**Anti-Social Behaviour in Churchyards and Church Premises**



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**The issues**

Clergy may have to deal with anti-social behaviour taking place around their homes or the churches and other buildings for which they are responsible. Reported behaviour includes people urinating and defecating in churchyards and vicarage precincts,[[1]](#footnote-1) drug dealing and using,[[2]](#footnote-2) soliciting and other manifestations of the sex trade,[[3]](#footnote-3) drinking,[[4]](#footnote-4) acts of vandalism,[[5]](#footnote-5) littering associated with rough sleeping,[[6]](#footnote-6) fly tipping,[[7]](#footnote-7) theft, starting fires,[[8]](#footnote-8) and causing a public nuisance. As the references show, these behaviours are often reported negatively in local newspapers as particular problems.

Requests for grants[[9]](#footnote-9) for increased security around church buildings and churchyards have become more frequent, with more clergy reporting various kinds of anti-social behaviour which may impact people wishing to attend their churches for worship, walking public routes by churches, or visiting, as well as placing more burdens on clergy.

This paper looks at these issues in relation to church buildings, considers available practical steps in relation to such issues and looks at the wider, more human-focussed, matters of engaging with those who use church premises in this way.

**Why churches and churchyards?**

Anti-social behaviour, defined as 'conduct that has caused, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm or distress to any person’[[10]](#footnote-10) in addition to specific behaviour contrary to law such as drug dealing, being drunk and disorderly, and offences relating to the sex trade, are activities which therefore can come to the attention of the police. So people engaged in these activities do not want to be caught on CCTV or otherwise come to the attention of police officers. Church buildings and church spaces such as churchyards or halls are often open but secluded spaces and the architecture of buildings and particularly porches, means that people can hide more easily from view. More requests for faculties for lockable gates for porches have been received in recent times. Moreover, church spaces are often, sometimes the only readily accessible spaces; other public spaces may be locked or protected by fences or better lit or protected by security personnel. Sometimes the church is the most accessible, safe and hospitable place for groups to meet, or hide, providing shelter but also invisibility, especially after dark.

In some places of worship which are open to the public and which have cafes and publicly accessible toilets, as well as large numbers of tourists, evidence of drug taking has been found in the buildings themselves.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Effects of anti-social behaviour on the wider community**

Such activities in churches and churchyards have significant knock-on effects for clergy and lay people whose task is to care for the church. The first issue is perception: people may not want to visit the church or come to services if they feel intimidated by people drinking or taking drugs where they want to walk, sit, or visit graves of loved ones. The second issue is residue from those activities: drug paraphernalia, empty cans and bottles (including smashed glass), used condoms or human excrement. All of these residues have to be cleared up and disposed of. Additionally, people may be very upset by vandalism or sprayed graffiti defacing graves. There may be considerable pressure for something ‘to be done’. As the reports in local newspapers show, anti-social behaviour is generally viewed negatively, expressing disapproval and calling for action to ‘clear up’ church premises and neighbourhoods. Such pressure typically comes back to local clergy to initiate and lead some sort of action ‘against’ perpetrators.

There are sites which give advice about providing adequate security for church property and land.[[12]](#footnote-12) [[13]](#footnote-13)

**Responses – safeguarding the local community**

However, the issues are typically more complex than the way they may be reported. Clergy have to consider both practical and pastoral responses to anti-social behaviour, and these include responses to those who see only ‘problem’, and to the people involved in the anti-social behaviours themselves. While it is talking about those with criminal intent with regard to church property, the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group, in its security advice, talks about ‘attackers’ and threat.[[14]](#footnote-14) Many people will make no distinction between those engaged in anti-social behaviour and those ‘attackers’ with criminal intent and see only threat from such people gathering near churches and in churchyards.

Practical responses demand attention to personal safety, particularly after dark. Some parish priests, particularly if they live alone or in isolated areas, may feel vulnerable and insecure, particularly if there are large groups of people gathering in the evening or at night on church property. However, because clergy often live on site, they may become aware of particular behavioural patterns, -including people drinking heavily in the churchyard on payday for example.

Some clergy report that there is respect for the dog collar and additional benefit to owning a dog, particularly since dog walking in the churchyard or church premises may be seen as less threatening than coming out to ‘have a look’ at what is going on. Further, some people involved in ‘hidden’ activities such as sex work, may move on if they think they are likely to be disturbed by dog walkers.

It may be important for clergy to know how to protect themselves and others in relation to removing of drug paraphernalia,[[15]](#footnote-15) excrement, or used condoms. Some clergy may risk themselves in attempting to clear sharps or broken glass in order to protect others – such as before people gather for worship; they cannot wait for the council to act. Many clergy will see their pastoral care of their own community as a duty which supersedes their own needs and simply clear up by themselves.

**Responses – seeing human beings with needs**

Problematising anti-social behaviour and making it only a matter for the police, social services and local agencies, is against the pastoral inclination of most clergy. The people who are engaged in such activities are most often people who live within the parish boundary and therefore entitled to the same duty of care as everyone else living in the parish. Clergy therefore may experience conflict between the perception of ‘problem’ to be made to go away and the pastoral duty to reach out to human beings in need.

**Example – the importance of the parish priest in negotiating established anti-social behaviour**

A priest in Somerset, whose church and surrounds have been a particular target of anti-social activity, is clear about the importance of understanding why anti-social behaviour takes place and what the most sensitive response must be. She sees the people she encounters as being especially vulnerable and therefore most in need of safeguarding and welfare. In engaging with those people, she has uncovered stories of deep trauma which have been the drivers for drug use, sex-work, or excessive drinking. Seeing only the behaviour and then stigmatising the person as ‘problem’ only contributes to the ongoing trauma. In her experience, many of the people she encounters do want to move forward, but have insufficient help to do so. Rough sleeping may be the easiest option rather than cope with housing problems for example, or because of the urgent necessity of the next fix.

The priest of this church says that it is most often the parish priest on the ground who must create relationship with individuals. The dog collar may make a difference, - some will still respect spiritual authority even if they don’t trust the police or other authority figures. Others, even if rejected by their families, may still have a special relationship which forms a communication point – ‘will you pray for my nan?’ The proffered provision of prayer and care can create a space within which negotiation can take place – ‘please don’t leave needles’.

She also says that providing help to the individuals with whom she has created relationship requires a multi-agency response, both church-mediated through groups supported through the diocese and through other charities and agencies. If the presenting issue is drug-taking, helping the individual may require patient understanding of complex needs to do with trauma, domestic violence, family problems, housing issues, mental and physical health issues, and other physical and social vulnerabilities. Notwithstanding, she believes that a multi-agency response can be effective in providing aid and support to individuals, which together with spiritual and emotional support offered through pastoral care, can equip people with hope, faith, ongoing church community involvement and a sense of dignity and worth going forward.

**Example – the importance of resources in prevention of anti-social behaviour**

Having the resources to help vulnerable people at the point of need may actively prevent anti-social behaviour from occurring. For example, this account comes from Salisbury:

My church is privileged. We have a second venue - a cafe and resource centre - and several paid staff members. One of the staff members is a community pastor: her work is deliberately focused upon the poor, the vulnerable, those with mental health and/ or debt problems. Frequently emails go around the church. does anyone have a washing machine/ bed/ dining table/ microwave/ whatever they can donate to a needy family/ person/ single mother? Can anyone spare some time to mentor a needy person (with appropriate training and safeguards in place, of course)? Is there someone who can visit a housebound person? do their gardening/ clean their home/ walk their dog/ offer a lift to church or cook a meal?

Having such a privilege makes a huge difference. First, it means that vulnerable people can have their basic needs met; their lives can be made a little bit easier, their stress levels reduced (if only by a little bit). This can create the opportunity for their empowerment to address other issues in their lives that are limited by worry and anxiety. Secondly, it allows for other staff members to work to their gifts and strengths: their energy can be focussed upon what they are good at (which is important) rather than upon the urgent things they are not gifted at. Thirdly, for the congregation: we are delighted to support such work - many of us may not have the skills or time to contribute, but many in the church have the ability to give financially. And this is a feel-good benefit: we know that donations make a positive difference in people's lives, and this motivates us to maintain or increase our giving. But need always outstrips demand: there is always more to do, more people to help, more lost and lonely people who need the support and help.

Do they come to church? To be honest, few do. Do they find faith in Jesus - many do. They respond to the love and care offered to them; some of them meet together and read the bible together; they find mutually enriching ways to support each other and explore together the teachings of Jesus. It can be a long road: sometimes people make great progress - and then it all goes wrong for them. Again. But we are still here for them - through our second venue, through our staff who act as a proxy for the congregation - and in turn, we try and act as a proxy for God.

We are privileged. Significantly so. But so are some of the most vulnerable people in our community. And in turn - they volunteer to help others: give unto others as you have received.

**Example – making active use of churchyards, dispelling anti-social behaviour by community engagement**

A parish priest in reflecting on her Manchester experience, found that she was able to do a great deal of ministry via the graveyard (usually in daylight). Making active use of the churchyard meant that this space was in use for many different activities and therefore less secluded. The churchyard would host nature walks and guides as an accessible greenspace, family history projects, worship (as in the Garden of Remembrance at certain times of year) and a focus for the church and the wider community in terms of upkeep – gardening groups and those who care for graves.

**Example – ecumenical cooperation in engaging young people**

In West Belfast, a Roman Catholic priest and an Anglican priest have worked together to engage young people in areas with a history of vandalism in cemeteries, including antisemitic graffiti in a Jewish cemetery. Working with the City Council and the Education Authority, Police Inspectors and through a Neighbourhood Partnership, the two clergy have joined with youth workers to engage with young people for whom drinking and drugs are particular issues. Through encounters and organised walks, the young people have been given opportunities to open up about such issues as bereavement and trauma. These relationships have enabled young people to make healthier choices and have somewhere to lay their frustrations and distress rather than it being exhibited in vandalism.

**Example – changing lives by helping the homeless on church premises**

In Edinburgh, a parish priest has set up a charity to provide meals for homeless people. His church has had a number of homeless people sleeping on the church property and the premises are affected by litter from local takeaways. The charity takes positive steps to help homeless people and has gained the support of local businesses, but the parish priest also has a greater vision – of the possibility of creating temporary homes ‘nesthouses’ within the church grounds along the lines of Social Bites homeless village in Granton.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Example – engaging with alternative spiritualities**

In West Wales, some local congregations have expressed concern about churchyards and church premises becoming gathering places for people following alternative spiritual pathways, accusing them of practising magic or Satanism. Local clergy have been working to dispel some of this anxiety about these communities by setting up meetings and events around sacred sites such as holy wells or ancient yews. In one church, where the churchyard is the start point of a number of trails, an ancient tree, a ‘poetry path’ and a well have provided starting points for conversations about God and spirituality. As local Christians bring their dogs to walk or to wander the trails, friendship and companionship with others has led to a lessening of tensions and a greater sense of invitation to the Christian life of the local community.

**Further reflection**

It can be difficult, time-consuming and personally draining for parish clergy to attempt to drive these matters forward by themselves and therefore sometimes, requests for better security marks only the tip of the iceberg for a much larger and more intractable difficulty.

One of the particular tensions in providing a ministry to people engaged in anti-social behaviour is pushback from some members of congregations. For example, if a homeless person is living in a tent in the churchyard, and is given shelter, warmth some tea and something to eat by virtue of helping out during services, perhaps by handing out books or service sheets, members of the congregation may object to the person’s presence because they see only the ‘problem’ of that person’s homelessness, which they want addressed before trusting the person with responsibility.

Further, vulnerable people may be drawn further towards churches where there is a known ministry to them. This also creates concern and pushback from congregations or members of the local community – ‘Don’t encourage them’.

Requests for improved church security therefore points to a series of underlying issues, including the perception of increased ‘problems’ which must be pushed on elsewhere. Christian pastoral care sees people engaged in anti-social behaviour as *people* first, and attempts to learn their stories, form relationship, address their needs and find ways to help them help themselves with the support of the church community. Enabling resources and smooth communication between multiple agencies in order to address complex problems, understanding the significant role of clergy and others involved in church life, may prevent issues escalating and enable creative ways forwards for people stuck in poverty, homelessness, health problems or cycles of addiction. As the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu remarked, ‘There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in’.

**Some suggested guidance for churches where anti-social behaviour is already taking place:**

**Practical:** It can help to -

* Attend as far as possible, according to resources, to security, lighting, people presence when the church is open, and locks.
* Take care of personal safety, especially at night, especially if you are alone. People under the influence of alcohol or drugs can behave unpredictably. If violence breaks out, call the emergency services. Don’t take risks with people whose activities have put them out of control; if they are at risk of harm or injury get immediate help.
* Engage the diocesan safeguarding officer as necessary according to safeguarding policy.
* Be careful about cleaning up any residue and take advice about clearing drug paraphernalia, condoms and human effluent.
* Work with the local authority (in its relevant form to the place) particularly if the area already has a programme for some of the behaviours challenging the church.

**Pastoral:** It can help to -

* Treat people as human beings loved by God. Show them respect and encourage others to be welcoming and compassionate.
* Be aware of any individuals who appear at particular times (eg soliciting or drinking on payday).
* See if particular individuals or groups will respond to friendly invitation or a chance to talk without judgement about their situation. If it is necessary to challenge to protect others, offer a way out of the situation, such as a grace period, rather than cause panic or a face-off.
* Make a point of learning about charities and agencies offering support locally or through the diocese. Create points of contact for specific issues such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, drug and/or alcohol addiction, mental health services, housing services etc.
* Offer prayer or other specific ministry and see if people who are befriended will accede to requests to help lessen the impact of their presence – by picking up litter, clearing up empty bottles or not leaving needles. Bins or bags can be provided to encourage cooperation.
* Engaging in this ministry can be draining and exhausting where there are long term issues. Be kind to yourself and make sure you have spiritual and pastoral support from friends and colleagues.

**Links:** NHS Conflict Resolution <https://slideplayer.com/slide/14099944/>

1. <https://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/news/18893216.man-court-defecating-bournemouth-churchyard/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/16982770.church-forced-padlock-gates-keep-brazen-drug-dealers/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/fury-prostitutes-drug-addicts-using-17146924> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://theisleofthanetnews.com/2018/10/30/deep-concern-for-growing-number-of-homeless-people-camped-at-ramsgate-churchyard/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.sidmouthherald.co.uk/news/respect-the-dead-police-to-up-patrols-following-antisocial-behaviour-6142628> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.sloughobserver.co.uk/news/17398861.slough-borough-council-evict-homeless-tent-dwellers-graveyard-defecating-graves-starting-fires/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.grimsbytelegraph.co.uk/news/grimsby-news/church-yard-among-dumping-grounds-198616> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.maidenhead-advertiser.co.uk/gallery/slough/140821/campers-who-defecated-on-graves-and-started-fires-to-be-evicted-from-churchyard.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/places-of-worship-security-funding-scheme> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/section/2/enacted> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/places-of-worship-allegedly-used-for-drug-taking> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/crime-and-security-prevention> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.ecclesiastical.com/documents/church-security-guidance-notes.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.ecclesiastical.com/risk-management/church-security/> <https://www.ecclesiastical.com/documents/church-security-guidance-notes.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/221089/pb10970-drugrelatedlitter.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/capital-minister-wants-temporary-homes-church-grounds-help-homeless-277258> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)