

# Stressed clergy put faith in the power of unions

**Kaya Burgess**  
Religious Affairs Correspondent

Priests and rabbis left psychologically bruised by their congregations are seeking outside help for counselling and advice on grievances.

Spurred by concerns over internal disciplinary procedures, religious leaders have been seeking guidance not only from God but from trade unions too.

The Unite union has had a surge in ministers joining its faith workers division in the past year. Almost 1,500, including priests, rabbis and a few imams, are members, a rise of almost 200, or 16 per cent, on the year before.

Clerics are unionising although many, including Church of England priests, have no rights under employment law. Priests are "office-holders" rather than employees and cannot have grievances heard by an employment tribunal.

The Times has seen anonymised data from the union's helpline for clerics, which received hundreds of calls in the past year. Some callers raise specific grievances, including bullying and issues with pay and redundancy, but most are just seeking a supportive ear.

The Rev Peter Hobson is head of Church of England Clergy Advocates (CECA) within Unite. He said priests were unlikely to walk out on strike, but did want better protection. The group liaises with the General Synod, which debated clergy wellbeing this year. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, said the most stressful part of his career had been the "isolation" of being a parish priest.

More priests had sought counselling, Mr Hobson said. "A lot of calls to our helpline, when it boils down to it, are for some guidance and support. If they have no one else, we often provide it."

Most members of Unite's faithworker division (54 per cent) are Church of England and 10 per cent are Methodists, but rabbis, who are employees of their synagogues, have also started joining.

Rabbi Ariel Abel, who sits on the division's executive, said: "There is no sector in the faith-worker world that is free from the potential of being treated badly. Rabbis raise issues to do with bullying, sometimes harassment of different kinds, and bad behaviour from lay people in elected positions within the synagogue. Sometimes people who are very well qualified leave their brains and morals behind on their work desk, and return to their congregations, and think that their rabbi or priest is a punchbag."

Mr Hobson said many priests did not feel that the clergy discipline measure, the church's system for complaints and allegations, was always fair or independent. "Every case where the CDM is invoked is difficult, for clergy against whom it is invoked and for others trying to run the process," he said. "It's fair to say it doesn't always work as it should."

He said the increased focus on safeguarding, and the emergence of historical abuse claims, had also contributed to anxiety. "Clergy, like anyone else, might be thinking, 'Are there things I may have done, perhaps totally inadvertently, in the past where complaints will be made, and how will I fare, and will there be someone to support me?'"

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## Vicar takes a swipe at his 'grumbling' congregation

**George Sandeman**

A vicar who accused his congregation of "grumbling, gossip and disunity" has taken a three-month sabbatical after a meeting with the Bishop of Salisbury.

The Rev Andy Thewlis has apologised for a 1,200-word letter on November 16 in which he accused members of All Saints Church in Burbage, Wiltshire, of "actively sabotaging" his ministry. "The Sunday morning worship experience is neither warm, nor welcoming," he wrote.

"It does not portray real love, joy or peace. Rather it reflects an organisation that is characterised by grumbling, gossip, and disunity. Criticism and negativity are predominant behaviour traits in too many church members. Some people ... are actively sabotaging the ministry of their vicar and their church."

"The arrogance of some church members through emails and conversations on an almost daily basis is wearisome. It drains energy, robs enthusiasm and reveals that some as we were told would prefer not to have a vicar."

Mr Thewlis, who has been in the post for a year, also complained that despite repeated requests he had not been given a list of songs known to the congregation, a lack that he said "demonstrates an unwillingness to co-operate".

He said that he and his wife, Sarah-Jane, were "not prepared to sacrifice our health or our marriage for a local

church in which internal politics and unnecessary power games cause such hurt and division".

The couple moved to the village in October last year after 21 years at a church in Jersey. Yesterday he apologised for the letter after a meeting with the Right Rev Nicholas Holtam, the Bishop of Salisbury.

A spokesman for the diocese said: "Mr Thewlis has now written a letter of apology to those who received his letter, which was inappropriate in both



**The Rev Andy Thewlis has apologised to his congregation**

tenor and content. The Bishop has also offered Mr Thewlis pastoral support including sabbatical time to consider his future, and he has accepted this."

Mr Thewlis said: "We are actively looking for a ministry elsewhere. It has been a challenging time."

Writing again to his congregation, he said: "I recognise that the letter was inappropriate and came as a shock ... I should not have sent it to all church members, nor should I have named individuals within it. I apologise unreservedly for the upset and hurt it has caused."



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