

Working to Bully-proof Clergy and Parishes

**A way forward in dealing with bullying
behaviours in a local church context**

Prepared for the Eastern Region Council
Anglican Diocese of Melbourne

by

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Vision made practical

2007

Forward

“Each local parish is its own community ... If the bullying situation occurs within the local church – if the bully is local and the target is local – then it becomes the responsibility of the local church community to intervene.” p. 7

Working to Bully Proof Clergy and Parishes is designed to assist clergy and parishes address bullying behaviours in their midst. It is aligned to *Faithfulness in Service – A national code for personal behaviour and the practice of pastoral ministry by clergy and church workers* as adopted by General Synod, October 2004, and last revised by General Synod Standing Committee October 2006.

Introduction

Bullying is a destructive set of behaviours that damages people whether they are targets, bullies. It also damages the people who are close to them. Bullying occurs in all areas of life – families, schools, workplaces and parishes. When left unaddressed, bullying can affect people’s peace of mind, their health, their relationships and their capacities to cope with day to day living. In severe cases, bullying can lead to physical assault, depression, loss of career or ministry, and even suicide.

Statistics show that one in six people experience bullying at work. In terms of gender, more than half of all bullies are female (58%), with the vast majority of bullying targets also being women (80%).¹



Bullying behaviours occur in all areas of society including local churches. An important part of handling these is strategic preparation. This resource is designed to help clergy and parishes understand, handle and protect themselves from bullying behaviour. It has been developed through the active participation of the clergy in the Eastern Region of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne.

Bully-proofing is a part of a wider parish conflict resolution approach. It is built around three main principles:

1. Educate all clergy and parishes about bullying behaviours
2. Develop compassionate cultures within parishes that include clear systems and processes that protect targets and effectively reduce the impact of bullies
3. Attend to the unique needs of targets and bullies.

¹ Bully Busters. *Workplace Bullying Defined*.

This booklet outlines some of the fundamental precepts of bullying behaviour and some useful ways to deal with it. More information can be sought through the references included.

Clergy and parishes are encouraged to recognise that bullying can take many forms and any one of us – clergy and parishioners – can experience periods as targets and bullies.

Two appendices are included. The first one is an example of a Code of Conduct that may be modified by a parish. The second is an example of a Complaints Process that may be adapted by a parish or clusters of parishes to deal with significant complaints or grievances at the local level. This suggested process is run by trained lay people, allowing all members of the parish, including the vicar, the opportunity to have issues fairly raised and resolved.

What is bullying?

Bullying



Bullying is the repeated seeking out or targeting of a person to cause them distress and humiliation or to exploit them. It includes:

- exclusion from a peer group
- intimidation; and
- extortion ²

Examples of bullying behaviour include:

- Aggressive or frightening behaviour such as swearing, shouting, intimidation or threatening violence
- Threats to make, or actively making, someone's work or home life difficult eg constantly calling the person at home late at night and on weekends, spreading false accusations about a person with the result they are ostracised
- Threats of, or actual assault against someone, or interfering with or threatening to interfere with someone's belongings
- Rude, belittling or sarcastic comments eg "you're hopeless", "She's on her way out"
- Abusive, belittling or intimidating phone calls, emails, notes etc
- Baiting or unreasonable teasing eg singing derogatory songs and inserting the person's name, cruel nicknames
- Nasty practical jokes

² *Faithfulness in Service*. General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia Child Protection Committee. 2006. p. 7

- Publicly belittling someone's opinions, or dismissing that person's contribution without good reason, including in front of others
- Standing in someone's way, or deliberately blocking his / her path in an intimidating manner
- Deliberate and unreasonable isolation or exclusion from (ministry) discussions, communication or other (ministry)-related activities
- Ignoring the person
- Gossip

Please note that occasional, one-off incidents eg losing your temper, shouting or swearing are *not* bullying.³

Harassment

Harassment is unwelcome conduct, whether intended or not, in relation to another person where the person feels with good reason in all the circumstances offended, belittled or threatened. Such behaviour may consist of a single incident or several incidents over a period of time. It includes:

- making unwelcome physical contact with a person;
- making gestures or using language that could reasonably give offence including continual and unwarranted shouting;
- making unjustified or unnecessary comments about a person's capacities or attributes⁴

Bullying in Parishes

Bullying can occur in any parish. It is important to understand that bullying behaviour ought never to be tolerated.

Parishioners can bully each other and they can bully clergy. Clergy also can bully other clergy, and they can bully parishioners. Sometimes bullies display bullying behaviour in all sorts of situations, and sometimes they only do so in specific settings, or against specific individuals. Targets also may almost seem to 'attract' bullies to them, or may display themselves as victims in particular situations.



Bully with a slingshot

Sometimes, bullies can become targets and targets can become bullies.... and some people seem to never act as either bullies or targets.

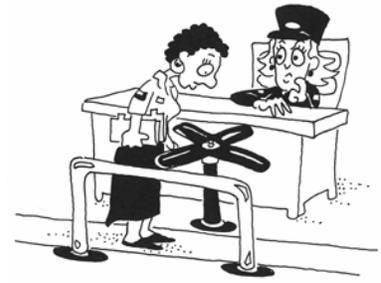
In its simplest form, bullying is a nasty scenario or interaction that has two participants or two groups of participants – bullies and targets. The starting point for this interaction is low self-esteem and the objective is power.

³ The Law Society of New South Wales. 2004

⁴ *Faithfulness in Service*. General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia Child Protection Committee. 2006. p. 8

Who are targets?

Targets can be anyone. Targets are people who suffer from the behaviour of bullies. They may be direct victims of bully behaviour, or they may be family, friends, supporters or dependants of the target.



The Gatekeeper

When bullied a target may suffer emotionally, psychologically, physically, socially and spiritually. Their suffering can cause them to change their own behaviour, becoming uncharacteristically withdrawn or aggressive. They may develop physical illness and may display poor judgment. Their quality of life deteriorates, and the healthy 'joy-factor' dissipates.

Who are bullies?

Bullies can be anyone. Some bullies are aggressive in any and all situations – to their families, to colleagues and employees, to receptionists, taxi drivers, whoever. They will seek to be dominant in all circumstances. They often lack empathy with people and therefore may actually be suffering from some form of mental or emotional illness. Others may simply not be aware of the effect their behaviour has on others, but can be persuaded to modify their behaviour if appropriate feedback is given to them.

In parishes, the key to modifying bullying behaviour lies in the skilling up of current and potential targets, and the development of a culture where bullying behaviour is recognised and simply not tolerated.

What doesn't work

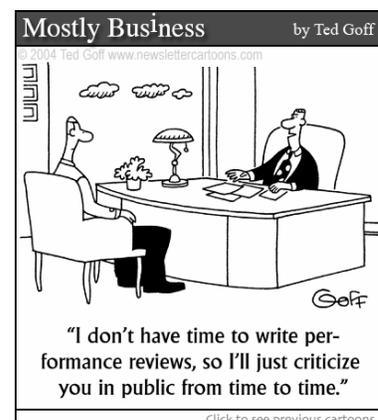
1. **Ignoring bullying behaviour.** Bullying, by definition, is an on-going pattern of behaviour in which the bully exercises inappropriate behaviour towards the target. Also, by definition, the target suffers as a result of the behaviour. Unchecked, the behaviour will continue and the target will continue to suffer. It is the responsibility of the parish community to address this in an effective way – one which stops the bullying and protects the target.
2. **Simplistic diagnosis.** Bullies are driven by the need for power. However, the underlying causes that 'create' bullies are far ranging. These include the bully's family history, state of mental and emotional health, peer group influence and the permission the culture of the church has tacitly given for the bullying to continue. There are many areas of 'grey' in each of these aspects, and combinations provide a wide variety of causes. Careful, wise and prayerful discernment is required to unearth the cause of any particular bullying behaviour.

3. **Ignoring feelings.** Feelings and emotions are important indicators of whether bullying is occurring, and, in particular, the level of damage that is suffered by the target. The unpacking of feelings is also an important factor in helping to determine whether a bully bullies because they lack empathy for their victims and actually enjoy the suffering, or whether they do feel for their victims and simply haven't recognised the extent of the impact of their behaviour. Any intervention into a bullying situation needs to include an understanding of the feelings of bullies and their targets.
4. **Blaming targets.** Blaming a target for 'allowing' a bully to behave destructively to them or judging they 'had it coming' is akin to saying that another person was asking to be burgled or raped. Bullying is an assault that damages the target. No tolerance of bullying either in theory or in action should be provided in a church environment.
5. **Excusing bullies.** Most parishes have a culture that tries to heed Jesus' teachings on forgiveness and 'turning the other cheek'. Sometimes these teachings can be distorted with the result that bullies continue to hurt people who are trying to be 'good' by not complaining and accepting the circumstance. One needs to ask what is being learnt in such a situation? Are we learning that bullying is acceptable because no-one is challenging it, and are we learning that injustice is acceptable because the prevention of harm is not preferred to the infliction of harm?
6. **Lack of local responsibility (It's the system's fault).** Each local parish is its own community. Although it belongs to a wider church that exercises influence over it, there can never be an excuse that bullying behaviour continues at a local level because of a lack in hierarchical response. If the bullying situation occurs within the local church – if the bully is local and the target is local – then it becomes the responsibility of the local church community to intervene. Certainly advice and support can be appropriately sought, but inaction at a local level due to a poor response at a denominational level is unacceptable. Each local parish needs to address bullying behaviour in the same way that each local parish addresses its own financial and buildings needs.

What does work

John 13: 34 "But I am giving you a new command. You must love each other, just as I have loved you. 35 If you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples."

Bullyproofing clergy and parishes is an outworking of Jesus' command to us to love one another. Some practical ways to assist are:



1. **Education.** Many people think they know what bullying is. They usually associate it with the caricature school-yard filled with angry bully-boys and weak, insipid victims. Bullying behaviour is far more complex than this and the range of behaviours more varied. People often don't want to identify themselves as 'weak and insipid' and therefore allow themselves to be bullied rather than undertaking protective measures. Just as we teach each other about truth-telling, kindness and acknowledging our legal obligations, so we need to teach each other about bullying behaviour. Without a collective understanding of the subject, parishes will not be able to undertake the necessary steps to prevent it.
2. **Clearly defined descriptions of roles and behaviours.** Much of the power exercised by bullies is derived from confusion about roles and acceptable behaviours. The relatively simple task of publishing the agreed roles of the clergy and lay leaders can dissipate some of the power games. Everyone is then clear about what the vicar, wardens, vestry members and ministry leaders **really** are responsible for, and, probably more importantly, what they are **not** responsible for. The bullies who try to force clergy and lay leaders to take responsibility in other areas can be directed to the relevant local documents. Similarly, codes of conduct for clergy, lay leaders and parishioners can prevent some bullying behaviours.
3. **Affirming assertive behaviour.** This is a complex area and requires a good understanding of the differences between passive, aggressive and assertive behaviours.

Assertiveness is distinguished from aggression and passivity. How people deal with personal boundaries; their own and those of other people, helps to distinguish between these three concepts. **Passive communicators** do not defend their own personal boundaries and thus allow aggressive people to harm or otherwise unduly influence them. They are also typically not likely to risk trying to influence anyone else. **Aggressive people** do not respect the personal boundaries of others and thus are liable to harm others while trying to influence them. **A person communicates assertively** by not being afraid to speak his or her mind or trying to influence others, but doing so in a way that respects the personal boundaries of others. They are also willing to defend themselves against aggressive incursions.⁵

The vicar and lay leaders need to model assertive behaviours. Assertiveness needs to be practiced in all public meeting places – services, social events, parish meetings etc. People need to be taught what these behaviours look like and learn to encourage assertiveness in each other.



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⁵ Assertiveness Wikipedia. Sept. 2007.

Ephesians 4 lays a foundation for this.

4. **Sanctions against bullying.** This is perhaps the most difficult area of all. What does a parish do with a persistent bully? If all other avenues of education and cultural change has failed, and a bully continues destructive behaviour, then sanctions need to be imposed. On a local level, when bullies are parishioners, such sanctions can be written into codes of behaviour.

If the bullies are members of clergy or church workers then Diocesan processes need to be enacted. According to *Faithfulness in Service* these processes include

- approaching the member of the clergy or church worker and identifying the concern where you believe that a person has not suffered harm or is at risk of harm
- reporting the behaviour to the church authority having responsibility for the member of the clergy or church worker or the director of Professional Standards where you believe that a person has suffered harm or is at risk of harm⁶

A church worker is a lay person:

- who is licensed or authorised by the bishop of a diocese
- who is employed by a church body in respect of whom this Code is part of their employment contract; or
- who, for payment or not, holds a position or performs a function with the actual or apparent authority of a church authority or church body, including an office, position or function:
 - of leadership in a parish, diocese or General Synod body;
 - as a member of the General Synod or a diocesan synod
 - as a member of a body incorporated by the General Synod, a diocese or a diocesan synod
 - as a church warden, member of any parish council or member of any committee constituted by or by the authority of the General Synod, a diocesan synod or a parish council;

in respect of whom the diocesan synod, the diocesan council, the church authority or the church body has adopted this code.⁷

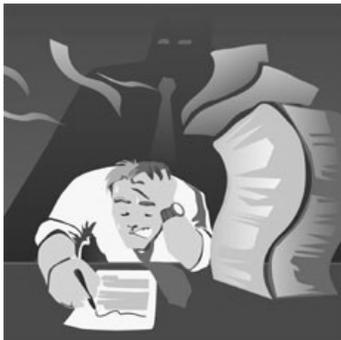
⁶ *Faithfulness in Service*. General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia Child Protection Committee. 2006. p. 14

⁷ *Faithfulness in Service*. General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia Child Protection Committee. 2006. pp. 7, 8

What targets need



bullying to continue. Good networks of supportive people need to be encouraged throughout the parish. Each person needs to be able to identify at least five people who they can 'tell anything to'. These people are not necessarily members of the parish. Parishioners also need to be taught how to be a good support person, and to watch for behaviour changes in one another that may indicate their friend or loved one is being bullied.



1. **Supportive networks.** Targets are, by definition, those who suffer through the behaviour of another. One of the effects of being a target is a loss of self-esteem that can result in isolating oneself from those who could help. This isolation may be seen in the social behaviour of withdrawing from the company of others, or through not sharing about the personal pain and allowing the bullying to continue. Good networks of supportive people need to be encouraged throughout the parish. Each person needs to be able to identify at least five people who they can 'tell anything to'. These people are not necessarily members of the parish. Parishioners also need to be taught how to be a good support person, and to watch for behaviour changes in one another that may indicate their friend or loved one is being bullied.
2. **Personal protective strategies.** Again, there are many strategies that targets can use to protect themselves from bullies. Strategies range from learning the arts of positive self-talk and realistic perceptions of themselves to managing their feelings to confronting bullies with verbal retorts that confuse and diffuse a bully's assault.
3. **Confidence in the 'system'.** Targets need to be confident that the parish system in which they operate has the leadership and processes which will protect them. Matthew 18 can be a useful guide. Without their local church community's support and prevention measures, targets are left to deal with the situations as best they can – and to do so alone.

What bullies need

1. **Accountability for behaviour.** Some bullies suffer from a pathological or spiritual condition. These need to be handled with some expertise and wise pastoral care. However, many bullies persist with their behaviour because they do not understand the impact they are having on their targets. Lack of accountability to the target and to the church community has allowed them to be 'successful' and in turn, has provided tacit permission for the behaviour to continue. Clarity of roles and behaviours

can help define for bullies what behaviours are acceptable and what are not. Refer to 2 Tim 3:16.

2. **Personal ‘coaching’ to modify behaviours.** For those bullies whose behaviour is habitual or stems from ignorance of their effect on a target, a church community might ideally provide support to reflect back the consequences of a bully’s behaviour and coaching towards improvement.

What parishes need

1. **A determination to be a safe place.** A church community ought to be one of the safest places around. People from all walks of life ought to find a haven of nurture and encouragement within the life of their local parish. Bullying behaviours assail that safety. A collective determination to be safe and free from bullying is the first step to eliminating this destructive conduct. This determination needs to be led by the parish leadership, and encompassed by the majority of parishioners. To be a ‘bully free’ community needs to become part of the core value structure of the community.
2. **Effective education processes.** These need to be introduced and regularly repeated. Each parish will determine the best way to do this within their own context. The main thing is that clergy, vestry and parishioners are clear about what bullying behaviours look like and how to deal with them.
3. **Consistency in application.** If determination initiates and education implements bully proofing processes, then consistency in application of strategies reduces bullying behaviours and their impact on targets, and infuses the local parish culture with capacities to be bully-free.

Appendix 1

Parish Code of Conduct – An Example

All people in this parish are expected to:

1. Conduct themselves at all times in a manner that honours God and His church.
2. In all financial matters act with scrupulous honesty and publicly account for all monies handled by them on behalf of others
3. Endeavour to conduct all personal relations in a godly manner, acting with respect, love, integrity and truthfulness toward all those with whom they associate, irrespective of position, race, gender or religious opinion.
4. Seek to pursue reconciliation when conflict or division occurs.
5. Be truthful, actively avoiding exaggeration and misrepresentation
6. Actively promote a safe environment where sexual abuse is neither tolerated nor able to take place.
7. Actively promote a safe environment where bullying is neither tolerated nor able to take place undetected.

Bullying means the repeated seeking out or targeting of a person to cause them distress and humiliation or to exploit them. It includes:

- *exclusion from a peer group*
- *intimidation; and*
- *extortion*

8. Actively promote a safe environment where harassment is neither tolerated nor able to take place.

Harassment means unwelcome conduct, whether intended or not, in relation to another person where the person feels with good reason in all the circumstances offended, belittled or threatened. Such behaviour may consist of a single incident or several incidents over a period of time. It includes:

- *making unwelcome physical contact with a person;*
- *making gestures or using language that could reasonably give offence including continual and unwarranted shouting;*
- *making unjustified or unnecessary comments about a person's capacities or attributes*

Appendix 2

Parish Complaints Process – An Example

The purpose of the complaints process is to establish the facts of a situation so that it is dealt with according to Godly principles and peace is made. A complaints process also provides church leaders with cumulative information that allows them to identify 'hot spots' (difficulties and potential difficulties) and develop strategies to resolve them.

a) Guidelines

1. Establish and train a group of respected lay people to undertake this ministry. The vicar is not included in this group. Through not being a member of this group, the vicar is also free to use the process when required. Training can be developed and delivered at a Diocesan level. As the matters can be sensitive and people vulnerable, care needs to be taken to select those who are mature Christians. The group would include a warden. If groups are trained on a local cluster or deanery basis, the opportunity to import support from a neighbouring parish from time to time might present itself. The process itself is subject to the archdeacon's authority.
2. Issues pertaining to sexual misconduct or criminal actions are dealt with under Diocesan or legal processes.
3. Processes to maintain confidentiality are established according to legal and Diocesan requirements.
4. The complaints process is accessible to all parishioners by being published in plain English and other relevant languages, and regularly promoted.
5. All leaders commit to ensuring the process' viability.
6. This process is not intended to supersede parishioners' regular access to their vicar or lay leaders.

b) Process

1. Encourage all complaints to be put into writing. Where this is not practical, a written record of a conversation with a member of the complaints process group needs to be made, seeking the signature of the complainant. No anonymous complaints will be acted upon in this process.
2. Acknowledge all signed complaints in writing, including a prepared statement of confidentiality and how the process will work.
3. Two members of the complaints process group are nominated to investigate the matter.

4. The investigating team clarifies the purpose and any expected outcome of the complaint with the complainant.
5. The investigating team undertakes a fair and unbiased enquiry. Brief notes on facts and evidence are maintained. Personal opinions are not recorded.
6. The investigating team ensures appropriate peace-making processes are enacted eg encourage a meeting between the parties to discuss the issue, secure an apology, provide an explanation etc.
7. The investigating team attempts to complete the process within three weeks of receiving the original complaint.
8. If a complainant is dissatisfied with the result, he or she can approach the archdeacon who will investigate the process, but not generally re-investigate the matter.

c) Data Collection and Assessment

1. All cases are recorded on a secure and confidential data base. Information is brief and factual. No personal opinions are recorded. Information includes - dates, names, contact details, brief case details and outcomes. The data base is password protected and only available to the vicar and members of the complaints process group.
2. Over time, this data base will provide an invaluable source of information, enabling the vicar and members of the complaints process group to discern patterns and trends within the congregation. This information can form the basis of pastoral and organisational strategies to improve the life of the whole congregation.

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