became the target of this person's bullying by way of retaliation.

The impact of this bullying completely dismantled my life. Every day I worked harder and harder to do the right thing, to care for my parishioners, and diligently prepare good worship and liturgy. At the same time I slipped deeper into a total misery.

¹ [What bullying is - Bullying at work - Acas](#)

I craved a sense of God's presence but in the completely senseless world I now inhabited there was only this Kafkaesque experience of dragging myself from one despair-ridden legal process to another:

I believe that my having survived, and helped to build up his church, is a testament to God's ability, working in the Holy Spirit to overcome an experience of evil. Yet without a fantastic GP I would not be a vicar today.

Others have pointed to the particularly exposed position of a priest whose job involves leading public worship and who usually lives visibly in the centre of the community they serve. A priest told me of the huge mental toll of having to meet their bully at every church service and PCC meeting, and how having to wash the feet of the bully on Maundy Thursday had so badly affected their mental health over the Good Friday and Easter services.

Bullying doesn't just affect the clergy – it affects the rest of the PCC and if not addressed can blight a parish for years. One PCC member has told of the distress of a PCC in a multi-parish benefice whose outstanding priest was forced to resign less than two years into their incumbency because of bullying behaviour in another parish in the benefice, and how this priest was the third priest in a row to resign within two years of appointment, apparently for similar reasons. He is now worried about filling the current vacancy, as the same thing will happen again and another priest's ministry will be ruined.

Bullying is wrong, especially within the Body of Christ, and it simply will not do for us as Synod to say it's all too difficult. We say we are committed to clergy wellbeing, but we have been ducking the issue for years, ever since we removed a provision from the Churchwardens' Measure in order to give it an easier ride in Parliament.

A code of conduct will help, and is a necessary step in identifying what is acceptable behaviour by churchwardens, PCC members and lay officers. But having a Code of Conduct on its own is not enough. Lots of PCCs already have Codes of Conduct, but they need to have teeth so that those found guilty of bullying can be disqualified from office.

Of course clergy will always need to be aware of neurodivergent voices, and open to prophetic voices that can sometimes grate. This motion is not about that. Rather this motion is designed to correct the fundamental injustice of the present situation, to level the playing field.

Sadly sometimes clergy will bully lay people, but there is a robust process in place to deal with that through the Clergy Discipline Measure, soon to become the Clergy Conduct Measure, and this can rightly in the most serious cases to prohibition and removal from office.

However if a churchwarden, PCC member or other lay officer bullies a priest or another member of the laity there is nothing that can be done to remove them from office or disqualify them, as the Secretary General's helpful paper makes clear.

Synod, this situation is unjust and must be remedied if we are to call ourselves the Body of Christ.

I have heard two hesitations expressed, which may come up in the debate today.

Should we, as the Secretary General's paper hints, wait until the revision of CCM is complete, and the new measure is functioning effectively before attempting to produce a comparable conduct measure for lay people? That would be delay tackling this issue for several years at least. Synod, the time for action is now. I believe that tackling bullying by lay officers now, in

parallel with the work on the CCM will give clergy a much greater degree of confidence in the new process, knowing that we are at last acting to create a level playing field and correct the injustice of the current system.

I have also heard it suggested that a lay conduct measure will make it harder to recruit PCC members and lay officers. I believe the opposite is the case. I know of too many places where people are reluctant to serve on the PCC or as churchwarden because they know that will put them directly in the firing line of the parish bully. If we can curb bullying behaviour more good people will feel safe and be willing to serve on our PCCs.

My motion does not specify the legislation that will best curb bullying and correct the current injustice between the treatment of clergy and laity. It trusts the wisdom of the AC to consult appropriately and bring appropriate legislative proposals to a future Synod. In so doing I pray that this will help to remove a grievous stain on the life of the church, and enable all clergy and lay leaders to work together safely and without fear to for the furtherance of God's Kingdom.

Synod I beg to move the motion standing in my name.
