

Whistleblowing and Disclosures: Policy and Guidance

This policy and guidance applies to everyone involved in Midhurst parish church including all workers who are involved on either a paid or voluntary basis.

Encouraging people to express concerns appropriately and in a timely fashion is an important aspect of church culture. Additionally, 'whistleblowing' has been recognised as having an important place in developing a strong safeguarding culture. At the most simple level, anyone can spot a genuine concern and it is important that everyone who does so feels safe to raise that concern and to know that they will be listened to and the concern taken seriously.

The aim of this policy and associated guidance is to provide a clear and transparent way for anyone involved in Midhurst Parish Church to raise genuine concerns about the safety or wellbeing of anyone within our midst. It also aims to ensure that any concerns are dealt with effectively and in a timely fashion.

This policy and guidance provides a simple set of steps to deal with concerns, ensuring that people are not penalised for raising genuine concerns, even if those concerns appear to be unfounded.

Thank you for taking the time to read this policy, and for agreeing to adopt it as part of the culture of this church.

The Reverend Marcus Collie
Vicar

Our Commitment: the PCC of Midhurst Parish Church:

- Welcomes, encourages and urges anyone who is concerned about any aspect of church life to raise those concerns.
- Undertakes to treat all such concerns seriously.
- Asserts that no-one who raises any concern in good faith, even if those concerns are ultimately found to be unfounded, will face any adverse consequences.

Where a concern relates to a child or a vulnerable adult:

- Recognises that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.
- Recognises that no other concern or responsibility, however genuine, outweighs the need to always prioritise the welfare of children and vulnerable adults.

Guidance:

What to do if you have a concern:

- In the first instance, speak to the leader of the area of church life about which you have a concern (for instance, if your concern is about Sunday School, speak to the Sunday School leader). A good principle is that concerns should be dealt with at the lowest level necessary, and only escalated beyond that if those concerns remain, having been expressed. However, if your concern is about the behaviour of a leader in the church (lay or ordained), you may feel that you need to escalate it to someone in authority over them; you would be perfectly justified in doing this.
- Try to be as specific as possible: what or whom are you concerned about exactly? Can you give specific dates or examples of what has caused your concern? Vague concerns are difficult to investigate. If you only have an impression, or cannot give specific examples, you may still wish to express concerns but be open about the limited details you have.
- Try and avoid language that is either accusatory or emotive: your aim is to improve an area of church life, not to put the recipient of your concern on the defensive.
- It is very helpful to quote policy, if you can (although if you cannot, this is not a reason to avoid expressing your concern). This helps the person receiving your concern to see very quickly that you are simply holding the church to account to its own policies, or to Diocesan policies.
- Raising a concern is usually best approached face-to-face, but follow up the conversation in writing. “Last Sunday after church I expressed a concern about X, you replied by saying Y, and you said you would get back to me by Z. Please could you reply by confirming my understanding of our conversation is correct”: a simple written communication such as this can assist greatly in providing clarification to all concerned about what was said (although see below guidance for the person receiving the concern along similar lines).

Escalation process

- If you are satisfied that your concern has been resolved, you can leave the matter there. If you are not, it is important that you escalate it.
- We suggest that a suitable 'order of escalation' would be:

- 1. Lay Leader in Church (e.g. Children's Work Leader)**
- 2. Incumbent (and/or churchwarden in a vacancy)**
- 3. The Archdeacon**

(If not satisfactorily resolved by the incumbent)

Escalation in Safeguarding Cases

If your concern relates to a child or vulnerable adult then in the first instance your concern should be voiced to:

- **The Parish Safeguarding Officer and the Incumbent**
- **If they are unavailable further support can be gained via the Diocesan Safeguarding Team – see the Safeguarding 'Who's Who'.**
- In escalating your concern, you are acting in an entirely appropriate way. Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility; there may be the rare occasion where you have to raise your concern outside of your local parish context, in order to ensure that the children and adults your church ministers with are safe.
- **If you feel that the concern has great urgency and cannot be escalated in this manner (for instance if you are concerned about the immediate safety or welfare of a child or adult), then you must raise those concerns without delay with the Police.**

Hearing a Disclosure

‘A disclosure’ is when someone advises you of an incident or pattern of behaviour that would be of concern. It might be an incident which they were party to, or something that has been relayed to them. The nature of such disclosures will vary but in all cases if someone is telling you about something that is bothering or has bothered them then it is ‘a disclosure’.

It is almost unheard of for someone to approach you and state this is what they wish to talk about! In almost every case, a disclosure comes about because of another conversation when you realise that the person has revealed either an incident or pattern of abuse, assault, coercion, bullying, or another inappropriate behaviour. It might be as simple as someone advising you that they know ‘person X routinely ignores the parish policy on Y’, but it might be much more serious.

Whatever the nature of the disclosure, it is important that you know how best to respond.

- If someone tells you that they have a concern, you should arrange to meet them as soon as possible.
- Approach the situation sensitively, recognising the discomfort that the person may feel. Offer to meet them away from the church if they wish and allow them to bring a friend if that would help.
- **Do not promise confidentiality:** you do not know what they are going to share, but if they share a safeguarding or abusive incident you will have to raise it with other people. Remember – there is a reason the person has spoken to you: they want you to do something about it!
- However, be prepared to discuss the possibility of anonymity for the person sharing the concern. People may have reasons to want to stay anonymous, even if they know they have to say something, and closing this option off may mean that the concern never gets aired at all.
- Reassure the person that they have done nothing wrong, and are right to talk to you about it – even if it turns out to be unfounded or mistaken. ‘Concerns’ shared out of malice or divisiveness are a different matter but at this stage, assume the person to be acting in good faith.

- You may wish to suggest sources of support for the person – especially if they are on their own without the support of a friend or family member. Sharing concerns in an institutional context can be very intimidating – even in church – and the concern may have been a source of great anxiety for a long time. The person may be sharing the concern with you because this anxiety has reached the point where they feel compelled to act, and in coming to you they are expressing a great measure of faith that they will be well-received, and not have their intentions misinterpreted.
- Recognise that not everyone expresses genuine concerns appropriately. Someone can say something in the wrong manner, at the wrong time and with the wrong language – but still be right. Don't be too quick to dismiss what someone says because of how they say it.
- Make notes of the conversation, ideally at the time or immediately afterwards.
- Follow-up your conversation in writing, as soon as you can. "On date X, you expressed your concerns about Y. I replied by saying I would look into what you said, and would get back to you by date Z'. This helps provide clarity for all involved.
- Make sure you are clear about what you will do with the concern, by when you will do it, and when you will let the person know. Give the person a clear indication of when they can expect to hear back from you, and keep to this promise if you have made no progress – hearing from you with no news is better than not hearing from you.
- Unless the concern is easily resolved, please seek advice from the parish safeguarding officer and/or the vicar. **Under no circumstances investigate an allegation yourself: ask for help.** Parish clergy and the safeguarding officer are specifically trained in how to best respond in these situations.