

National Churchwatch

Draft Reporting Procedure for Violence against Clergy

Introduction

One of the major failings identified by the University of London (Royal Holloway) independent academic report into violence against the clergy was the fact that there was no clear method of reporting violence within the Church of England. Almost all clergy who were attacked discussed the incident with colleagues, but often senior clergy were simply unaware that an incident had taken place. Even very serious assaults that ended up in court were sometimes missed by senior clergy until they read about it in the newspapers!

The following is a suggested reporting procedure drawn up by Nick Tolson, the National Churchwatch Co-ordinator and is intended to be used as a guide for Dioceses to ensure that all acts of violence are reported and recorded.

Why report Incidents?

It is necessary to encourage the reporting of all incidents to ensure that there is a clear and standard response to an attack, no matter where in the Diocese it occurs. Personalities, location, whether the police are involved and the method of the attack should have no bearing on the response by the Diocese. The response should be quick, practical and supportive to the member of the clergy who has been assaulted. Of course, this relies on the member of the clergy to know what to do if they have been attacked, and the importance of reporting the incident even if it is considered to be 'minor'.

Definition of Violence

Understanding what needs to be reported and what doesn't is difficult as each person has a different definition of what is violent and what isn't. There are three different definitions that can be used;

1. Health & Safety Executive's Working Definition of Violence

"Any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by a member of the public in circumstances arising out of the course of his or her employment"

2. DSS : Advisory Committee on Violence to staff

"The application of force, severe threat or serious abuse by members of the public towards people arising out of the course of their work whether or not they are on duty.

This includes severe verbal abuse or threat where this is judged likely to turn into actual violence, serious or persistent harassment; threat with a weapon; major or minor injuries; fatalities"

Although the two definitions above are helpful, they do not cover some of the most important parts of violence, such as a small amount of verbal abuse repeated over a long period of time that can have the same effect as a one off physical attack.

The best definition I would suggest is;

3. "Any behaviour which produces damaging or hurtful effects, physically or emotionally, on people."

Reporting Procedure

You need to decide who is responsible for collating the information on violence against clergy and ensuring that there is a correct response.

Response from the Victim

There must be a clear, and absolute requirement for anyone who is a victim of an assault or violent confrontation to report it. The churchworkers in the Diocese should be reminded of the procedure frequently (*At least annually!*) Victims should be encouraged to report the incident so that the Diocese can ensure that reasonable steps can be taken to prevent a repeat offence on the victim or on another person.

Dioceses should also encourage colleagues of victims who do not initially wish to report the offence to report it on their behalf so that the appropriate support can be given. It should be remembered that the vast majority of the clergy who are assaulted confide in colleagues but are unwilling to talk with any senior officer of the Diocese. These colleagues usually can offer a shoulder to cry on but have no experience in practical advice to prevent a reoccurrence of the offence.

Initial reports from victims should be encouraged through as many means of communication as possible, and as fast as possible. The first report does not need to be detailed in any way, other than something has happened that needs to be reported. The Diocese should then respond as advised below.

The obvious choice for whom to report an assault is the Archdeacons, but bear in mind that many clergy/churchworkers may not wish to do this for various reasons. A second person, perhaps a lay person should also be available to report to if victims wish to.

The practicality of reporting can be difficult. Thought should be given to having a special number that people should ring when an incident occurs. This would send a text message or page the appropriate person who can respond immediately. Alternatively giving all clergy a card with several contacts who may be called should an incident occur.

The important thing in this is that **SOMEONE** does respond! There shouldn't be a recorded message saying someone will get back to you in the morning. The first few hours after an assault are **VITAL**. If a victim feels that someone 'official' is taking it seriously, then they will feel reassured.

Remember, the greater shock will occur to the family and friends of the victim, they should be taken care of as well.

Response from the Diocese

This splits into Short term and long term responses.

Short term

This is the response that occurs in the first 24 hrs after an assault.

It could include;

- A visitation by a senior clergy person who is responsible for the person assaulted;
(This should probably be an archdeacon, even when the person assaulted is not ordained. This will show how seriously the Diocese takes the assault. The Diocese could appoint someone to deal with all assaults in the Diocese)
- Immediate permanent repair of any damage relating to the assault;
(Such as replacing panels on a front door that have been kicked in)
- Ensuring that the offence has actually been recorded as a crime by the police;
(Diocesan contact with the police officer in charge of the case to ensure it is dealt with appropriately)
- Ensuring that the police are aware of the offence even if the person assaulted does not wish to press charges;
(The police will take no action but will make a note for their records in case there are other similar cases)
- Co-ordinating the response to the press;
(This may be done with the police, but not necessarily so. All cases should be publicised – not necessarily naming the church worker involved – but giving general details. This is essential to raise awareness among people who may also be at risk)
- Alerting other churchworkers;
(Where appropriate, information should be passed around to churchworkers/parishioners nearby – probably Deanery group – to ensure they are aware of the incident and know who to contact should they need any further details or if they have any relevant information. Hiding an incident or trying to minimise it often just causes rumours and exaggeration to occur. Be honest when informing the people)

Long Term

This response occurs for as long as it takes to ensure that the assaulted person feels able to carry out their ministry as before. For some this will be a matter of days, for others it may be several months.

This could include;

- A review of the incident with the victim and talking through some of the options they may have taken to prevent the assault occurring;
- Ensuring the security of the building where the incident occurred is carried out by an independent professional;
(This may be a Crime Reduction Officer, personal safety specialist or other experienced person – perhaps even all three!)
- Liaising with the Officer in the case to ensure that all is done to catch the offender;
(A little pressure can pay dividends. Some police officers do tend to do the minimum possible even in assault cases!)
- If an offender is caught, ensuring that someone attends court to find out what sentence the offender is given;
(This is important even when the person pleads guilty and no-one is required to attend court. It again gives the message that the Diocese takes the offence seriously, and can pass on the information to the churchworker immediately rather than the several weeks it can take for the police to pass on the information.)
- Ongoing support of the victim
(This usually occurs anyway, but if there is any long term effect of the assault, physical or emotional, it should be recorded)
- Personal Safety Training for the person involved and also of all churchworkers in the surrounding area;
(This is to offer reassurance to those who may feel vulnerable because of the incident, even if they weren't directly involved)
- An annual report should be prepared with statistics and analysis of all incidents.

(The victims should not be named in the report but a short report on the incident should be present. This should be distributed to all clergy in the Diocese so they may learn from any mistakes that were made and feel confident to highlight any problems that may remain)

Summary

Most important in this is the impression that the Diocese takes these offences seriously. More than that, the Diocese is actually doing something about it. Many clergy feel abandoned and simply do not know what to do when a violent incident occurs. Most clergy will be able to cope with an incident without help, but some will find that their Ministry is being affected by these incidents.

When someone has a number of incidents, special care needs to be taken looking at why this is occurring. It is all too easy to blame the attitude of the victim, (Perhaps they are a bit abrupt with 'difficult' visitors. Can they be helped? Perhaps some training or other method can be employed to assist them, and alert them! Never make instant judgemental no matter how tempting this might be.

Finally, a statement from the Bishop, possibly to be voted on at Diocesan Synod, that the Diocese abhors all violence against churchworkers not matter what the reason, should be made. This may sound obvious but it does focus the mind of synod and remind them that violence does happen and the Diocese has a clear method of responding to it!