



Guidance for Local Complaints Officers

This guidance aims to help local complaints officers who may be handling their first complaint. It can also act as a reminder for those who have more experience. However, it is no substitute for standing orders which are the final authority. See CPD Volume 2, Part 11 or www.methodist.org.uk and insert “complaints and discipline” in the search box in the top right hand side of the screen.

Introduction

The Methodist Church recognises that now and again incidents of inappropriate behaviour occur within its membership and it has procedures in place for dealing with complaints.

The aim of the procedure is not to trivialise complaints or to allow trivial matters to be treated as a crisis. The emphasis is to resolve problems locally while retaining powers of discipline for more serious matters. The aim is to protect those who believe they have a legitimate grievance, whilst allowing the basic pastoral and conciliatory character of the Church to be maintained.

What are the Complaints and Discipline procedures for? Through these procedures, members of the Methodist Church are accountable to the Church in matters of faith and behaviour. The Church seeks to enable healing and reconciliation to take place. Each of us needs to accept responsibility for our own acts and omissions.

Are the procedures for everyone? A complaint may be made by anyone. The Methodist Church is committed to equality and diversity in all aspects of its life. Race, gender, age, disability or sexuality are no barriers when people seek fairness, openness, honesty and justice in their dealings with those who are part of the Methodist Church.

What is a complaint?

It is a statement objecting to the words, acts or omissions of a member or office holder of the Methodist Church and requesting that action should be taken.

The complaint can be made orally or preferably in writing to any member or officer of the Church, who must then take action upon it. The person who is told such information is described as the “recipient”. The person who is the subject of a complaint is known as the “respondent”.

What does a recipient do with the information?

The recipient should ask the question “Who should I now tell about this information and how soon? Can I help to easily resolve the matter or should I report it to my minister or to the local complaints officer (normally the Superintendent Minister) who may explore whether reconciliation could be achieved?”

More serious complaints will be handled through formal procedures by people outside the local situation who have appropriate skills, training and experience. These will be complaints, for example, of serious or persistent misconduct, of racial, child or sexual abuse or abuse of a disabled person, of criminal offences or convictions or cautions.

What is your role as Local Complaints Officer?

You may receive a complaint from a variety of sources. If the respondent is a presbyter, deacon or probationer and the complaint

concerns conduct of a sufficiently serious nature to warrant consideration of a charge, the local complaints officer will be the District Chair. **For the purpose of this guidance, what follows assumes the local complaints officer is also the Superintendent Minister.**

Your main tasks are to:

Step	Standing Order	Action needed			Date action taken
	1120 (12)	Make ministers, lay employees, members and office holders aware of the role and responsibilities of a local complaints officer.			
1	1102 (6)	Check with the relevant connexional team member at Methodist Church House (0207 486 5502) whether Methodist Law & Polity Committee has issued any relevant codes of practice or guidance.			
2	1121 (2) (i)	Note in writing the date when the complaint was received.			
3	1121 (2) (ii)	Use Form A to obtain a written statement of the complaint from the complainant.			
4	1105 (1)-(3) 1105 (5) & 013	Consider whether suspension of the respondent is appropriate or necessary. Suspension is a neutral act and may be used by either the Chair of District or the Superintendent Minister as the case may be. The standing order provides further details. If the respondent is a lay employee, ensure that the employee's disciplinary procedure is followed.			
5	1105 (4)	When necessary, ensure that the functions of the respondent affected by the suspension are adequately covered.			
6		1120 (6) If it is a criminal complaint, do not inform the respondent but contact the relevant connexional team member for advice.	1121 (3) If it is not a criminal complaint , inform the respondent and provide a copy of Form A.	1120 (7) If it is a complaint relating to an employee of the Methodist Church , consult the District Lay Employment Sub Committee. See SO 1120 (7) for further detailed	1102 (7) If it is a complaint relating to abuse is it appropriate to obtain specialist advice? See the booklets <i>Safeguarding</i>

				information. The complaint may then be dealt with under employment grievance or disciplinary procedures as appropriate.	<i>Children & Young People or Safeguarding Adults.</i> See also 1120 (6)
		Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
7	1120 (2) 1121 (7) (a)	After seeking the written response of the respondent, meet the complainant and/or the respondent and attempt to resolve the complaint informally, unless the matter is too serious or if resolution is not practicable. Include an observer at that meeting. Make written notes.			
8	1121 (7) (b)	Send a copy of the notes to both complainant and respondent.			
9	1121 (2) (iii)	Consult the District Reconciliation Group to explore the possibility of resolving the complaint by a more formal means.			
10	1121 (8)	If the complaint is resolved locally or withdrawn [SO 1121 (4)], make a written record of the outcome . Retain with other supporting documents for 5 years, then send to the Secretary of the Conference.			
11	1121 (3)	If the complainant and respondent agree to a formal resolution , ask them to sign a record of what has been agreed.			
12	1121 (5)	If no local resolution is possible or appropriate or the complaint is not withdrawn, refer the complaint to the relevant connexional team member.			
13	1121 (5) (ii)	If you decide not to refer the complaint to the relevant connexional team member: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - make a written note of your reasons for not referring; - inform the complainant and respondent; - inform the complainant of the right to refer the complaint direct to the relevant connexional team member and provide sufficient information for them to do so; 			
14	1121 (16)	If no local conciliation or formal resolution, send all your papers to the relevant connexional team member .			

		<p>Inform the complainant and the respondent that this has been done in order that a connexional complaints team can be appointed to investigate the complaint in accordance with SO 1122.</p>	
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The more serious complaints, and any complaints which cannot be resolved informally, are dealt with formally. You will need to record the complaint in writing. You will normally see the complainant and the person complained against, called the respondent, and a statement will be taken. Either party may be accompanied at such meetings. You will usually defer any action whilst a police investigation or employment disciplinary inquiry is proceeding.

You will try to achieve resolution but, if the matter is too serious or if resolution is not

practicable, you must then decide what to do and, where appropriate, pass the complaint on to the next stage in the procedure for investigation. Where a complaint appears to be unrelated to the respondent's standing in the Methodist Church and is essentially a private matter between the parties, the complaint may not be referred any further. This decision is taken on the nature of the complaint, not whether it is to be believed or not. You will need to inform the parties of the decision and, if the complainant is not satisfied, that there are rights to pursue the matter.

Investigating a complaint - the Connexional Complaints Panel

The Methodist Conference has appointed a panel of lay and ordained members of the Church who have among them expertise in the sort of issues which comprise many complaints.

From this panel a team of three will be selected, who will study the papers received from you and decide upon the best course of action within the standing orders of the Church. They will encourage all those they see to prepare written statements and to send in advance any supporting papers. At any meeting the complainant and respondent are entitled to be represented or accompanied.

When they have gathered all necessary information, the team members will consider their options, including reconciliation. Reconciliation may involve no more than an admission of fault or an acceptance by both parties that they have genuine and honest differences or that they have interpreted facts differently. Where reconciliation is not agreed, not appropriate or not successful the team will have to consider what action to take.

If the facts do not merit treating the matter as a complaint (see below), the team may take a number of other steps, including ruling on points in dispute between the parties, issuing advice to one or both parties or giving directions about how the parties should conduct their relationship in the church context. If the complaint affects the life of the local church or circuit the team may direct that its decision be announced in the church or circuit.

For access to the following resources see

www.methodist.org.uk/complaintsanddiscipline

People: Who to contact for advice

complaints@methodistchurch.org.uk

Helpdesk: 020 7486 5502

Form A: Outline of complaint

Form B: Local Complaints Officer

A simple guide leaflet