

Addressing Allegations of Spiritual Abuse in FIEC Churches

FIEC is a voluntary association of independent churches and has no central oversight of the way a member church operates. However, all member churches must meet the criteria of affiliation to the charity. To join FIEC, a church must be Independent, have at least eight members, agree with our Doctrinal Basis and Ethos Statements of ministry, and be registered with the Charity Commission (or be willing to register within two years), with proper governance and safeguarding policies in place.

Where a church member or individual has a grievance with an FIEC affiliated church, this should be taken directly to the local church. This is because an independent church is a charity in its own right and should have procedures in place to deal with complaints and grievances. This means that FIEC does not have the legal power to investigate a church or a church leader on behalf of a complainant. However, the FIEC Trust Board does have the right to remove a church from the Fellowship or a man from the Pastors' Network. This is called disaffiliation.

When a legitimate allegation has been received, FIEC will seek to engage with the church about issues that have been raised in the spirit of Proverbs 18:17. We want to help a church to respond biblically and wisely to allegations made against them.

Disaffiliation will be considered where the following situations remain the case following an appropriate investigation:

- > Where a church or a church leader has departed from the doctrinal positions held by the FIEC and their theology is inconsistent with the agreed position of member churches.
- > Where a church does not have proper charitable governance in place (including fit-for-purpose Safeguarding policies) such that it would bring the gospel into disrepute because the church is not meeting its requirements to the State (Romans 13).
- > Where there is evidence of systemic or systematic abuse of power by a church or its leader(s). See **Appendix A** for examples.
- > And the church fails to deal with these matters or take the appropriate action following engagement with FIEC.

If you wish to raise an allegation of abuse of power in an FIEC church which you believe should lead to the disaffiliation of the church from the Fellowship or removal of a leader from the Pastors' Network, you will need to complete the form set out in **Appendix B**.

The procedure set out does not remove the right of any individual to report a local church to the Charity Commission which is the legal regulator of independent churches.

If you believe that abusive behaviour has taken place which constitutes illegal activity, you should contact the relevant authorities directly (police, social services, Charity Commission).

APPENDIX A – Defining systemic or systematic abuse of power

There are clear Biblical standards expected of leaders which are focused on their character and their behaviour towards Christ's flock. In the Scriptures we see that servant-leadership draws parallels to shepherds and devoted parents, while warning against overbearing leadership that seeks to lord it over people.

Abusive behaviour takes many forms. Sometimes it is public and prominent, including violence or sexual misconduct which immediately disqualifies a leader from ministry. But sometimes it is much more subtle, perhaps domineering or bullying behaviour from leaders who are abusing their position in the local church.

Churches are usually able to spot public and prominent abuse, taking the appropriate action to remove a leader who has disqualified himself from ministry after this sinful behaviour.

But the more subtle forms of abuse may go unnoticed in the life of the local church.

We define abuse of power as behaviour which overreaches into the lives of people in ways that the Bible does not command. This has sometimes been called "heavy-shepherding" and may be described as coercive control. Behaviour in this category might include:

- > An unhealthy control over the details of people's lives.
- > A ministry that demands actions from church members that the Bible does not.
- > A leader restricting Christian liberty. Examples might include church members being told they cannot visit family or being instructed as to how they should spend their money.

There is rightly a high bar for proving coercive controlling behaviour and bullying leadership. We would expect it to form part of a pattern with either multiple people reporting this behaviour, or multiple accounts over a sustained period against the same person.

It is important to state what we do not consider to be abusive leadership. The following will not normally be categorised as abuse of power:

- > The church or its leaders upholding theological convictions (unless they are at odds with FIEC's Doctrinal Basis).
- > The decision of the church or its leaders on the vision/direction of the church.
- > The way a church or its leaders have handled pastoral matters which can be complex.

- > The decisions taken by a church or its leaders in line with the church's governing documents.
- > Faithful gospel teaching that is offensive to people – especially in the area of gender and sexuality.
- > Personality clashes – these are inevitable in church life.
- > Unwise words, actions or procedures by a leader or leaders seeking to do the right thing.
- > Imperfections or one-off mistakes from leaders. No leader will ever attain perfection, neither should we expect it of them.

The principle is that one-off mistakes which could in hindsight have been addressed in a different way are not evidences of systemic or systematic abusive behaviour. If there are multiple personality clashes, unwise actions or many poorly handled pastoral matters, this might indicate a pattern of behaviour which may be evidence of abuse of power. Similarly, if a particular vision and direction of the church is pushed at the expense of Christian freedom and discipleship it may also indicate abuse of power.

APPENDIX B – How to raise an allegation

The form on the following page (page 4) should be completed to raise an allegation of abuse of power against an FIEC church or member of the FIEC Pastors' Network. It can be returned by email or by post to the address at the top of this document.

What happens next?

FIEC will present your evidence to the leaders of the church in question and ask them for a response. There are then two courses of action.

1. If after receiving the response from the church we do not think it is an allegation which will lead to disaffiliation from the Fellowship of the church or the pastor, we will advise you accordingly and no further action will be taken.
2. If we believe it is an allegation that may lead to the church or pastor being disaffiliated from the Fellowship, we will commission an investigation to assess the evidence and engage with all parties.
 - > The investigation will be presented to the FIEC Trust Board who will consider whether the church or pastor should be disaffiliated from the Fellowship. The results will not be made public except to report on disaffiliation.
 - > The Trust Board's decision is final and there is no further appeals process.

Please note – FIEC will seek to engage with the local church that is the subject of the complaint at every step of the process to help them to respond wisely and well to any allegations raised. The flow-chart below (page 5) is a helpful visual aid which explains the steps that will be taken.

Spiritual Abuse Allegation Form

Please save this form to your computer before you begin filling it in; do not complete it in a web browser. Return the completed form by email or by post to the address at the top of this document.

Mac users: Please complete the form using Adobe Reader and not Mac Preview. You can download Adobe Reader from adobe.com/reader.

COMPLAINANT

Name

Address

Email

DETAILS OF ALLEGATION

Name(s) of those
accused of abuse or
malpractice

Name of local church

Please summarise
the nature of the
alleged abuse of
power

Has this alleged abuse of power been
reported to the local church leaders?

YES

NO

What is their
response?

Please provide a summary
of the relevant evidence to
support your view that this
church or its leaders should
be disaffiliated from the
Fellowship. This should be
in as concise a format as
possible.

