

Park Church Complaints Policy

Document	Park Church Complaints Policy
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Owner(s)	Jon Mason

1 PURPOSE OF THIS POLICY

- 1.1 This policy provides a process for dealing with complaints relating to the behaviour of, or activities and decisions taken by, the church's staff, group/ministry leaders, volunteers, Elders, Deacons and Trustees. (See 9.1 for our definition of a complaint.)
- 1.2 This procedure can be used by anyone with a complaint, whether they are a member or attendee of the church, or not.

2 OUR COMMITMENT

- 2.1 We will provide a fair complaints procedure which is transparent and easy for anyone wishing to make a complaint.
- 2.2 We will publicise the existence of our complaints policy so that people know how/who to contact us to make a complaint.
- 2.3 We will ensure all complaints are investigated fairly and in a timely way, doing our best to avoid conflicts of interest.
- 2.4 We will try to resolve complaints and do our best to see that relationships are repaired.
- 2.5 We will reflect on complaints to help improve what we do and how we do it.

3 PROCESS

- 3.1 This complaints policy outlines a three-stage complaints procedure:
 - 3.1.1 **Stage 1: Triage**, where an Elder of the church will determine the severity of the complaint and which process to follow.
 - 3.1.2 **Stage 2: Informal resolution**. This is part of the complaints procedure but resolution of the complaint or issues is achieved by informal conversations rather than a formal investigation.
 - 3.1.2.1 Please note that this stage is optional and that if the complainant wishes to commence at Stage 3, they have every right to do so. However, the complainant must be able to demonstrate why Stage 3 is necessary. Failure to provide the evidence would mean that the complaint would not escalate but would commence at Stage 2.

- 3.1.3 **Stage Three: Formal investigation.** This is the stage where formal processes should be used which includes an investigation into the complaint, with written outcomes.
- 3.1.4 **Stage Four: Appeal**

4 STAGE 1: TRIAGE

- 4.1 All complaints should be made to an Elder of the church. This can be verbally or in writing.
- 4.2 Elders should:
 - 4.2.1 Make every effort to be approachable, open-minded, and sympathetic, remembering that the complainant may feel nervous, knowing the trouble their complaint could cause.
 - 4.2.2 Signpost the complainant to this policy so that they understand the process that will be followed.
 - 4.2.3 Advise the complainant what will happen next and how long it will take.
 - 4.2.4 Establish with the complainant their desired outcome of the complaint (e.g. an apology, some other form of restoration or actions they wish to see taken such as changes to policies or procedures, etc.).
- 4.3 Determine answers to the following questions:
 - 4.3.1 Is this a **child safeguarding** concern? If YES, report to the Children's Safeguarding Officer.
 - 4.3.2 Is this an **adult safeguarding** concern? If YES, report to the Adult Safeguarding Officer.
 - 4.3.3 Is this a **potential serious incident?** (See 9.3 for the definition) If YES, go to Stage 3.
 - 4.3.4 Is this a **vexatious complaint?** (See 9.2 for the definition)
 - 4.3.5 Is the complaint **specific**, and **evidence-based?** (See 9.1 for the definition) If NO, either:
 - 4.3.5.1 Counsel the complainant that they should drop the matter because they have misunderstood some context, or simply because [love covers over a multitude of sins. \(1Peter 4:8\)](#). Or,
 - 4.3.5.2 Counsel the complainant that they need more evidence to pursue the matter, assisting them if necessary.
 - 4.3.6 Is the accused an **Elder** of the church? If YES, go to Stage 2b. If NOT, go to Stage 2a.

5 STAGE 2A: INFORMAL RESOLUTION

- 5.1 [Matthew 18:15-17](#) is our guide for dealing with complaints between individuals.
- 5.2 The complainant should speak to the accused, in person, and point out their fault. The accused may have no idea of the offence or hurt they have caused. The complainant's aim should be to win them over, and to restore the relationship.
- 5.3 If the accused will not agree to meet, or does not agree with the complaint, then one or two others should go with the complainant to try to establish the facts of the matter and to restore the relationship.
 - 5.3.1 An Elder of the church could be one of those people. If the complaint started at Stage 1, the same Elder should continue the process in Stage 2. They should try to

mediate between the parties and bring resolution and restoration of the relationship.

5.4 If this too is unsuccessful, the Eldership should consider what further action can be taken.

That might be one of the following: (See also section D-3.4 of the church constitution.)

5.4.1 Declaring the individual(s) out of communion with one another and therefore ineligible to share in the Lord's Table.

5.4.2 Declaring the individual(s) to be out of fellowship with the Body of Christ, including removal from church membership, and disbarring from church activities.

5.5 If the accused is a non-member, there is no further right of review after this informal stage.

However, the leadership team should review whether the accused was given an inappropriate degree of responsibility for a non-member.

6 STAGE 2B: INFORMAL RESOLUTION OF A COMPLAINT AGAINST AN ELDER

6.1 [1 Timothy 5:17-21](#) is our guide to dealing with complaints against Elders. It says to not even [entertain an accusation against an elder](#) unless there are witnesses.

6.2 The Elder who has been speaking with the complainant in Stage 1 will now act as their advocate.

6.3 A meeting should then take place where the complaint of the person is heard.

6.3.1 Present at that meeting should be:

6.3.1.1 The complainant, with an Elder acting as their advocate.

6.3.1.2 The Elder who the complaint has been made against.

6.3.1.3 One or two further people should be present to act as witness(es). They could be another Elder or other independent person. If the aggrieved person is female, at least one woman should be included as an independent witness.

6.3.2 The aim of the meeting is to bring healing, repentance, forgiveness and peace. This could require more than one meeting if necessary, but the process should be completed in a timely manner, and ideally within one month.

6.3.3 Since by this stage, at least one other Elder has deemed the matter sufficiently important to bring to the accused, there is likely some truth in what he is accused of. Therefore, the accused Elder should be [quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry](#). ([James 1:19](#))

7 STAGE 3: FORMAL INVESTIGATION

7.1 If the complainant feels that the issue has not been satisfactorily resolved at Stage 2, they must formally notify one of the Elders within 14 days.

7.1.1 The reason for the 14-day limit is that it's unfair for the accused to have a complaint "hanging over them".

7.1.2 The complainant must clearly indicate the nature of their concerns and the reason for seeking a more formal response. Where, due to complexity or circumstance, this 14-day period is unrealistic, a longer timeframe can be negotiated between the Elders and the complainant, however this extension must be requested within the 14-day period.

- 7.2 The Eldership will oversee the complaint, deciding on an individual or team to investigate and will define the scope and process of the investigation.
- 7.3 In Stage 3, written records must be kept:
- 7.3.1 A complaint form should be filled out (see [COMPLAINT FORM](#)) with supporting evidence provided.
 - 7.3.2 Written acknowledgement of receipt of a complaint will be provided within 7 days, and a timescale for next steps should be provided. (see [COMPLAINT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT LETTER TEMPLATE](#)).
 - 7.3.3 Written notes of interviews must be taken by the Elders and held securely. A copy should be supplied to the complainant, and ideally agreed by them.
- 7.4 If the complaint relates to a specific person, they should be informed, and given opportunity to respond.
- 7.5 Pastoral support should be offered to the complainant and to anyone else concerned.
- 7.6 The final written report to the complainant should be agreed by the Elders. Whether the complaint is upheld or not, the report should describe:
- 7.6.1 The action taken to investigate the complaint.
 - 7.6.2 The conclusions from the investigation.
 - 7.6.3 Any action taken as a result of the complaint.
 - 7.6.4 Their right to appeal.

8 STAGE 4: APPEAL PROCESS

- 8.1 If the complainant is still dissatisfied with the process or outcome of the investigation, they can appeal the decision in writing to the **Chair of Deacons** within 28 days of receipt of the outcome.
- 8.2 The complainants appeal must clearly state the reasons for the appeal and provide evidence as to why they disagree with the outcome of the investigation.
- 8.3 The appeal is NOT a reinvestigation of the original complaint.
- 8.4 The **Chair of Deacons**, supported as required by other nominated individuals, should then:
- 8.4.1 Establish the scope and process of the appeal.
 - 8.4.2 Review the process and findings of the stage 3 complaint to establish as to whether any further investigation is required.
 - 8.4.3 Once any necessary inquiries/investigations are complete a final decision will be made on the robustness and reliability of the stage 3 process and findings.
 - 8.4.4 The outcome of the appeal should be reported back to the Eldership.
 - 8.4.5 The complainant and accused are then notified of the outcome.
 - 8.4.6 The complainant will be notified of their options to raise the concerns further. These are:
 - 8.4.6.1 a complaint or a referral to the charity commission, or
 - 8.4.6.2 reporting to the statutory services (police, social services, etc).
 - 8.4.7 There are no further rights to appeal.

9 QUESTIONS

9.1 What do we mean by a complaint?

- 9.1.1 A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about any aspect of church life. This can be about a person, or persons, an activity, or a group or about a service provided by the church.
- 9.1.2 Complaints must be specific and evidence-based. It is unfair to accuse someone of something non-specific because it's almost impossible to defend oneself against it.
 - 9.1.2.1 Eg. "I just feel he's really manipulative" is non-specific and non-evidence-based.
 - 9.1.2.2 However, "He manipulated me by saying xxx which was overheard by so-and-so, and he wrote this email to me" is both specific and evidence-based.

9.2 What do we mean by a vexatious complaint?

- 9.2.1 If the Eldership conclude that a complaint is vexatious (i.e., unreasonable, and repeated, once the above processes have been exhausted) the church may consider exercising church discipline if the complainant is a member.
- 9.2.2 If the complainant is not a church member, the church is under no obligation to respond further once all available avenues of resolution have been explored.

9.3 What is a serious incident?

- 9.3.1 Sadly, sin can be so serious that the church is obligated by law to do certain things. The Charity Commission defines a *serious incident* as "*an adverse event, whether actual or alleged, which results in or risks significant:*
 - Loss of your charity's money or assets.*
 - Damage to your charity's property.*
 - Harm to your charity's work, beneficiaries or reputation.**The most common type of incidents are frauds, thefts, significant financial losses, criminal breaches, terrorism or extremism allegations, and safeguarding issues.*"
- 9.3.2 In that situation, reports must be made to the Charity Commission, our insurance company, and to the police. In addition, detailed notes should be kept of all meetings and these should be locked in the safe indefinitely.
- 9.3.3 Serious Incidents must not be dealt with informally. They must go to Stage 3 immediately.

9.4 Why is there a different process for Elders?

- 9.4.1 [1Timothy 5:17-21](#) seeks to protect Elders from vexatious complaints. There are probably 3 reasons for this:
 - 9.4.1.1 A working assumption that Elders are in the right.
 - 9.4.1.2 A recognition that Elders are more likely to be "targeted" by someone with a grudge, and they need to be protected from that.
 - 9.4.1.3 To prevent Elders from being harassed by frivolous accusations that would impair their ministry? We tend to think of the "muzzled ox" as something to do with money – but in the wider context it seems to be about the debilitating effect accusations can have on ministry, if they are not substantiated.
- 9.4.2 [1Timothy 5](#) specifically recognises that for Elders to hold a fellow-Elder accountable is hard. Elders are friends as well as colleagues – and it's much easier to take their side by burying the problem, or doing a quick patch-up job rather than thoroughly

investigating an accusation against them. Elders must take seriously the strength of these words [I charge you in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favouritism](#). All heaven is watching as Elders hold one another accountable.

9.5 What should we do about confidentiality?

- 9.5.1 All complaints must be handled sensitively and confidentially as far as possible. Information concerning the complaint should only be shared on a need-to-know basis.
- 9.5.2 If someone is removed from membership, or disbarred from certain activities, then of course, this will need to be shared as widely as necessary.

COMPLAINT FORM

If you need help filling in this form it's absolutely fine to ask someone to help you.

Your details

Name:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

If you are raising the complaint on behalf of someone else, please give details:

About the complaint

Date(s):

Person(s) involved:

Complaint about: (please clearly describe the nature of your complaint)

Supporting information:

- *State the matter or name of the person who is the subject of the complaint.*
- *What happened, when and where.*
- *Provide the contact details or statements of any witnesses.*
- *If complaining about a decision, explain what the decision was about, when it was taken, and who made it.*
- *Explain what impact this decision has had, or you may fear will have, and upon whom.*
- *Provide any additional information that you believe would be helpful.*

Q1. Have you tried to resolve this matter informally? YES/NO

If YES, please move to Q2.

If NO, please explain briefly why you decided not to try to resolve the matter informally, then move to Q3.

Q2. If you tried to resolve this matter informally, what happened?

State who you dealt with, when and where, what information you provided to them, and what you felt was unsatisfactory about the outcome.

Q3. What actions are you wanting the church to take and what outcomes are you seeking?

Whilst the church leadership cannot promise to do what you ask, it would be helpful to understand what resolution you are seeking.

The church will treat your data carefully and in accordance with the church's data protection policy. The church cannot guarantee to keep the fact and details of your complaint confidential if it is necessary and proportionate to share your data to review and resolve your complaint.

Signature of complainant:

Date:

COMPLAINT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT LETTER TEMPLATE

[Date]

Dear **[insert name]**,

Thank you for your letter to **[church name or name of specific person]** dated **[insert date]**.

We are sorry that you have had to raise a complaint **[include a brief summary of complaint]**.

The Church, acting through our Eldership, will review your complaint in accordance with our complaints policy, a copy of which can be found here: **[insert link]**

[Insert the name of the responsible person(s)] will be in touch with you within 7 days to begin a review of your complaint.

The Church will treat the facts and content of your complaint carefully and in line with our data protection policy **[insert link to church data protection policy]**. However, on occasion the Church may need to make a public statement about the subject matter of the complaint or to report the matter to the statutory authorities and consequently the church cannot guarantee to keep the fact of or details of your complaint confidential. Where this may be necessary, you will be kept informed. You should maintain reasonable confidentiality as to the nature and content of your complaint, other than to seek professional advice if required, and now that you have submitted your complaint, you should avoid communicating with the person complained about while the matter is being reviewed.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact **[insert name/email]** in writing.

Yours sincerely,

[Name and signature]