



The Uniting Church in Australia  
Synod of South Australia

# Managing Challenging Behaviours

Guidelines for Pastoral Leaders

## Managing Challenging Behaviour – Guidelines for Pastoral Leaders

Many leaders of congregations find that amongst their fellowship there are significantly more people who display difficult behaviour in a social setting, than perhaps there used to be. Some of these people may have a diagnosed mental illness. Others may present to us and our community in ways that do not conform with our expectations for a multitude of reasons. These guidelines provide a pathway through the pastoral issues in maintaining inclusive, healthy, safe, communities of spiritual growth and mission.

### Thinking theologically and ethically

In the Basis of Union we read:

*“God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.”*

The foundation of life and participation in the life of the church is not our physical, emotional or mental health, nor is it what we can contribute to the running of an organisation but the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. All of us belong by grace. We express this gracious acceptance by seeking to grow in radical hospitality - opening our lives in costly ways to share God's welcome with others.

We also need to recognise that none of us is completely healthy all of the time. We all struggle to some extent with our emotional and mental health. Hopefully this means that we always start from a place of compassionate concern. We are reminded of the character of the Kingdom of God in the Beatitudes.

Many of the values about how we relate to each other are expressed in the Safe Place Policy of the UCA.

### A Safe Place

The Uniting Church in Australia believes that all people are made in the image of God and as such we should accept every individual regardless of race, age, creed or gender.

As a Christian community, we believe that God reaches out to us in love and acceptance and that our relationships with each other should express love and respect and not be abused.

As a community of faith we are committed to providing a place in society where human beings can explore what it means to be made in the image of God.

As an expression of this commitment, the Uniting Church in Australia recognises its responsibility to provide worshipping and pastoral communities that are free from abuse and that provide safe environments for all people to explore and express their faith in the Gospel

You might like to consider how you express these values in your own community.

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## Responding pastorally

### Questions to consider

1. What needs does this person hope will be met in this community? How can those needs be met? Are these expectations realistic?
2. Is this a contextual problem (i.e. does this person behave this way only in our fellowship)?
  - If “yes”, we need to think clearly about the circumstances around the difficult behaviour and how to influence that context positively. Are there ways we can structure our life together that “makes room” for differences, without compromising the fabric of the fellowship? Should we be examining our own attitudes and behaviour? Have we put in place boundaries to safeguard the safety of everyone in our congregation and does everyone know what they are (e.g. no-one should be abused or manipulated, privacy, confidentiality etc ). The *Called to Care* materials may be helpful here, and they are available from the Synod office (Resources).
  - If “no”, the “problem” is more likely to be personal in nature and not with this particular relationship / ministry. This usually indicates that the primary strategies to modify the behaviour are counselling, pastoral counselling, psychology, and psychiatry – individual “therapy”. Most often our response will be to encourage the person to seek help from those professions. However, the environment always has an influence of some kind on mitigating or provoking stressful situations. Whatever the answer to this question, the issue of how we provide the best possible pastoral care for every person involved, remains central.
3. The maxim, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood” holds especially true in these complex situations.

### Information

Government printed brochures – These are available for order in multiple copies at no cost. They can be accessed via the following links and contain much useful information.

- [www.health.gov.au/mentalhealth](http://www.health.gov.au/mentalhealth);
- <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-pubs>
- <http://mentalhealth.about.com/library/mh/blmh.htm>;
- [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au);

### Consultation

Relevant health professionals. If you plan to contact a person’s specific health professional to discuss their care, you need their permission. However, you can call ACIS (Assessment and Crisis Intervention Service) in your region to clarify your thinking, to discuss the best strategies and explore what resources are available to assist you.

UCA Chaplain(s) in Mental Health. The chaplains are very experienced in dealing at the interface of spiritual and mental health issues. They are able to provide you with strategies for the pastoral care of the person and the congregation.

\*\*\*\*\*Discuss your personal and professional responses with your supervisor.\*\*\*\*\*

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## Managing the situation

### 1. Develop a team approach.

No one can deal with these issues alone – indeed, it is dangerous to do so.

- **Education** (Called to Care; Managing Conflict; or perhaps a session for your specific needs.)
- **Plan together** your ways of managing the situation.
  - For example, you may need to think through
    - Our primary goal is...
    - When ...happens, we will...
    - My role will be... and your role will be...
- **Support each other**
- **Debrief** – the conversations about how best to deal with difficult situations should be ongoing as situations change
- **Document** the events and situations that have occurred between members of the Church and the particular individual.
- **Pay due attention to possible media interest in this issue.** Inform the Engagement Executive Officer on 8236 4249. You are reminded of the policy that the Moderator, the General Secretary and the Engagement Executive Officer are those authorised to speak with the media on our behalf.
- **Inform the Presbytery and the Synod Placements and Safe Church Team** about any possible risk management issues.
- **Inform the Synod Placements and Safe Church Team and the Presbytery** if you have concerns for ANYONE's safety.
  - Do not hesitate to call the Police at any time about an urgent situation.

### 2. Seek the further support of the wider church

Should a pastoral approach and all the steps listed above (including consulting mental health chaplains) not resolve a situation, you may need to take a wider organisational behaviour management approach. If the Synod's support is required, after significant conversation, the Synod would instigate the following series of letters as appropriate.

**Letter 1** – States the UCA Safe Place Policy and requests the respondent to assist us to maintain a safe place for everyone.

**Letter 2** – Names specific behaviours that are unacceptable, offers a conversation with a presbytery person and the minister/ pastoral leader and the respondent. This would be a mediation-style meeting from which would emerge negotiated and contracted behaviour from congregation, minister and respondent.

**Letter 3** - If the behaviour continues, at a meeting between minister, presbytery and church council, a decision could be made (and minuted) to exclude the person. The person would be informed in writing, and the reason for the exclusion would be documented. Should the person continue to attend, the police can be called and asked to escort the person from the building.

As you would appreciate, a lot of reconciliation work is undertaken before the Synod would support the exclusion of any person from worship or other church activities. Prevention is always the preferred pathway in the resolution of such matters. Congregations and their leaders are encouraged to seek help early rather than late and to celebrate the many ways in which people find expression for their faith, fully participate in worship and discover their God-given gifts for mission and service.

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