

PRINCIPLES FOR COMMENDING MINISTRY

(Revising The 'Maidstone Commitments')

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Forwards	page 2
Introduction	page 3
PRINCIPLE 1 - Accountability	page 4
Commitment #1	page 4
Commitment #5	page 5
PRINCIPLE 2 – Transparency	page 6
Commitment #2	page 6
Commitment #3	page 7
PRINCIPLE 3 – Mutuality	page 8
Commitment #2	page 8
Conclusion	page 9
Appendix 1: Next Steps	page 9
Appendix 2: Say-So	page 10
Appendix 3: Bishop’s Working Group	page 11
Appendix 4: Further Resources	page 12

Forward from Rt Rev Dr Rob Munro

The 'Maidstone Commitments', published in April 2022, were formulated to be a helpful response to churches reflecting on a series of public incidents of safeguarding issues and abuses of power within complementarian and conservative evangelical churches. It was intended to give some simple practical ways for churches to cultivate more healthy 'cultures' or ways of working, within their leadership teams and congregations.

With Bishop Rod's retirement, and the re-designation of the Bishop who supports complementarian evangelical churches as the 'Bishop of Ebbsfleet', there is a need to revisit and revise the 'Maidstone Commitments' to fulfil their aim of enabling churches to adopt them as abiding principles by which healthy ministry and leadership is enabled. It is not intended that the significant number of Churches who have already adopted the 'Maidstone Commitments' will need to go through another review process, although it is hoped that those still planning to consider them will complete that process soon. However the 'Maidstone Commitments' are now being recast in a simpler way under the three headings - Accountability, Transparency and Mutuality – how we decide, how we communicate and how we connect to the wider Church.

I am very grateful for all the work done on the original 'Commitments' document, and encourage all those Churches in the 'Ebbsfleet Network' to have regard to their recommendations and practical suggestions, as ways to commend complementarian evangelical ministry for the future.

Rt Rev Dr Rob Munro, The Bishop of Ebbsfleet, August 2023

Original Foreword from Rt Rev Rod Thomas

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', 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.

Rt Revd Rod Thomas, The Bishop of Maidstone, 25th April 2022

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.

The '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 culture.¹ 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'.

The 'Commending Ministry' principles are a simpler re-articulation of the five 'Maidstone commitments' under three areas: Accountability, Transparency and Mutuality.

These arise from an application of 2 Corinthians 4:1-2:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

Paul's articulation of his own Ministry is a model for our Churches' Leadership, as he was speaking in the face of criticism about his own Ministry. He answers his critics by pointing out the character of his leadership. He led with clear Accountability – because Ministry is God's gift not our right; Transparency – because Ministry is to be done God's way not our own; and Mutuality because Ministry should commend itself more widely than just our local Church.

The former 'Commitments' naturally fall under these three headings – **Accountability**: how we decide things, **Transparency**: how we communicate things and **Mutuality**: how we connect to the wider Church and world before God. Each of 'Principles' also challenge common cultural habits often associated with flawed leadership. Accountability challenges a tendency to abuse power; Transparency speaks against a tendency to 'spin' truth; Mutuality speaks against a tendency towards tribalism or separatism. It is also hoped that the three 'Principles' will be easier to remember than the five (and maybe the A.T.M. acronym may help).

The aim of this paper is to be a resource to Church Leaders – incumbents, leadership teams and PCCs – to review their own culture and agree some principles for their future leadership. This is not a summary of all that is required of leadership, nor even addressing its priorities – to glorify God in Gospel Ministry and godly living. It is hoped to be a framework for faithful leadership to flourish for the building up the whole body of Christ. It would help to have any feedback from Churches who adopt these principles, as further work is underway to resource them better in the future.

¹ In this document, the word 'culture' is used to refer to the way that things are done in a particular context. This is not a technical definition, but as a convenient shorthand to describe the various issues under discussion.

² 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.

PRINCIPLE 1 : Accountability – How are things decided in Church?

The goal of godly ministry in Ephesians 4:13 is the maturity in Christ of the whole body of the Church, which is explained in 4:16 as needing every ligament engaged in its growth in Christ. Those in ‘Word ministry’ in leadership are called to equip others to do that work of building each other up. There is an emphasis therefore on ensuring decisions are made that respect all of those called to serve in the Church, which means justly honouring the gifts God has given people and judiciously regarding the way we make decisions.

That is articulated by the following principles:

act with impartiality and justice (*Maidstone Commitment #1*)

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 in complementarian parishes, 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 (this, 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.

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 Principles¹ 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.**



Research by Revd Dr Kirsten Birkett (commissioned by the Bishop of Maidstone, available from the Ebbsfleet website [HERE](#)), concluded that 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, including housing
- opportunities for further training and ministry development pathways
- engagement and impact on decision-making

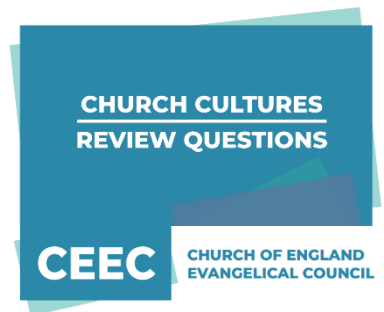
The Leadership and PCC should satisfy itself that any distinctions or differences are in keeping with the biblical mandate to act justly and to show no partiality.

¹ Web-search: ‘Pastoral Principles Church of England’ or follow the link [HERE](#).

review carefully the church culture (*Maidstone Commitment #5*)

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 and regularly their own church culture. The servant leadership model of Jesus calls us not to follow patterns and habits of 'worldly power' (Matthew 20:25-28), and the way we lead should clearly avoid manipulation or deception (2 Corinthians 4:2). Different and more godly ways of leading do require teaching and training to help people not to follow worldly approaches.

The Bishop of Ebbsfleet specifically commends all church leadership teams and PCCs undertake 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 ways in which a church might review 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 Ebbsfleet and senior diocesan clergy, as appropriate;
7. ongoing, in that there is expectation that the process will need to be repeated periodically.

An additional benefit and wider of a review is that it may helpfully provide feedback to the Bishop of Ebbsfleet on what areas may need further resourcing or support.

As part of the ongoing need to keep a Church culture under review, it is recommended that a couple of the church 'officers', probably the wardens, have it included in their job description to have regard for these principles when considering what to include in their APCM report. The wider church is increasingly looking to wardens or other key lay leaders to support in these sort of areas, including clergy wellbeing, so it can helpfully be included as part of their 'brief', or a PCC could delegate that responsibility to someone else.

PRINCIPLE 2: Transparency - How do we communicate in the Church?

2 Corinthians 4:1-2 explicitly calls on leaders to set forth the truth plainly. In an age of communication overload, that calls for us to deliberately ensure important information is accessible and understandable, not just within the Church, but also to outsiders (v.2). This is vital when it comes to dealing with concerns, complaints and allegations, and is expressed in the following two 'Maidstone' commitments.

signpost safe pathways for raising concerns (*Maidstone #2*)

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 publication of a whistle-blowing policy², the details of which should be readily available. Posters can also highlight the right people to contact³.

Satisfactory outcomes 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 to establish truth.

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. See Appendix 1 for further information.

² A Sample Whistle-Blowing Policy is available [HERE](#)

³ Sample Posters incorporating Safeguarding and Complaints are downloadable [HERE A3](#) and [HERE A4](#).

A commitment to Transparency is not only in regard to complaints, but also in how we communicate who we are and our priorities, which gives rise to a further commitment...

ensure awareness of PCC resolutions (*Maidstone #3*)

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 in what they communicate 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 Ebbsfleet.

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

First, a sentence³ 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 Ebbsfleet.

Second, a poster⁴ could be displayed on an internal noticeboard, giving details of the Bishop, his role and his contact details, and clarifying that the Bishop of Ebbsfleet is able to offer pastoral care and to undertake various services in the church, with the agreement of the Diocesan Bishop.

It is also helpful if parishes receiving the extended pastoral oversight of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet 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 Ebbsfleet has no role in relationship to formal disciplinary arrangements or safeguarding policies. It may also help for churches to clarify the contacts for complaints or 'whistle-blowing' unrelated to safeguarding, and a suitable sample poster for that is also available⁵.

³ 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. We receive extended episcopal care from the Bishop of Ebbsfleet. Further information is available www.bishopofebbsfleet.org '.

⁴ A suitable poster is downloadable from the Ebbsfleet website [HERE A3](#), [HERE A4](#) or [HERE A5](#).

⁵ A suitable poster is downloadable from the Ebbsfleet website [HERE A3](#) or [HERE A4](#).

PRINCIPLE 3 : Mutuality - How we connect to the wider Church

Our union in Christ by faith and our connection to other churches through the Church of England brings with it a responsibility for churches to work together in proclaiming the gospel and serving the nation's parishes. In an established Church, those relationships are both spiritual but also structural or legal, that requires various particular duties of churches. So the way we connect to others is of great importance, hence the final resolution.

foster positive working relationships with your diocese (Maidstone #4)

Many 'resolution parishes' enjoy positive working relationships with senior diocesan clergy.⁴ 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 diocesan 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.

This principle of Mutuality therefore encourages clergy and PCCs to engage as positively with senior diocesan clergy⁶, to ensure that working relationships – especially in cases of pastoral breakdown – can be as effective as possible. In this way, the responsibilities that senior diocesan clergy have for parishes in their area of responsibility is properly acknowledged, and parishes are able to access any support they might need. In particular it needs to be acknowledged that even when extended pastoral and sacramental care is given to a parish by the Bishop of Ebbsfleet (overseeing the spiritual care of a parish), the Diocesan and/or Area Bishops remain responsible for legal aspects of ministry, and constructive engagement in those areas will be of great help in building appropriate relationships.

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

- an occasional informal meeting of senior diocesan clergy can be arranged with a Leadership team, Standing Committee and/or PCC;
- an invitation can be issued for diocesan clergy to be physically present at an open event in the parish (for a church lunch, a fete, Remembrance service, etc);
- commitments can be made to attend diocesan functions (which might not otherwise have been a priority) that will enable working relationships to be enhanced;
- participation in diocesan committees and synods, which are usually more concerned for the legal and practical life of a diocese, rather than having a spiritual focus
- phone-calls and emails should be kept as positive as possible, to ensure good communication is enhanced.

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

⁶ 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).

Conclusion

The issues raised in this paper are simply an application of Scripture's commands calling us to ways of leadership that reflect the sacrificial servant leadership of our Lord (Mark 9:35), that renounces secretive worldly ways (2 Corinthians 4:2), and better expresses our unity in Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6). Our hope is that these 'Principles' helpfully summarise a way for the grace of Christ to be encountered in our communities in the way we conduct our churches' life.

It is also part of our proclamation of God's grace that we honestly acknowledge and repent of those habits and activities that have undermined these biblical commands. Some of our churches and individual leaders have failed to uphold these principles in the past, which is a sadness. The good news is that Jesus' forgiveness and grace is not simply to affirm us where we are, it is to transform us into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18) – we are always a work in progress, or as the reformers put it '*semper reformanda*', always reforming. That work is neither instant nor complete this side of the perfection that is promised only in his presence, so we are committed to acknowledging our failures in anticipation of change, and committed to the work to embody the change he calls us to.

The Bishop of Ebbsfleet recommends these 'Principles for Commending Ministry' be adopted by Incumbents, Leadership Teams and PCCs of all 'resolution parishes'. It is his hope and expectation that local churches in his care will:

1. agree to formally *adopt* these Principles, at a meeting of the PCC;
2. agree to *adapt* church practices to honour them, over an agreed time span.

As an aid to our mutual accountability on this, the Bishop would appreciate a short note, by email, of the PCC's proposal. The Bishop's Office will keep a brief note of the responses. It is acknowledged that different churches will be at different stages of processing these issues, and each local church is therefore encouraged to use its own discernment in deciding how best to move forwards.

In reviewing this document, please consider the following questions:

- Has the PCC reviewed the issues raised by the 'Principles for Commending Ministry' (or the previous 'Maidstone Commitments')? If not, can they be raised on a PCC agenda as soon as is practically possible?
- Has the PCC formally adopted these 'Principles' or previously adopted the 'Commitments'? If so, has the Bishop of Ebbsfleet's office been informed?
- Has the PCC agreed a process for enacting the 'Principles' with a time-scale to review them? If so, have you agreed who will be responsible to see it through?

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

Appendix 1: ‘Say-So’- a confidential anonymous reporting service

In the vast majority of cases, it is expected that concerns in a church will be raised through its normal channels – usually clergy initially, or wardens is necessary, with safeguarding handled by Safeguarding Officers in the Parish and Diocese. At times however that nature of a complaint may mean a person feels unable to use systems with people that they know. The wider Church does usually accommodate this by contact with the relevant Archdeacon. However, the Bishop of Ebbsfleet 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 Ebbsfleet commends the work of *Say-So*, an external speak- up service (www.say-so.co.uk) provide an external 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. 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, as necessary, the police).
- 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 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.

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.

Appendix 2: the Bishop's Working Group

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

- Revd Rachel Browning (*Associate Minister at Christ Church, Cambridge*)
 - Mr Anthony Clarke (*Provincial Safeguarding Adviser & a member of the National Safeguarding Team*)
 - Revd Jason Roach (until Sept 2021) (*then serving as Pastor at The Bridge Church, Battersea*)
 - 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 3: 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 Ebbsfleet's website

- 'Equal but Different – women & men as Fellow Gospel Workers' booklet ([available online](#))
- Exercise on Women's Ministry - 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](#))

The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's website contains useful advice and guidance:
www.bishopofebbsfleet.org See especially the section on Guidance.
If you have any queries, please contact the Bishop of Ebbsfleet's office:
admin@bishopofebbsfleet.org or on **07710 232423**.