

# The Maidstone Commitments

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## Foreword

Like many of us, I was profoundly saddened to read the *Thirtyone:eight* report published in March 2021. Our first concern, now as then, is for the victims – and we continue to need to put them first, and to pray for them. However, we were also spurred on to think more about how our behaviours within our churches both help to build up the body of Christ and commend the gospel more widely.

As part of this process of reflection, I convened a working group in 2021 which was largely reflective of the diverse membership of conservative evangelical churches. It was assisted by a member of the National Safeguarding Team. This group (please see Appendix 3) met during 2021 and 2022 and I am enormously grateful to them – and in particular to my senior chaplain, the Revd Mark Wallace, who acted as secretary to the group. A number of diocesan bishops and archdeacons were also consulted as part of the process. Our aim was to do what we could to help ensure our churches are safe places and our church cultures are healthy environments. I do not believe that conservative evangelical churches are necessarily more at risk of abusive cultures than other types of church, but I firmly believe we should be willing humbly to learn lessons, wherever they may be found, that will help us to be more Christ-like in our leadership and in our ministries.

These Maidstone Commitments are one way I hope to help the parishes in my care at this time. They are not intended to be a comprehensive application of New Testament teaching about church life and pastoral ministry. Rather, their focus is on ways in which accountability and self-reflection can be improved. I will be writing to all incumbents and PCCs of ‘resolution parishes’,<sup>1</sup> and asking them to consider first making these commitments and then working diligently to meet them. I will, of course, do everything I can to assist them as they do so. My hope is that these commitments will stand the test of time, even if some of the nomenclature has to change. For example, if structural changes take place in dioceses and within the Church of England nationally, I hope the underlying principles will remain.

With best wishes,

Rt Revd Rod Thomas  
The Bishop of Maidstone  
25<sup>th</sup> April 2022

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this document, the phrase ‘resolution parish’ is used as a shorthand for those complementarian evangelical parishes which have passed a resolution in accordance with the 2014 House of Bishops’ *Declaration of the Ministry of Bishop and Priests* and are under the pastoral and/or sacramental care of the Bishop of Maidstone.

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## Introduction

The local church is God’s primary means of mission in the world. As a hub of evangelism, every church has a great responsibility: not only to proclaim the gospel, but also to live out their lives in a manner worthy of it. They do so, however, always aware of their frailty and fallenness.

These Maidstone Commitments were first put together at a time when the conservative evangelical constituency in the Church of England was confronting the reality of abuse as revealed in the *Thirtyone:eight* report entitled “Independent Lessons Learned Review (incorporating an Audit of Safeguarding Arrangements) concerning Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Church Wimbledon”.

The issues, however, are timeless: we always need to ensure that our church life is as healthy and as welcoming as possible, which means churches need to keep giving continual attention to their church cultures.<sup>2</sup> We do not believe that conservative evangelical churches are especially prone to the development of unhealthy cultures, but it is important for all churches that their leaders are more fully aware of how their ministries are being received. We need to be always reforming.

These Maidstone Commitments are offered by the Bishop of Maidstone to those parishes under his pastoral and sacramental care.<sup>3</sup> These ‘resolution parishes’ share a complementarian theology, believing that women and men are designed to be different as well as created to be equal, and therefore have a particular obligation to consider how women in our churches are treated.

Incumbents and PCCs of ‘resolution parishes’ are therefore invited to consider carefully these Maidstone Commitments. The Bishop hopes that parishes under his care will feel able to make these commitments in the coming weeks, and will then work towards meeting them over the coming months.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this document, the word ‘culture’ is used to refer to the way that things are done in a particular context. This is not designed to be a technical definition, but as a convenient shorthand to describe the various issues under discussion.

<sup>3</sup> This ministry, as outlined in the 2014 House of Bishops’ *Declaration of the Ministry of Bishop and Priests*, is by extension and is therefore shared with the Diocesan Bishop.

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## **Commitment #1: to act with impartiality and justice**

Despite the biblical injunction to ‘show no partiality’ (cf James 2), concerns have been raised as to how people are sometimes treated unfairly. Particular issues include the extent to which women’s voices are heard appropriately, the existence of ‘inner circles’ in church life, and the extent to which members of staff or key volunteers are consulted, listened to, and treated fairly. Churches are therefore encouraged to look carefully at how they treat different groups of people (which, of course, should not be restricted just to those within the church community), and consider how the dynamics of power work out in church life.

It is acknowledged that treating people justly is not the same as treating everybody the same. There will, for example, rightly be different expectations of volunteers and employees. Nonetheless, appropriate distinctions must not become a mandate for careless injustices. As PCCs consider how the common life of the congregation might better commend the gospel, they may find it helpful to consider the Pastoral Principles adopted by the House of Bishops, and therefore reflect on how they might acknowledge prejudice, speak into silence, address ignorance, cast out fear, admit hypocrisy, and pay attention to power.

In light of the recent research undertaken by Revd Dr Kirsten Birkett (commissioned by the Bishop of Maidstone, and available from his website), there is a need for particular care to be taken in showing honour to all women. Since advocates of complementarianism may be particularly vulnerable to accusations of sexism and/or misogyny, complementarian churches need to demonstrate the equal worth given to men and women, however distinctive their roles.

Areas of church life that should be considered include (but are not limited to):

- pay-scales and terms of employment for locally-employed staff
- opportunities for training and ministry
- impact on decision-making

The PCC should satisfy itself that any distinctions or differences are in keeping with the biblical mandate to act justly and to show no partiality.

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## Commitment #2: to signpost safe pathways for raising concerns

Recent events have shown the importance of people having an appropriate way of raising concerns. Many of these concerns will be low-level (ie they do not reach the threshold for a formal complaint), but nevertheless it is important that they should be registered, so that patterns can be discerned and addressed at an early stage.

***Safeguarding concerns should always be dealt with via the relevant Parish and Diocesan policies, and it is the responsibility of the PCC to clarify for their congregation and wider church community that the passing of a resolution under the House of Bishops' Declaration does not affect safeguarding policy in any way.***

Most non-safeguarding concerns will normally be handled within the local church, for which internal points of contact for concerns should be readily available. This might include a designated person (eg a Churchwarden) or the publication of a whistle-blowing policy, the details of which should be readily available.

Satisfactory resolutions may not always be possible within the local church context, so it would be helpful if church policies also signposted the way in which a complaint or concern could be raised with the Archdeacon or Area/Rural Dean. Although these might be low-level concerns, an 'external' reviewer is often well placed to discern whether or not, having received a number of expressions of concern, patterns of behaviour are developing that need to be addressed. Such a procedure is also consistent with the biblical injunction for two or three witnesses.

In the exceptional situations where relationships between the parish and the senior clergy of the diocese are strained almost to breaking-point, it is nonetheless important that dioceses are able to identify low-level or recurring problems as they occur. For those parishes, where the PCC conclude that complaints or concerns would not readily be raised with the senior clergy of the diocese (eg because of pastoral breakdown), the Bishop of Maidstone commends the use of 'Say So', an external speak-up service. Please see Appendix 2 for further information.

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### **Commitment #3: to ensure awareness of a PCC's convictions over men's and women's ministry**

Over the last few years questions have periodically been raised about the degree to which 'resolution parishes' make others aware of their complementarian position. It is understood that churches are quite rightly concerned to give priority to primary issues of gospel mission and ministry (and that these priorities should be reflected in the design of noticeboards, websites, etc.). Nonetheless, just as churches are rightly also required to display details of insurance, safeguarding, and other information that is administrative but important, it is also appropriate to display information that clarifies the PCC's theological convictions over men's and women's ministry, and the relationship (if any) with the Bishop of Maidstone.

PCCs should state their complementarian position in an open and transparent manner. Various possibilities may be appropriate, but two in particular would seem important.

First, a sentence<sup>4</sup> on the church's website (perhaps in a section headed 'leadership', or 'about us') will be a helpful clarification, and might also contain a link to the website of the Bishop of Maidstone.

Secondly, a poster could be displayed on an internal noticeboard, giving details of the Bishop, his role and his contact details, and clarifying that the Bishop of Maidstone is able to offer pastoral care and to undertake various services in the church, with the agreement of the Diocesan Bishop.

It would also be helpful if parishes receiving the pastoral oversight of the Bishop of Maidstone clarified the nature of that episcopal ministry, so that any confusion about his role and that of the Diocesan, Suffragan or Area Bishops in the diocese is minimised. The role varies considerably from one diocese to another, and from one parish to another, but where the Bishop's involvement is more formalised, it usually relates to pastoral and sacramental provision in relation to confirmations, ordinations, interviews, licensings, MDRs, and involvement in pastoral organisation. It should always be made clear that the Bishop of Maidstone has no role in relationship to formal disciplinary arrangements or safeguarding policies.

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<sup>4</sup> Possible wording might include: "The PCC of this parish has passed a resolution under the *House of Bishop's Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests* in order to reflect its convictions on the distinctive ministry of men and women".

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## **Commitment #4: to foster positive working relationships within dioceses**

Many 'resolution parishes' enjoy positive working relationships with senior diocesan clergy.<sup>5</sup> These positive working relationships benefit all sides, especially in times of crisis or difficulty.

Sadly, however, this is not always the case. In some situations, the relationship is strained or even broken as a result of theological differences. When this happens, there is a significant danger of parishes becoming isolated from important support and accountability structures. The effort to engage positively will be particularly important in situations where there are theological differences, since it will be vital to ensure a viable and effectual working relationship between parish and diocese.

The fourth Maidstone Commitment therefore encourages clergy and PCCs to engage positively with senior diocesan clergy, to ensure that working relationships – especially in cases of pastoral breakdown – can be as effective as possible. In this way, the responsibilities that senior clergy in the diocese have for parishes in their area of responsibility is properly acknowledged, and parishes are able to access effectively any support they might need.

There will be many different ways in which relationships might be built, even when relationships are strained:

- an informal meeting between a member of senior diocesan clergy and the Standing Committee and/or PCC might be arranged;
- an invitation might be issued for diocesan clergy to be physically present at an event in the parish (for a church lunch, a fete etc);
- commitments can be made to attend diocesan functions (which might not otherwise have been a priority) that enable working relationships to be enhanced;
- phonecalls and emails can be kept as positive as possible, to ensure communication is enhanced.

In situations where it is not immediately clear how this might best happen, the Bishop of Maidstone would be pleased to be consulted.

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<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this document, 'senior diocesan clergy' refers to the relevant Bishop, the relevant Archdeacon, the Area Dean, or the Diocesan Director of Ministry (or equivalent).

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## Commitment #5: to review carefully a PCC's own church culture

As part of a church that believes in always reforming itself, and in light of the way that our sinful hearts can deceive us (cf Hebrews 3), all 'resolution parishes' are urged to review carefully their own church culture.

The Bishop of Maidstone specifically commends the *Church Cultures Review Questions* produced by CEEC (available [from the CEEC website](#)), and encourages all 'resolution parishes' to refer to this when reviewing their own church culture. This may be done as a PCC exercise over several months, as a review carried out across the whole church community, or in any other way that has been determined locally.

Whilst there are a variety of alternative ways in which a church might go about reviewing their own culture, the aim should be to engage in a process which is:

1. corporate, involving more than just one or two leaders;
2. thorough, reviewing all aspects of church life and culture;
3. proactive, seeking to introduce positive change;
4. open, in that all may contribute;
5. transparent, in that (although some aspects may need to be kept confidential) the process and the recommendations are made known to the congregation;
6. accountable, in that what is made available to the congregation is also made available to the Bishop of Maidstone and senior diocesan clergy, as appropriate;
7. ongoing, in that there is expectation that the process will need to be repeated periodically.

Different churches will move at different speeds. It is understood that some parishes will have completed such a review during 2021, and for such parishes there is no need for a further review at this time. However, it is hoped that all 'resolution parishes' will have at least begun this process before the end of 2022.

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## Appendix 1: Next Steps

The Bishop of Maidstone commends these Maidstone Commitments to Incumbents and PCCs of all 'resolution parishes'. It is his hope and expectation that local churches in his care will:

1. agree to *make* these commitments, at a meeting of the PCC sometime in the next few weeks;
2. agree to *meet* these commitments, together, over the next few months.

The Bishop would appreciate a short note, by email, of the PCC's position. The Bishop's Office will keep a brief note of the responses of all 'resolution parishes', but will not be keeping substantial details on file and lacks the capacity to review responses in detail.

It is acknowledged, though, that different churches will be at different stages of processing these issues, and the local church is therefore encouraged to use its discernment in deciding how best to move forwards.

- *For churches that have already concluded a full process of review in the last 12 months*, the incumbent and PCC may conclude that these Maidstone Commitments have already been met. In which case, a short note of explanation to the Bishop's Office will suffice.
- *For churches that have begun, but not yet finished, such a process*, it would be helpful if the PCC could confirm that they are willing to make these commitments, even if it may yet be a while before the commitments are met.
- *For churches that have not yet begun a process of review*, the Bishop would like to encourage the PCC to set substantial time aside over the coming months to consider these commitments.

In all cases, enquiries to the [Bishop's Office](#) or to the [Bishop's Senior Chaplain](#) are welcomed.

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## Appendix 2: Say-So

In the vast majority of cases, it is expected that concerns will be raised through the normal channels. In most dioceses, this means contacting the relevant Archdeacon. However, the Bishop of Maidstone is aware of a very small number of ‘resolution parishes’ where the normal channels of communications are ineffective because of, for example, substantial pastoral breakdown. In these exceptional situations, it is nonetheless important that dioceses are able to identify low-level or recurring problems as they occur.

In such exceptional cases, the Bishop of Maidstone commends the work of *Say So*, an external speak-up service ([www.say-so.co.uk](http://www.say-so.co.uk)). *Say So* provide an impartial and independent service, which can be contacted by telephone or online. Their details can be made available to everyone in the parish, so that complaints and concerns can be registered with ease and confidence. Familiarisation and training is available, both for parishes and (should they wish to receive it) diocesan authorities.

Complaints and concerns that are raised with *Say So* are triaged according to their professional standards.

- Anything that reaches the threshold of a safeguarding concern will immediately be referred to the appropriate Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser (or, in rare circumstances where the risk of significant harm is assessed as immediate, the police, social services, etc as necessary).
- Complaints or concerns that are deemed frivolous or vexatious will be logged, but not forwarded or otherwise acted upon.
- Genuine concerns (whether low-level or potentially disciplinary) will be passed on to the diocese in a secure manner that has previously been agreed with the Bishop and/or Archdeacon. This might, for example, be via a direct email to the Archdeacon. *Say So* would then leave such matters with the Archdeacon (or other designated contact) to take whatever actions were deemed appropriate.
- All reported matters will be forwarded to the diocese, but complaints or concerns that are assessed as frivolous or vexatious will be logged but not otherwise acted upon by the diocese.

In essence, the use of *Say So* would enable necessary concerns to be raised despite a situation of pastoral breakdown, while ensuring that important matters still reach the appropriate ecclesiastical authority.

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## Appendix 3: the Bishop's Working Group

The following were members of the Bishop's Working Group, which met during 2021 and 2022.

- Revd Rachel Browning (*Associate Minister at Christ Church, Cambridge*)
- Mr Anthony Clarke (*Provincial Safeguarding Adviser & a member of the National Safeguarding Team*)
- Revd Dr Jason Roach, until September 2021 (*then serving as Pastor at The Bridge Church, Battersea & Advisor to the Bishop of London*)
- Revd Mike Smith (*Vicar of St John's, Hartford*)
- Mrs Barb Sweeting (*Women's Ministry Co-ordinator at Christ Church, Leyton*)
- Rt Revd Rod Thomas, Chairman (*Bishop of Maidstone*)
- Revd Mark Wallace, Secretary (*Senior Chaplain to the Bishop of Maidstone & Vicar of St Peter's, Colchester*)

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## Appendix 4: Further Resources

The following resources may be of use. Suggestions of additional resources are welcomed, and may be included in further editions.

### Books

- Marcus Honeysett, *Powerful Leaders? When church leadership goes wrong and how to prevent it* (London: IVP, 2022)
- Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2020)
- Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rina, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: How to Become An Effective Leader By Confronting Potential Failures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007)
- Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Exploring the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2019)
- Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021)

### The Bishop of Maidstone's website

- 'Fellow Workers' booklet ([available online](#))
- Research by Revd Dr Kirsten Birkett ([available online](#))

### The Church of England

- Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy ([available online](#))
- Parish Safeguarding Handbook ([available online](#))
- Pastoral Principles for living well together ([available online](#))
- The Five Guiding Principles: a resource for study ([available online](#))

### Church Society

- a variety of resources relevant to complementarianism ([access resources list](#))

### Thirtyone:eight

- An Independent Learning Review: The Crowded House ([available online](#))
- Independent Lessons Learned Review (incorporating an Audit of Safeguarding Arrangements) Concerning Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Church Wimbledon ([available online](#))