

BETHANY CHURCH

Internal Complaints Policy and Procedures

Church details

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This policy should be reviewed annually. The next review is due on: May 2027

1. Introduction

- 1.1. **Bethany Church** (“the Church”) is committed to ensuring that complaints are addressed in a way that is fair, transparent and timely. This policy sets out clearly how complaints will be dealt with.
- 1.2. As a church, we want to follow what the Bible says about how we should relate to each other. Where something goes wrong, our aim is work towards restoring the relationship as much as possible, recognising that both justice and mercy are important to that end.
- 1.3. We also want to learn from our mistakes. Hearing complaints can help us to do that.
- 1.4. The overall responsibility for this policy and its implementation rests with the Church trustees. The trustees will take into account any conflicts of loyalty that may arise where one, or more, of them is the subject of the complaint. They will take appropriate and reasonable steps to manage those conflicts of loyalty, insofar as that is practicable in the life of the Church.
- 1.5. The trustees are aware of The Charity Governance Code. The Charity Commission/OSCR and members of the public may regard the Code as setting the standard for good governance in charities. The Code expects charity trustees to have in place “a transparent, well-publicised, effective and timely process for making and handling a complaint, and that any internal or external complaints are handled constructively, impartially and effectively”.

2. Scope

- 2.1. This policy applies to all trustees, employees and volunteers who act on behalf of the church.
- 2.2. Where an employee or an office-holder of the Church wants to raise concerns about their employment, those matters should be addressed in accordance with the Church’s employment/HR policies, such as an internal grievance policy, rather than as a complaint under this policy.
- 2.3. The Church will not be able to address a complaint unless it includes sufficient information to allow the matter to be properly reviewed and investigated.
- 2.4. Where the trustees have reasonable grounds, based on the evidence available to them, for assessing that a complaint has not been raised in good faith or is not an appropriate use of this policy, they may disapply it and will provide the complainant with their reasons for making this decision. One example would be that the complaint has been raised in order to harass or cause distress to an individual. Another is where a complaint raises the same or very similar matters to those that have been addressed in a previous complaint.
- 2.5. Some complaints may relate to other policies that the Church has in place, such as for safeguarding. If any of these other policies are relevant to the nature of the complaint that is raised, the Church will inform the complainant that the matter is being dealt with in accordance with that other policy.
- 2.6. The Church is committed to ensuring that complaints are handled sensitively. The Church has specific obligations and commitments in relation to data protection and privacy. The Church cannot guarantee to keep the fact and details of your complaint confidential if it is necessary and proportionate to share your data in order to review and resolve your complaint. On occasion, the trustees may need to involve third parties. The Church may also need to take legal advice and to share information with its professional advisers.
- 2.7. This policy does not form part of any legal agreement or contract by or on behalf of the Church.

3. Definition of a complaint

- 3.1. A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about any aspect of church life, where the complainant wishes to receive a response. This can be about the actions or behaviour of a person or persons, or about an activity or group, or about a service provided by the Church.
- 3.2. By raising a formal complaint with the Church, a complainant is asking the Church to devote time and resources to properly addressing their concerns. This may be legitimate, but a formal complaint should usually only be raised after other methods of resolution have been exhausted. Raising a formal complaint would preferably be the last step taken, not the first.
- 3.3. A formal complaint is not the same as raising a concern. Concerns can often be dealt with by taking the matter up with the leaders at the Church before there is a need to raise a formal complaint.

4. Receipt of Complaints

- 4.1. Complaints should be addressed to one of the church Trustees. Complaints may be made through various channels – in person, by phone, via email or message, or by post. If you wish to lodge a complaint you can do so by sending it to the Church office at matt@bethany.org.uk or chris@bethany.org.uk addressed to the trustees.
- 4.2. If any other person in the Church receives a complaint, they should ask the complainant to raise the complaint directly with the trustees.
- 4.3. Where a complaint is made in writing, including by email or message, it is helpful (and may mean the complaint can be addressed more easily) if the complainant sets out:
 - 4.3.1. Their name and contact details.
 - 4.3.2. The date of the incident or decision that the complaint relates to.
 - 4.3.3. The nature of the complaint and who is involved.
 - 4.3.4. The nature of the complainant's relationship with the Church.
 - 4.3.5. Whether there is any other information that the Church should be aware of.
 - 4.3.6. What steps they have taken so far to resolve the matter, if any.
 - 4.3.7. What actions or outcomes they are looking for from the Church.
- 4.4. Where a complaint is made verbally, the trustees will respond to the complainant within 3 working days with a written record of the complaint that has been made, asking the complainant to confirm that the record is accurate and to complete any information that is missing from the list set out above.

5. Acknowledgement of Complaints

- 5.1. Upon receipt of a complaint or confirmation of the written record of a complaint, the Church will formally acknowledge it within 5 working days.
- 5.2. Complainants will be informed of this policy and provided with a copy, if requested.

6. Initial Review

- 6.1. The trustees will carry out an initial review to confirm the complaint it falls within the scope of this policy. They will then provide an initial response to the complainant within 2 weeks, setting out:
 - 6.1.1. Whether or not the complaint will be handled in accordance with this policy. If not, which other policy applies and the next steps. If it does, the further information that follows;
 - 6.1.2. Who has been nominated to investigate the complaint (this may be more than one person);
 - 6.1.3. Who will be responsible for communicating with the complainant, and their contact details
 - 6.1.4. The likely timeframe for the investigation and a response.

7. Investigation and Resolution

- 7.1. **Assigned Officer:** When possible a trustee or trustees of the Church will be nominated to be responsible for investigating the complaint. They will be someone who is independent of any person that is the subject of the complaint, insofar as this is possible to achieve in the life of the Church. The investigator will gather all necessary information, including contacting the complainant if required, and work towards a satisfactory resolution of the issues raised in the complaint.
- 7.2. **Timescales:** The Church aims to resolve complaints as promptly as possible. Complex complaints may require more time for investigation, but the Church will provide regular updates to the complainant regarding the progress and expected timeframe for a response.
- 7.3. **Resolution:** Depending on the nature of the complaint, the complainant will usually be notified of:
 - 7.3.1. the steps the Church has taken to investigate the complaint;
 - 7.3.2. the conclusions drawn from the investigation; and
 - 7.3.3. any actions taken as a result of the investigation.

8. Confidentiality

- 8.1. Complaints may be shared with any or all of the Church's trustees, if appropriate and taking account of any conflicts of loyalty that they may have in relation to the substance of the complaint.
- 8.2. If the complaint relates to a named individual, the trustees may inform that person as to the nature of the complaint in the course of their investigation and seek a response from them. The identity of the complainant will not be shared with the subject of the complaint. Sensitive information about the complainant will only be shared with the named individual to the extent that it is necessary to do so for the complaint to be properly investigated.
- 8.3. Where a complaint relates to a member of staff or an individual trustee, the Church may need to carry out its investigation in accordance with its internal employment/HR policies and governance procedures. The nature of these internal processes, data protection may mean it is not appropriate to provide the complainant with full details about the process being followed or the outcome of that process. However, we would normally expect to be able to inform the complainant of:
 - 8.3.1. the completion of the initial investigation;
 - 8.3.2. the fact that an internal process is being followed; and when it is completed.

9. Communication

- 9.1. Throughout the complaints handling process, clear and transparent communication with the complainant is essential. The Church will use its best endeavours to keep the complainant informed of the progress, any delays, and the final outcome of the investigation.

10. Closure and follow up

- 10.1. Once the complaint is resolved, the trustees will formally close the matter and record the outcome in the complaints register. They may also conduct follow-up checks to ensure that the resolution remains effective.

11. Appeal

- 11.1. If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint or the way in which the complaint has been handled, they should send a written appeal to the trustees within one month of being told of the outcome. If an appeal is raised at a later date, the trustees will decide whether or not it is appropriate to consider it, acting in the best interests of the Church.
- 11.2. The trustees will acknowledge receipt of the appeal within two weeks.
- 11.3. The trustees will identify someone other than the original investigator to lead on the appeal process. This person will review the original evidence, the investigation report and the grounds for the appeal set out by the complainant, but will not reinvestigate or open new lines of enquiry, to assess whether or not the original decision was within the range of reasonable conclusions that the trustees could draw, based on the evidence that was available to them.
- 11.4. The trustees will collectively consider the findings of the person conducting the appeal process and will notify the complainant of the outcome. They will aim to do so within two months of receipt of the appeal notice or will otherwise provide an update to the complainant within that time, setting out the timescales that will apply.
- 11.5. The appeal decision will be considered final.

12. Further Steps

- 12.1. If the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome, they may complain directly to the Church's charity regulator, the Charity Commission, whose website sets out the kinds of issues that they can assist with.

13. Continuous improvement

- 13.1. The trustees are committed to continually reviewing and improving the Church's complaints handling process to ensure they can fulfil the Church's charitable purposes effectively and prevent future complaints. Feedback received through the complaints handling process will be analysed, and any necessary adjustments to policies, procedures, or employee training will be implemented.