Parish of St Mary's, Summerstown

St Mary's Safe Church Policy: Guidance for pastoral care and visiting

Approved by PCC on 25th January 2022. To be reviewed annually

Latest review: *24th February 2026*

This guide should be read in conjunction with the Code for Safer Working Practice and the policy for working with vulnerable adults.

Pastoral care is central to our role as the church and we have a desire to support one another practically, emotionally and spiritually. It is one way in which we foster the well-being of all people, individually and corporately. Pastoral care activities may include visiting, befriending, counselling or mentoring, self-help activities (e.g. CAP money advice), giving material aid etc.

Care may be offered by clergy, staff members and volunteers. All forms of care need to have clear and specific boundaries. See A Safe Church, Section 4, Activities with children and young people, and Activities with adults who may be vulnerable, for best practice guidelines. (ASC_Section_4_Keeping_safe.pdf (anglican.org))

In one-to-one pastoral care, further specific norms for practice include the following:

i. to avoid harming the recipient by what is done or not done
ii. to acknowledge that the relationship between carer and recipient is at that time asymmetrical and unequal. No advantages, personal, sexual or financial, should accrue to the carer from the relationship, other than the satisfaction and fulfilment of knowing that the work has been done for the benefit of the other person
iii. to accept that the recipient is always to some extent dependent upon the carer. The relationship of dependency places power in the hands of the carer. There needs therefore to be a continual effort to understand the nature of the pastoral relationship so that power does not become abused or misused. The carer should therefore avoid acting in such a way that the recipient misunderstands the nature of the relationship. Physical touch is often an important and valuable aspect of pastoral care, yet it is particularly open to misuse and misunderstanding
iv. to work in such a way that the individual's or family's context, culture and social group are always taken into account with skill and respect
v. to maintain the principle of confidentiality within any limits that may have been agreed in advance with the recipient
vi. to maintain one's knowledge and skill at the level appropriate to maintaining competent caring and to be clear as to the limits of one's competency
vii. to enable recipients to be free to disengage from one's support and/or from a relationship with one at any time
viii. to ensure that one's work is supervised regularly by people who are competent to do so.

Spiritual support and care
Clergy, staff members and leaders or volunteers in a church context carry a role that may have meaning and significance for others beyond any characteristics and gifts that they may personally possess.

In providing pastoral care in a spiritual context, the role may hold out idealised and unrealistic hopes of love, protection, nurture and fulfilment for those to whom they minister.

The primary responsibility for ensuring that such expectations are managed always rests with the incumbent.

In home visiting
We want to encourage church members to offer hospitality, develop strong Christian friendships and provide care and support for one another. Where an individual is vulnerable or may be at risk of vulnerability, or where there is a difference in power or responsibility (eg a leader, a carer, or some level of authority/power), particular care should be taken in offering pastoral support.

When visiting someone in their home who is vulnerable, it is best practice to do this with another person and not go on your own. In particular, if visiting a vulnerable individual of the opposite sex you should be accompanied by someone of the same sex. (For example, if the incumbent is visiting a vulnerable woman he should take another woman with him) This provides both the individual and the person offering pastoral support appropriate protection from any risk of harm.

Acceptable touch
Sympathetic attention, encouragement and appropriate physical contact are needed by children and adults. Some physical contact with children, particularly younger children, can be wholly appropriate. However, abusers can use touch that appears safe to 'normalise' physical contact which then becomes abusive. As a general rule, the use of touch between adults in positions of responsibility and those with whom they are working or volunteering should be initiated by the person themselves, and kept to the minimum. In addition to this, always follow the guidelines below:

- ask permission before you touch someone
- allow the other person to determine the degree of touch except in exceptional circumstances (for example, when they need medical attention)
- avoid any physical contact that is or could be construed as sexual, abusive or offensive
- keep everything public. A hug in the context of a group is very different from a hug behind closed doors
- touch should be in response to a person's needs and not related to the worker's needs. Touch should be age-appropriate, welcome and generally initiated by the child, not the worker.

Meeting 1-1 for spiritual encouragement and mentoring

St Mary's wish to enourage people to meet together and read the Bible and pray together. In many cases, this will be mutual between peers and friends. In some cases, one person may be in a position of authority, for example due to age, Christian maturity or role within the church. Particular care should be taken in these friendships. The following guidance applies:

- Do not set up regular 1-1 meetings for mentoring, bible study or prayer with a member of the opposite sex
- Meet in a public place like a café, rather than in a home
- If any concerns arise about the relationship, dependencies or misunderstandings contact the Parish Safeguarding Officers
- Do not put pressure on individuals to speak about topics which they may be uncomfortable about – this may include health, family, spiritual life etc.
- Do not meet with anyone under age 18 without written permission from a parent or guardian – and refer to guidance for working with young people.

Vulnerability of the carer

In pastoral one-to-one situations, the carer is himself or herself vulnerable to potential misunderstanding or abuse. A pastoral relationship may evolve into one where the recipient of care, however vulnerable him/herself, may attack or abuse the carer in some way, such as through harassment or unfounded complaint against him or her. The risks of this happening may be greater when the recipient does not feel that his or her conscious or unconscious needs and longings are being met by the carer.

Where the carer feels he/she is in a position of such vulnerability, he/she should always consult with his/her Archdeacon or the Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser (DSA) at an early stage for advice and support, regardless of whatever agreements of confidentiality the carer may have with the recipient

Annual review

This policy will be annually reviewed and updated to reflect the pastoral activities of St Mary's Church and ensure appropriate guidance is issued to all volunteers.