

# CHURCH TIMES

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## Bullying can be institutional, too

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It has become embedded in the structures of the Church of England, argues *Paul Skirrow*



*Definition of bullying: The abuse and mistreatment of someone vulnerable by someone stronger, more powerful, etc. It is prone to or characterised by overbearing mistreatment and domination of others.*

THE clergy of the Church of England, if asked directly, would probably be able to identify instances of personal **bullying** by the hierarchy, either of themselves or of others. Most, however, would accept that this is not too common. The identifiable mechanisms for direct one-on-one bullying, however, have been embedded as part of the structures and systems of the Church. The hierarchy are engaged in bullying even without their activity's being identified as such by them or others.

Below are some examples of the way in which bullying has become embedded, and which is, in fragmented and generalised ways, experienced by most clergy.

- The removal of freehold. This paved the way for creating weaker and less-protected clergy, making them easier targets. Employment rights were undercut severely through this process. The checks and balances built into the system were removed, and a poor substitute, from the point of view of the clergy, was introduced: Common Tenure.
- The **Clergy Discipline Measure** is a fine example of what happens when the protection of freehold renders clergy vulnerable. Its destructive weaknesses have been identified, but whether the Church has the will or the way to redeem the situation remains to be seen. The practice of being suspended and cut off from support and the exercise of one's

vocation is a definition of being guilty until being proved innocent. The process feels like being bullied to clergy who have had to go through it, and it hangs, like Cicero's sword of Damocles, over the heads of all priests going about their parish duties.

- The constant demand for responses to questionnaires from the “centre”, over and above what used to be the usual documents, seem like a deliberate checking-up process to make sure that the clergy are doing what they should. This is demeaning.
- The proliferation of initiatives cascading from the “centre” remind clergy that they are not really doing all they could to fulfil their vocation, and their practice of [ministry](#) needs remodelling. Belittling the vulnerable, persistently reminding them of their inadequacies, is an act of bullying.
- The devising of diocesan strategies and plans into which parishes are expected to fit has the same effect, and reminds clergy that their traditional and faithful activities are inadequate.
- The constant money pressure through [parish share](#) could be described whimsically as stealing the parishes' dinner money, which is an old, traditional, and established form of bullying. That aside, clergy are often made to feel as failures when they cannot up the giving to fund the extra diocesan staff, initiatives, and programmes.
- The pressure to put bums on pews reflects a contempt for low numbers. Two or three gathered together represents a failure by the clergy. [Numerical growth](#) is seen as the key to “success” and the only indicator of “success”.
- Persistent pastoral reorganisation, or the threat of it, disturbs, threatens, and worries clergy who have no way to resist, especially those without freehold. It creates and sustains anxiety, increasing vulnerability and the desire to comply with the demands of the bullies.

ALL the above, in effect, outlines institutionalised bullying. It suggests that we have developed management practices designed to manipulate a weakened clergy to force them to do what the hierarchy wants through the structures that the hierarchy controls. It is the practice of the powerful dominating weaker and more vulnerable people.

What is to be done? Many clergy, quite rightly, sit lightly to the above where they can, dismissing it out of frustration. This is still possible for those who have managed to hold on to their freehold. For others, I would argue that a quiet resistance is required. A collective stance which allows such bullying to pass by or wither in the inbox.

Alongside that, listen to our people and reassert the fact that those we serve have a different view, and we are necessarily heeding their needs. Treat intrusive questions in questionnaires and assessments with quiet dignity, while indicating their irrelevance to your situation: a simple “N/A” works well. Use appraisals creatively to rediscover the excitement and hope of your [vocation](#), rather than follow a hierarchical agenda.

For the hierarchy, stop undermining your clergy in the name of “ministerial support”. Have a moratorium on initiatives. Visit and affirm small churches without judging; just enjoy them. Reconsider the size and financial burden of the large bureaucracies now deemed essential to manage the Church. There are some wonderful clergy and people out there; meet them and listen. Think theologically about ministry, priesthood, and the place of lay people in the world.

MUCH is spoken of bullying, and the Church of England has policies and training programmes about how to deal with it. The Church knows that there is a problem, and, at one level, seeks to prevent it from becoming a greater problem. That is good.

Essential though the prevention of direct one-on-one bullying is, however, we need to see how we have integrated bullying into the culture and management of the Church over the past two or more decades.

If the analysis above has some basis in fact, then we need to rethink. We seek to serve God and God’s people. We will never manage that with systems that allow the motives and practices of the powerful to dominate the servants. That’s the way of the world, not the way of God and the Kingdom.

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*This is an edited extract from a longer article published at [survivingchurch.org](https://survivingchurch.org).*