

Dealing with difficult people

*A guide for clergy, ministers,
churchwardens, lay workers,
parish administrators and other
church staff*



Department for Social Responsibility

 THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
THE DIOCESE OF GUILDFORD

Introduction

Living in Surrey or Hampshire, we are fortunate to be living in one of the safest parts of the country. Yet by the very nature of our work we often encounter strangers, and there may be times when we do not feel at ease or confident that we are safe. We may well feel more concern for others: our family, colleagues or staff, than we do for ourselves.

As Christians we want to be friendly and welcoming and we would love to be able to have an open door policy at all times and in all places. Yet we also believe that we should be sensible about our own personal safety and that of others for whom we are responsible.

The personal safety of clergy and parish staff should be the concern of the whole church. In the Church of England, the Incumbent and PCC of a parish have a particular responsibility to consider the personal safety of clergy, parish office staff and anyone who may be in church or the church hall to, for example, practise the organ, arrange flowers, do the cleaning or to lock and unlock the building. It may be that the PCC considers this matter as part of their annual risk assessment and, ideally, establishes a policy which all concerned are made aware of.



Further help

This booklet is only a brief guide. If you would like to explore the possibility of further training in any of the areas touched on here, please contact the Department for Social Responsibility (address overleaf) to discuss.

Similarly, for advice or information on any of the issues mentioned in this booklet (e.g. mental health, housing and homelessness) contact the Department to see what help may be available.

Mention has been made of encountering someone with suicidal feelings. **Suicide prevention** is not covered here because it is a complex area which needs skilled understanding and thorough training; again, contact the Department for Social Responsibility if you would be interested in further training in this subject.

The **Suzy Lamplugh Trust** is an excellent source of information on all aspects of personal safety. The Trust offers training, conferences, publications and practical advice on personal safety; campaigns to improve legislation, and, perhaps most importantly, works to help overcome people's fear of crime.

Visit the Trust's website: www.suzylamplugh.org.



When someone comes to the door...

If you live in a vicarage, parsonage, manse or other housing close to church, you have probably already thought about personal safety issues and discussed the matter with your partner and family and any others in your household. Some clergy families keep their front door locked from inside as a matter of course, for example, and most will have an agreement on, for instance, not giving money at the door. It is wise to have thought through these things and to have some kind of "policy" which all the family know about.

Some basic safety precautions might include:

- ☺ having an agreement not to let unexpected strangers in, unless certain that it is safe to do so (**the Police are adamant about this**)
- ☺ having a policy of not giving money at the door - instead you might have at hand tinned or dried food to give, or vouchers for a local fish and chip shop or takeaway
- ☺ if a caller you feel uncertain of needs to talk to you, you could arrange to meet them in a public place such as a local cafe or park
- ☺ have information to hand of local resources, for example on hostels, night shelters, mental health resources, which you can give to a caller
- ☺ find out and keep handy the phone numbers for your local Emergency Duty Team (Social Services), Crisis Response Team (Mental Health Services) and local Police (Community Support etc.)

What we bring to a situation

In any form of communication, information is conveyed in a number of different ways. It has been estimated that:

7% of the message is conveyed by the words spoken

38% is conveyed by tone of voice, volume, pitch and pace of speech

55% is conveyed by facial expression and body language

“This is not what I need right now”

The way we react to potentially dangerous situations or people we feel uneasy with is affected by the state we are in at the time. If we are overtired, stressed or anxious, we are less able to be calm and in control. Emotional stress works its way through the body, making muscles tense, causing headaches and muscular aches and pains, and a vicious circle of sleeplessness and overtiredness.

It has been suggested by experts in assertiveness training that physical fitness, mental agility and a balance of work and relaxation contribute to our ability to stay calm in the face of aggression, and so to stay in control.

Of course, a sense of risk and an element of stress are essential features of the human condition and vital to our survival. It is the way we manage them which determines whether they do us and those around us good or harm.

“I am not in the right place for this now”

This can be true literally as well as figuratively. Although of course we can never be completely prepared for difficult situations where we may be at risk, we are less likely to put ourselves (and others) at risk if we have thought out, for example, how to avoid being alone in church or, if this is unavoidable, how help could be summoned if necessary.



Compiled by Wendy Bryant, Open To All Adviser, for

Department for Social Responsibility
Diocesan House
Quarry Street
Guildford
GU1 3XG
Telephone: 01483 790324

Further copies available from:
Dsr.administrator@cofeguildford.org.uk

revised and updated March 2009