

Responding to Challenging Behaviour During Worship

Introduction

Stockethill Church has recently experienced challenging behaviour from individuals that has been disruptive of worship. This document will attempt to establish a set of procedures, with their rationale, in order to aid elders to respond with authority, clarity and integrity in similar difficult situations.

It is difficult to provide a comprehensive set of guidelines for all people and situations. This document should therefore be seen as an attempt to respond to the difficult situations that have recently been experienced while yet being open to revision and reflection in the light of new insight or events.

Basis

The Church is called to live according to the rule of God, that is his kingdom, as preached by Jesus Christ. The Church therefore must always seek to emulate its saviour in being welcoming, patient and forgiving to all, fulfilling the law of God (Mt. 5:17).

The Church is therefore called to produce the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) and so give a pattern of individual and communal life that lead to human flourishing. As it lives according to God's rule, the Church may offer to the world a faltering reflection of a God-given pattern of what it is to live a good life, individually and in community: a safe place, for young, old and the vulnerable, free from violence, threat, illegal substances and inappropriate language.

The Church therefore has a duty to order maintain its own distinct way of life, of grace and obedience, and invite others to participate in it.

How then should the Church respond to individuals who wish to enter and participate in our community? The Church must initially and continually respond with welcome. The individual is being welcomed into the distinctive community of Jesus Christ. The nature and the Church's community may need to be explained, but its integrity should not be compromised for fear of causing offence. The Church must remain salt and light (Mt. 5:13-14); it must retain its integrity by continuing to offer welcome and maintaining the order of its life.

Discussion of Recent Examples

It is on the above basis that elders may need to act if an individual enters a church meeting but refuses to show respect for the Church's order, even after polite request. Inevitably individual judgment must be made in each case. This document is being composed in response to particular recent events. These include the failure to control an aggressive animal and persistent, foul-mouthed interruptions of the service.

The first instance involved actual physical safety. Members of the church should be protected from physical harm. In this case, where physical safety is involved, the action so transgresses all widely accepted civic norms that the notion of a warning or 'second chance' would not be appropriate.

The second instance involved inappropriate language and drunken behaviour in front of children as well as disrespect for the normal ordering of a church meeting.

God's rule involves the protection of innocence. It must be assumed that the standards of the kingdom required, for instance by Paul would create a suitable environment for the raising of children. In addition,

when Christ used children to illustrate the ideals of the kingdom of God (Lk. 18:16; Mt. 18:3-4) he assumed the inviolability of innocence. Good and healthy societies are therefore places where children are expected and welcomed and protected. A healthy church will therefore be a place in which families can confidently gather. There will be differences of opinion amongst families about what is and is not suitable for children of particular ages. In any individual case, an assessment may have to be made about the degree of offence caused to the families present. Practically speaking, however, the Church should aim for its meetings to be a safe environment for young families and therefore the norm should be an absence of aggressive and offensive language.

Interruptions themselves are not always inappropriate. In this case, the interruptions were drunken and persisted even after polite request. While on any given occasion, the elders may choose to act with compassion, tolerance and patience, seeking to preserve relationships, persistent chaotic interruptions and drunken behaviour would ultimately make church worship impossible.

The Church should seek to maintain its welcoming attitude and acknowledge the vulnerability of any individual who might be offending against the church. At the same time, some behaviours break community. Because of the presence of families, it may be that some church meetings may have to be less tolerant of certain behaviours than other meetings. Again, a judgment will have to be made in any particular situation. All Church meetings should seek to see the kingdom of God come, and be unashamed of the character of its welcoming and good community.

Boundaries for Behaviour

Given the above, it may become necessary for the Church to refuse participation in worship to individuals who are acting in an anti-social fashion. 'Anti-social' here refers to public behaviour that makes a meeting unsafe, unsuitable for children, or that overtly breaks Christian norms of the kingdom in a way that makes community life impossible.

The creation of these boundaries does not mitigate Christ's call to offer salvation to the outcast, or wherever possible to maintain relationships with those excluded.

Although creating a list of proscribed behaviours can be made to seem arbitrary, it remains necessary as a starting point. These would include:

- Consuming alcohol (with the exception of the appropriate use of wine during Communion) or illegal drugs on the premises.
- Chaotic behaviour, including violent action or inappropriate verbal disruption of a service.
- Bad language.
- Behaviour that would be inappropriate in front of children.
- There should be a general expectation of rationality and reasonableness amongst all participants.

It is important for the church to understand the responsibilities of the elders. Setting before them these broad outlines would be simple moment of clarification about the nature of the kingdom, as God's rule that leads to his glory through individual and social flourishing. It has potential to build confidence in the good nature of the community of the church. It also means that the congregation can be supportive and understanding in any given difficult moment of challenge or exclusion.

While all participants are free to express dislike or disappointment with anti-social behaviour, it should be the responsibility of elders to police the boundaries of behaviour and ultimately to ask any individual to

leave. Other members of the congregation may assist and be present but should not take independent action. This can be a difficult task, potentially humiliating, and may be seen as confrontational. Those performing this duty must do so with the good of those being excluded held in mind. Language and physical attitude wherever possible must be such that where possible relationships are preserved through such conversations. For example, a person who is obviously under the influence of drugs or alcohol and is, because of this, acting in a way deemed unacceptable should be invited to return, "When they are sober." It may be appropriate for a church member to leave with such an individual to ensure their safe return home.

'Where there is no law there is no transgression.' Compassion and forgiveness should be a principle of the exercise of any church boundaries. No one should be excluded - apart from grievous offences - without first being made to understand the unacceptability of their behaviour. As a general rule, this can be thought of as 'two strikes and you're out.'

On any given occasion, it may be that an elder feels uncomfortable approaching a chaotic individual. In such cases, no elder should feel obligated to offer warnings. If no elders feel comfortable approaching an individual, and a meeting is being rendered unsafe or the normal conducting of its business made impossible, then it will be appropriate for the police to be called.

Similarly, if after a polite request for a change of behaviour and a subsequent request to leave no adequate response is received, the police should be contacted.

Except in emergencies for the purposes of protection, it would not be appropriate for elders to use physical force.

Visitor contact forms should be offered to new congregants as a means of reducing anonymity and increasing accountability.

Elders should not be eager to offer warnings. In addition, elders should be aware of the benefit of warnings being conveyed by someone who has an existing relationship with the person being spoken to. It may be that a difficult or dangerous situation can be better managed by one person over another and elders should be seek the most peaceful resolution.

Elders should support one another in approaching individuals, while avoiding any implication of physical threat.

Warnings in the Service

Inappropriate interruptions to the service should be responded to with calm explanation of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour from the front. Any further unacceptable behaviour may be responded to by elders while the service goes on.

Final Comments

This document is offered for comments in the recognition that the issues involved are challenging and the church has little experience operating in this manner. Critique and questions are therefore welcomed in a spirit of prayerful exploration and patient listening for God's will.

Appendix:

Aberdeen Street Pastors

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Dealing with Drink and Drug Excess

Many of the people we meet will be under the influence of alcohol, drugs (prescribed or illegal) or a combination of both. This will bring a measure of unpredictability to your interaction with them. You need to evaluate the risks involved in each case.

Effects of alcohol

The effects are many but can include:

- Boisterous or chaotic behaviour
- Extreme 'highs' and 'lows'
- Dehydration
- Drowsiness/falling asleep
- Volatile, often dangerous behaviour
- Aggression and/ or violence
- In worst cases, alcohol poisoning.

Effects of drugs

As well as many of the effects listed for alcohol, drug users may experience:

- Hallucinations
- Paranoia (they may feel you are plotting against them)
- Delusions (they may tell you incredible stories that they believe to be true)
- Desperate cravings (for chocolate e.g. or more likely for a “fix”)
- In worst cases, heart or other organ failure.

If they are drunk or under the effects of drugs:

- Try to find out how much drink/drugs they have taken
- Give them water to sip but do not allow them to gulp it
- Involve qualified First Aiders
- Give them information on approved agencies they can follow up when straight.

Procedure for People under the influence

If you encounter a person who is unable to find their way to safety or is unable to walk unaided, you have a number of options. As a process though:

- Please ensure they and you are safe
- Ensure they have space to be ill, able to breath and are not too cold
- Consider looking for friends to help the person home or to safety
- Consider contacting a friend or family member to collect them
- Contact CCTV and ask for Police support if you need it (or are needing to move on). The Police will then have a “Duty of Care” to look after the person.
- If unconscious, call an Ambulance from your mobile (rather than CCTV).

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