

Dealing with complaints in the Southern Counties Baptist Association

Baptist churches operate as autonomous congregations who work in covenant partnership with one another. Our Association is primarily an expression of that mutual covenant and does not have a regulatory role in respect to the day to day operations of local Baptist churches. While we are keen to support our church communities in maintaining wholesome relationships with one another, we do not have an automatic role to intervene in situations of complaint and conflict. The guidelines that follow seek to outline the practical implications of this.

If you contact SCBA

As an Association, our usual policy is that unless there are clear safeguarding or legal implications, we would not treat initial contact as a formal complaint. It is very often the case that matters can be resolved informally, and most parties prefer that if this is the case, formal process is not implemented or observed. You would only be invited to submit a formal complaint if the avenues outlined below have been exhausted, and you explicitly indicate that you wish to make a formal complaint.

If you have a complaint about a church

If you are a Church Member or have been affected by a local Baptist church in a way that you feel gives cause for complaint, you should in the first instance make an approach to the minister, secretary or another recognised church officer at that church. Alternatively, you should tender your complaint in writing to the trustee body of the church. This will normally be the deacons or leadership team. Wherever possible, we would encourage that you seek to resolve your complaint informally, and only make formal representation to the trustees if this has not achieved a satisfactory outcome.

Many local churches will have their own complaint or grievance procedure. In such circumstances you should use that process.

In the event that you feel your complaint has not been properly handled, you can contact the SCBA office. You will be asked to give a written summary that provides:

- (i) An outline of the events that you wish to make a complaint about
- (ii) An explanation of why you feel these events give cause for complaint
- (iii) An account of how you have communicated your complaint to the trustee body and/or church officers.
- (iv) An explanation of why you feel they have not handled the complaint adequately.

Where this is reasonably possible, a member of the SCBA team will seek to advise you on how you might take matters further. This may involve contacting the church informally to explore whether a suitable resolution can be found. This may include helping you to make representation to the Church Meeting.

It is ultimately for the Church Meeting to decide whether or not a complaint can be upheld and what actions need to be taken as a consequence. The only exceptions to this would be where the church has acted in a way that is in breach of its Trust Deed or where an Accredited Baptist Minister has acted in breach of the Baptist Union's ministry regulations. All other matters are at the ultimate discretion of the Church Meeting, though it is hoped that wherever possible matters could be amicably resolved without resort to a meeting of the whole church.

If you have a complaint about a minister

If you believe you have reason to complain about a minister, it is important to firstly ascertain whether or not that individual is an Accredited Baptist Minister. Where a church has chosen to appoint a non-accredited minister, the Baptist Union and the Regional Association (SCBA) have no direct jurisdiction over their conduct and behaviour. In the case of a non-accredited minister, you should follow the procedure outlined for complaints about a church.

If the minister is an Accredited Baptist Minister, you need to consider whether your complaint is in relation to their **competence** or **conduct**.

Competence: This refers to the minister's ability to perform their day to day duties in the local church. If your complaint arises from what you believe to be a failure to adequately do this, this is a local church matter, and again you should follow the procedure for a church complaint.

Conduct: This refers to a minister's behaviour and character. If you believe that a minister has acted in a way that is "unbecoming", (e.g. has acted violently or aggressively, made inappropriate sexual advances etc.) this would be a matter of conduct and should be reported to the Baptist Union's Ministries Team. SCBA Regional Ministers act as local representatives of BUGB, so initial contact can be made through them. In the event that a Regional Minister is not available, you should contact the offices of the Baptist Union directly.

We recognise that the dividing line between competence and conduct may not always be clear and there may be some overlap between the two. If you are in any doubt contact a Regional Minister, or the offices of the Baptist Union, who will be able to advise you further. Please remember that our Union and Regional Associations only have direct jurisdiction over Accredited Baptist Ministers.

Please remember that a minister is first and foremost an individual, so before making a formal complaint, please try to resolve matters by seeking a personal meeting. We recognise that this might not always be possible, or you may feel uncomfortable doing so. If you feel you need to make a complaint to the SCBA, please make this in writing and, using the outline above, try to provide:

- (i) An outline of the events that you wish to make a complaint about
- (ii) An explanation of why you feel these events give cause for complaint
- (iii) An account of any attempts you have made to resolve this, and what the outcome of this has been.

If you have concerns over a safeguarding matter

If your reason for complaining also gives you cause to believe that young people or vulnerable adults may be at risk, you should immediately contact your church's safeguarding officer. This individual should be clearly identified by the church and their details on display in the premises in which you regularly meet. If you do not know who your Safeguarding Officer is, we would advise that you seek out this information irrespective of whether or not you are seeking to make a complaint at this time.

If your concerns relate to a minister, please contact the SCBA office or the SCBA Safeguarding Officer, irrespective of whether that minister is an Accredited Baptist Minister. All initial contacts will be treated in strictest confidence, so if you are in doubt, please contact us.

If you believe that a church has acted in breach of its Trust Deed

SCBA is not a Trust Body, so does not bear responsibility for Trust related matters. Most Baptist Churches have appointed the Baptist Union Corporation as their trustees. BUC operates from the Baptist Union's offices in Didcot. Churches may have private trustees, or have appointed an alternative Trust Body. If you believe that a church is in breach of trust you should ascertain who its external trustees are and make appropriate representation to that body.

In summary:

- The SCBA does not have direct jurisdiction over our member churches – wherever possible complaints should be resolved within the local church community.
- The SCBA should only be involved where it is believed that a church has not adequately dealt with a complaint. In such circumstances our role is one of facilitation unless there is a case of inappropriate conduct on behalf of an Accredited Baptist Minister or a situation that places young people or vulnerable adults at risk.
- If you believe that a church is in breach of its Trust Deed, and you are unable to resolve matters through engagement with the church, you should contact its external trustees.
- Safeguarding matters should be raised with the church's Safeguarding Officer in the first instance.
- If you believe that an Accredited Baptist Minister has engaged in inappropriate conduct, you should contact a Regional Minister or the Ministries Team at the Baptist Union offices.