

Management of Protest, Disruption and Violence in Church and other Places of Work

“The Diocese of London is committed to the well being of all its clergy and accredited lay workers, and specifically to minimise the risk of personal injury that could arise in the exercise of ministry.”

London Diocesan Policy on Clergy Safety

1a Dealing with Disruption in Church Advice from the Police

Scotland Yard advise that in case of actual disruption, Clergy, Church Wardens or any other responsible person should dial 999. To ensure the availability to a sides person or churchwarden of a mobile telephone is a good precaution. .

1b Advice from Canon Barry Wright Senior Chaplain, Metropolitan Police

It is more than likely that protestors will not signify their intentions in advance. However, if you receive intelligence that any form of protest is to take place, then you should inform the local police.

The Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act creates the offence of riotous, violent or indecent behaviour in a designated place of worship whether during divine service or at any other time. Churchwardens are given powers to deal with intruders but police should be called to deal with any disturbance.¹ When confronted by protesters or faced with a threat of violence, the following approaches may be useful:

- *Appear calm*
- *Avoid prolonged eye contact*
- *Be aware of your tone of voice, speak slowly and softly*
- *Keep your distance*
- *Don't touch anyone threatening you*
- *Listen – try to take time to listen*
- *Negotiate*
- *Do nothing that will precipitate violence against you or any other person*

¹ *However, a delicate balance needs to be maintained now that the right to freedom of expression under the European Convention on Human Rights has a place in English Domestic law.*

**1c Advice from the Diocesan Registrar
Paul Morris**

Churchwardens have a duty and power to maintain order in the church and the churchyard, particularly during divine service. They may take reasonable steps and use reasonable force to remove anyone disrupting worship. They even have a power of arrest.

In practice, Churchwardens and others should be careful if there is any danger of a breach of the peace. If in doubt, the police should be called.

1d In case of disturbance

The advice given above deals with personal responses. Parishes are advised in advance of any encounters to discuss appropriate practical responses to deal with disruption during the course of worship. Suggestions include briefing the organist or music group to be ready to play “covering” music until asked to stop by the priest or one of the Churchwardens or sides persons. As already mentioned, a simple precaution is to ensure someone has a mobile phone and can dial 999 discreetly without drawing unnecessary attention as they do so. It has been suggested that having a hymn(s) ready for the congregation to sing to cover any disruption may also be a good idea.

2 DEALING WITH AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE

The following notes in sections 2 and 3 are adapted from seminar training material originally presented by Ray Braithwaite John Cudlip for the management of violence and aggression at work. They are offered here as helpful reminders of the kinds of awarenesses and precautions that are constructive in dealing with aggressive behaviour in a variety of circumstances. This is quite separate to the advice given above in relation to Fathers 4 Justice. The suggestions below refer particularly to the safety of clergy and others working in churches and church projects.

2a Verbal and non verbal warning signs

Increasing our awareness of verbal and non-verbal warning signals is an important first step in dealing with violence and aggression. Unfortunately people often miss or ignore clear signals that the situation is about to escalate. As well as being aware of signals the aggressor may be conveying, we should also be aware of our own behaviour and signals we are putting out

2b Prior knowledge of aggressor

The prior knowledge or contact we have with an aggressor will be important in picking up warning signs that all is not well. The person you encounter may come across in a subdued manner whilst normally they are bubbly and chatty. Are you aware of issues which may be personal triggers for this person? Are you aware if they are under stress or strain? A normally good relationship is

not insurance that aggression will not be aimed your way. Relevant information concerning the aggressor or prior knowledge can be useful. Think about information you need concerning someone's history, e.g. has this person been violent before? What has their mental health been like?

2c Don't mirror aggressive behaviour!

Unfortunately one of our natural reactions in many social situations is to mirror people's behaviour. If someone laughs – we may laugh...if someone folds their arms – we may fold our arms. If we are not taking control of our reaction we may well mirror aggressive behaviour. Another natural reaction to aggressive behaviour is to tense up and freeze and this itself may appear aggressive. Take a deep breath, then let it out slowly, it will help you to relax. Offer non-aggressive body signals and talk slowly and calmly.

2d Take threats seriously

Verbal threats are the clearest warning signs we may receive. Always take threats seriously. People sometimes ignore threats because they don't want to show they have been intimidated by the aggressor or they hope the aggressor will calm down. If people do not get any response from you they will repeat the threat in a more forceful way.

2e Look out for degrading and de-humanising language

It is often important for an aggressor to de-humanise you. The more you become an object or just a representative of an organisation or institution which in their eyes has wronged them, the easier it will become for them to be violent. It's also part of the wind up process for the aggressor. Repetitive words or phrases like "you lot.." or "you bastard".. are clear signs the situation may escalate. Part of this process may include sexist or racist language.

2f Defendable space

We all have our own physical "personal space" which we only like to be invaded either with permission, or in appropriate situations. (It's an area about four feet in diameter all around us.) It may be okay for us to invade, and be invaded by, someone's personal space on a crowded Underground Train, but we would feel differently if someone chose to stand right next to us on a deserted station platform. Be aware of someone invading your personal space. It's an act of aggression if it's inappropriate. Be sensitive to invading others. Remember that there can be different cultural rules concerning personal space boundaries.

2g Non verbal messages

Both the aggressor and we can convey clear messages through our non-verbal behaviour. Recognise that non-verbal messages will change for different cultures. For example some cultures may see eye contact as respectful and attentive, others as a challenge. Notice facial expressions and posture. A pained expression and clenched fists, for example, may be clear signs of aggression. Be aware of messages your own behaviour may be signalling. Smiling because you are nervous or trying to be friendly may be seen as a wind up. Make slow movements with open gestures, don't touch an angry person, and allow yourself a physical exit.

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3 HELPFUL AND UNHELPFUL STRATEGIES

There is no such thing as the 'ABC' of dealing with violence. Every incident is unique in bringing together different individuals, situations and events. What works with in one situation may have the opposite effect with another. An approach made by one may feel totally alien to another. However, clergy and their teams should be prepared to practise and rehearse different ways to deal with difficult situations.

3a Trigger Phase

Helpful

- It is not always possible to know people who may become aggressive. However, where we can, getting to know our parishioners and church members is crucial to recognising someone at this phase. For example, as already mentioned if someone is usually quite chatty but appears quiet and withdrawn, it is important we pick up on this.
- Get to know certain events or occasions that the person feels anxious or stressful about; what is it that can actually 'trigger' them.
- Acknowledge that the person is unhappy about something. Just asking 'what's up?' may be enough to avoid an escalation.
- Offer support or comfort. "Is there anything I can do?"

Unhelpful

- Ignoring the trigger signs
- Belittling the emotions or the problem.
- Remember that every problem and emotion is unique to an individual and although it may seem trivial to us, or we've heard this problem many times before, it is important to the person concerned.

3b Escalation and crisis phases

Helpful

- Be calm. This may be easier said than done. If we are feeling anxious, angry, or afraid it is important that we work hard at appearing calm . Take a deep breath and let it out slowly – it will calm you down and signal non-aggression.
- Be in control, speak clearly and listen to what the person is upset about. Offer solutions, ideas, or something comforting like a cup of tea. Make it known you are or will do something to try and solve the problem in hand.
- Offer diversionary tactics, changing the subject or offering a source of stimulation may be appropriate.
- The use of humour or touching someone may be appropriate, but beware, such tactics may backfire!
- Get help and backup from someone who can be trusted
- Where necessary call the police.
- Maintain appropriate eye contact and be aware of not infringing someone's personal space. Be aware that some people require more 'personal space' than others do, and they may feel threatened if you are less than six or more feet away.
- Beware of potential weapons, and that some areas i.e. kitchens, have more potential weapons than others. Clearing away broken furniture before you find yourself in a tricky situation is helpful before the broken chair leg is used as a weapon.

Unhelpful

- Raising your voice, losing your temper, pointing your finger; all these things may encourage the person to get more angry.
- Feeling that you must 'win' the encounter or have 'to see it through' may be unhelpful.
- Agree to see the person at a later date or time when they are calmer.

3c Assaultive behaviour

Helpful

- If someone is committing an assault on somebody, themselves, or property, the personal safety of yourself and others is paramount. If necessary remove yourself and others away from the aggressor.
- Always put people before property! Broken furniture can be replaced.
- Get someone to call the police
- Still attempt to remain calm and in control. Make it clear that it is the behaviour you object to, not them as a person, as the expression of anger or frustration can well be valid.
- Point out the possible consequences of their action, but don't make threats you won't or can't carry out.

- If you decide on physically containing the situation, bear a number of points in mind.
- You are legally bound to only use 'reasonable' force. You need to consider the size and weight of the aggressor if you attempt to restrain them. It may be a long time before they finally calm down.
- We may find ourselves resorting to unfamiliar or 'last resort' tactics only if some of the above don't work.

Unhelpful

- Taking risks, trying to be a hero; you are not paid for this!
- Don't make sudden movements.
- Audiences can be unhelpful, people may want to back down but because they have an audience or their 'mates' are watching, find it difficult to do so.
- Blocking of exits both for yourself and the aggressor can be very dangerous.

3d Recovery phase

- Most of the earlier tactics will still apply here. Remember that the person will remain 'high' for some time.
- They will determine the rate of recovery. Inappropriate strategies at this point could encourage the person to return to a crisis phase and commit further assaults.
- Don't resort to blaming or showing anger unless you are certain the person has finally calmed down.
- It will depend on the nature of your work as to whether you feel you have a role to play here when someone has finally calmed down. You may wish to see them escorted from the premises or taken away by the police. However, some discussion about why the event occurred should take place, in order to avoid a re-occurrence. The worst thing to do is nothing.

3e Post crisis responses

- To experience an assault, or even be involved in an aggressive exchange can be a very upsetting experience. At times like this, prayer, sensitive listening and simple kindnesses will all be appreciated. However, post traumatic stress counselling may be required in more serious cases. Bishops and Archdeacons may well be able to help with resources for this.

Adapted material copyright John Cudlip

This paper is a slightly shortened version of a memo prepared by the Archdeacon of Hampstead and sent to all clergy in the Diocese of London on 2nd December 2005.