

## **Spiritual abuse by the Reverend Michael Hall - a lesson for churchwardens**

In July 2023, the Diocese of Oxford published<sup>1</sup> the Report by Elaine and Patrick Hopkinson, “Lessons learnt from the historic events in the parish of St Margaret’s, Tylers Green”.

The Executive Summary states:

“1.6 Reverend Hall is described as a bully, who used coercion and control to silence dissent, isolate the congregation, make them dependent on him and to exploit them. He emotionally abused people and used scripture and fear of hell to control them. Anyone can be made vulnerable by spiritual abuse. Some parishioners, including some of the Parochial Church Council did not recognise they were being abused at the time.

1.7 Some parishioners had concerns about Reverend Hall’s ministry, but their attempts to reason with him persistently failed. Given the power imbalance between Reverend Hall and members of the congregation and in the relationship between the abused and the abuser, such attempts at resolving complaints may actually have exposed victims/ survivors to further harm. Consequently, there was a need for others in positions of authority to have dealt with complaints on the parishioners’ behalf. However, churchwardens and the other members of the PCC did not act on or report Reverend Hall’s abusive behaviour to the diocese. When his abusive behaviour did come to the attention of the diocese, no action was taken. Some responses to complaints excused and minimised Reverend Hall’s behaviour and some complaints did not receive a response at all. (Pages 3-4).

### **The diocese**

The Revd Michael Hall was vicar at St Margaret’s Church, Tylers Green from 1981 until his retirement in 2000. He died in 2021. There was a warning flag raised to the bishop from the outset:

“In connection with Reverend Hall’s application to St Margaret’s Church, a bishop from another diocese wrote a reference dated 26 November 1980. The bishop praised Reverend Hall’s achievements and hard work ethic, but also commented “At that stage he was one of my problem boys”, “I appointed him as Team Vicar ... but there was no hope of any team relationship”, “provided he is in charge all goes well”, “his spiritual definiteness makes it difficult for him to work with other clergy” and “You would get a remarkable man but not the easiest to have around.” There is no record of any follow up on this reference.” (Page 41).

12.18 In the process of this review, thirteen letters of complaint, and two references to verbal complaints, about Reverend Hall were obtained.

12.19 There is no record of a reply to ten of the letters of concern/ complaint that were sent to the Bishop of Buckingham. The complaints included telling a bereaved mother that it was illegal to put flowers on her deceased child’s grave and calling her evil;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/learning-lessons-review-revd-michael-hall.php>

telling another bereaved mother that it was evil to watch a video of her now deceased child; being physically aggressive towards a policeman; arranging for men to sexually touch women as they arrived at a party; making physical and spiritual threats and behaving in a belligerent and dictatorial manner. In addition to no record of replies, there was no record of any investigation or action being taken in response to these serious and disturbing allegations.” (Pages 23-24).

So, why did the Diocese do little or nothing at the time in response to the allegations?

“20.4 The Bishop of Oxford from 1987 to 2006... sites four reasons why it was impossible for a bishop to have taken action against Reverend Hall at that time. (i) There was a lack of official complaints because people were too intimidated to “go public”. (ii) Reverend Hall made it clear he would instigate legal proceedings against anyone he thought slandered or libelled him. (iii) Reverend Hall always managed to have the majority of the PCC on his side. (iv) There was nothing in the church’s legislation at that time that enabled a bishop to deal with a situation where the PCC was so supportive of a vicar.” (Page 35).

The situation was akin to domestic abuse, where the victim is too fearful of their abuser to make a formal report. A couple wrote in September 1994:

“The couple wrote in confidence saying that they had been advised that Reverend Hall harangued people who criticise. The bishop replied saying that he could not act on anything except in a general way unless people were willing to put their names to specific complaints.” (Page 44).

When someone is frightened to make a complaint, they need professional support, but at that time the bishop had no Human Resources support in the Diocese and he wrongly thought that nothing could be done:

“12.26 When parishioners complained to the bishops in confidence this could have led to a meeting or conversation with them, offering support and exploring their fears and what might be done to protect them...” (Page 25).

“12.34 During the time of Reverend Hall’s ministry, there was no HR and safeguarding team or safeguarding procedures...”

The situation is very different today:

12.36 The handling of complaints and safeguarding concerns has improved since Reverend Hall’s time. The Church of England’s safeguarding e-manual contains a very detailed chapter on spiritual abuse and presents a spectrum from healthy spirituality to abusive spirituality. It provides guidance on how to respond to disclosures. It also includes guidance on responding well to victims and survivors of abuse. The Diocese of Oxford is supported by a HR and Safeguarding Department of 13 people...” (Page 26)

So, at the time, a bishop without HR support and no procedures, responded badly. Today there are procedures and 13 trained staff to deal with it.

The increased number of staff in a diocese is often criticised by those who complain about the increased ‘diocesan bureaucracy’ that parishes have to pay for. For example, in the July 2023 General Synod this witty Synod question was submitted complaining about the trend that congregations and numbers of clergy are falling but numbers of diocesan staff are increasing:

“Professor Roy Faulkner (Leicester) to ask the Chair of the Finance Committee:  
Q160 All trends in church statistics show that there will be no congregation by 2045. At that time, trends predict that the number of stipendiary clergy will be 3607 (80 per Diocese), and the number of Diocesan support staff will exceed 10,000 (approximately 200 per Diocese)...”<sup>2</sup>

Some diocesan staff numbers could possibly be reduced, but we should not revert to the absence of trained staff that was part of the problem in failing to respond well to safeguarding concerns..

### **Churchwardens and PCC members**

Whilst the response by the bishop and the diocese would be much better today because of new procedures and staffing, the failings of the churchwardens and PCC members are something that could easily reoccur and should be the main learning of the Review.

“The diocese” is often seen as the faceless bureaucracy that demands most of the local church’s income to be paid to them in Parish Share. The Reverend Hall promoted the ‘us and them’ oppositional relationship, and his churchwardens were sucked into it:

“14.1 ...Reverend Hall could not accept criticism and had a confrontational relationship with the diocese. During Reverend Hall’s time at St Margaret’s Church he wrote some 49 letters, most of which were to the diocese, all of which were adversarial... Over the same period, supporters of Reverend Hall, (sometimes individuals, sometimes the churchwardens and sometimes the whole PCC) wrote some 34 letters, including a petition to the diocese, either complaining about the way Reverend Hall was treated or defending Reverend Hall’s actions” (Page 27),

The churchwardens and PCC would not have been deliberately covering up abuse by their vicar. Their vicar was controlling the narrative for them, and they saw their role as supporting him:

“8.5 ...the challenge remains that it takes someone to recognise spiritual abuse and to complain or whistleblow. This may not happen if everyone is being seduced by a seemingly all-knowing and powerful figure, as they were by Reverend Hall. (Page 17).

This was a similar situation to that of Emmanuel Church Wimbledon, where I wrote that the diocese were seen as the enemy, and “people did not want to report the failures of their own church to the enemy”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> General Synod Questions Notice Paper July 2023, page 62.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/questions-notice-paper-july-2023.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Page 3 of my article on the Independent Lessons Learned Review Concerning Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Church Wimbledon <https://adrianvincent.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/202104-Jonathan-Fletcher-review.pdf>

The report looks at the role of the churchwardens:

“12.4 The PCC is made up of clergy and lay members. The churchwardens are members of the PCC. They and the other lay members of the PCC are unpaid volunteers and are drawn from the church congregation who are on the electoral roll. They may be approached to become a churchwarden or PCC member, or they may put themselves forward. In either event there must be a proposer and seconder. There is a ballot by members of the congregation on the electoral roll at an Annual Parochial Church Meeting (APCM). However, it is unusual for there to be more candidates than there are places to fill because they are voluntary unpaid roles, and for the churchwardens in particular a considerable investment of their time is required.

12.5 The churchwardens are officers of the bishop, not the incumbent (Cannon E1 paragraphs 4 and 5) and so should maintain independence.

12.6 Reverend Hall approached and encouraged individuals of his choice to become members of the PCC and to take up the role of churchwardens. In effect, Reverend Hall appointed them. He surrounded himself with people who he could rely on to support him.” (Page 22).

“12.9 ... Instead of reporting warning signs of abuse by Reverend Hall, the churchwardens supported and endorsed his behaviour. For example, Reverend Hall and the churchwardens wrote to parishioners requiring them to make an unreserved reconciliation with Reverend Hall. They quoted Hebrews 13 Verse 1, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your soul, as those who will have to give account”. (English Standard Version).” (Page 22).

“12.11 The churchwardens also sought to close pathways for expressing criticism of Reverend Hall by writing to parishioners that, “We want to make it clear that it is improper from now onwards to use the wardens as mediators between the leadership of the church and the people.” No alternative means of making representations was offered in this letter.” (Page 22).

The Report is correct that the role of churchwarden is one that no-one wants to take on.

The Report is unfair to simply say “The churchwardens are officers of the bishop, not the incumbent (Cannon E1...”. Churchwardens are also required to “co-operate” with the vicar. The full quote of Canon E1, paragraph 4 is:

“4. The churchwardens when admitted are officers of the bishop. They shall discharge such duties as are by law and custom assigned to them; they shall be foremost in representing the laity and in co-operating with the incumbent; they shall use their best endeavours by example and precept to encourage the parishioners in the practice of true religion and to promote unity and peace among them. They shall also maintain order and decency in the church and churchyard, especially during the time of divine service.”

Churchwardens have a range of responsibilities and accountabilities that are often in tension. They have to:

- a.) Represent the local residents (they are appointed in a Parish meeting at which anyone resident in the parish is able to attend and vote for the churchwarden).
- b.) Represent the congregation.
- c.) Co-operate with the vicar.
- d.) Act as an officer of the bishop.

It is a lucky day for the churchwarden if the local residents, the congregation, the vicar and the bishop are all pulling in exactly the same direction. More often, there are tensions and it is difficult for the churchwarden to know to whom their primary loyalty should be. There is a lack of guidance and training for churchwardens in how to decide between these competing loyalties. Churchwardens will be in most frequent contact with their vicar, so, when there is a dispute between vicar and diocese / bishop the churchwarden will naturally default to seeing their role as to back-up and support the vicar.

I have knowledge of the ethical tensions that barristers have to face of competing loyalties and perhaps this can provide a model for churchwardens. The code of conduct of a barrister is in the Bar Standards Board Handbook which sets out that a barrister has duties:

- a.) to the Court (Core Duty 1)
- b.) to their Client (Core Duty 2)
- c.) to the confidentiality of their client's affairs (Core Duty 6)
- d.) to maintain their independence (Core Duty 4)

The Handbook then sets out what barristers should do when any of these duties are in tension. For example, their duty to the Court is primary and 'trumps' their duty to their client.

Barristers have years of training and have to pass an ethics exam before they are appointed. They are therefore able to know how to deal with these competing loyalties.

Churchwardens, by contrast, take on the role in their spare time with hardly any training. My own Diocese of Guildford gives one day training for new churchwardens, and half a day a year training for current churchwardens, plus any safeguarding training. The training half day can be on topics such as how to apply for a 'faculty' to make changes to the church building, and how to increase your social media presence. Not what to do when you have problems with your vicar.

There is some written guidance. For example James Behrens' "Practical Church Management" has a chapter entitled "Resolving conflicts", but such reading is not compulsory or part of any official training.

It is not surprising therefore if there are examples where churchwardens have failed to make the right judgment in difficult circumstances when they have conflicting loyalties. More guidance and training for churchwardens should help. I think this should be the main learning from this Lessons Learnt Review.

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Adrian Vincent