

# **FORMAL PARISHIONER COMPLAINT PROCEDURE**

## **(Vestry Approved 1/6/2026)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This Formal Parishioner Complaint Procedure is a structured process established to support the safety, dignity, and well-being of all individuals participating in our church community. It is designed to provide parishioners with a confidential and respectful means of raising serious concerns, such as harassment, discrimination, or other egregious conduct, that may affect their ability to remain engaged in fellowship. This procedure reflects the church's commitment to fostering an inclusive environment where every person, regardless of sexuality, race, color, ethnicity, national origin, gender identity or expression, age, or ability, are treated with respect and care.

This process is intended for substantial matters that require formal attention and resolution. It is not a venue for general dissatisfaction, minor interpersonal disagreements, or informal grievances that do not meet the threshold of serious misconduct. It is also not a substitute for pastoral care or spiritual guidance, nor is it a public forum, so complainants are asked to refrain from sharing details publicly while the procedure is underway. While this is not a legal proceeding, certain complaints may be referred to the Diocese or local law enforcement if necessary.

Ultimately, this procedure exists to strengthen our community by ensuring that serious concerns are addressed thoughtfully, fairly, and in a manner that preserves the integrity of our fellowship. Parishioners are encouraged to approach this process with discernment, and the church remains committed to supporting all parties involved with compassion and confidentiality.

## **CONTEXT**

St. Mark's seeks to provide a safe place and community to those who participate in our fellowship. Recent developments in our country's cultural history have challenged us to be more attuned to harassment and sexual harassment complaints, and to recognize that any individual, whether female, male, transgender, non-binary, or non-gender identified, or based on their race, color, ethnicity, national origin, age, or disability has the inherent right to the safety and the integrity of their person while in our fellowship.

Therefore, to strengthen our community, St. Mark's is providing parishioners with a process to provide critical feedback on serious issues that have the potential to separate them from the community.

The threshold for complaints is an individual judgment based on these stated goals. However, if the complaint is deemed not actionable or is outside the scope of this policy, the Complainant will be notified by the Senior Warden or Rector.

To allow the process to proceed smoothly, we request that Complainants refrain from publicizing their concerns during the process. That is, other than disclosing concerns to seek private support (e.g., from their partner, friends, or counselor), we ask that Complainants not discuss them on social media or in public forums.

## **OVERVIEW**

- The Formal Complaint Procedure may consist of five components, as is necessary to resolve the complaint:
  1. Formal Complaint submitted to Senior Warden or Rector.
  2. Lead(s), Rector, Senior Warden, and Personnel Committee Chair (as needed) meet with the Complainant and may gather additional information.
  3. Lead(s), Rector, Senior Warden and Personnel Committee Chair (as needed) meet with the Subject.

4. Clergy mediation meeting with the Complainant and Subject.
5. The Senior Warden and/or Rector determines any actions.

- Penalties are assessed for egregious offenses or repeat offenders (i.e., those who have been sanctioned or warned about their behavior). Certain alleged behavior may warrant referral to local law enforcement authorities and/or the Episcopal Diocese of Washington (the Diocese).
- Records are maintained for seven years after the conclusion of the mediation meeting.
- The matter and its results will be assessed after one year.

## **STEP 1: INITIATING A COMPLAINT**

- Submit a complaint in writing to the Senior Warden, at [Swarden@stmarks.net](mailto:Swarden@stmarks.net) or by mail to the church. If the Senior Warden is the subject of the complaint, then the complaint must be submitted to the Rector.
- Submit a complaint as soon as possible, preferably within 30 days of the incident. If you submit it after 30 days, provide the rationale for the delay in submitting the complaint.
- Complaints regarding ordained clergy (priests or deacons) must be made to the Episcopal Diocese of Washington by writing to one of the intake officers ([intakeofficer1@edow.org](mailto:intakeofficer1@edow.org) or [intakeofficer2@edow.org](mailto:intakeofficer2@edow.org)). More information about the Episcopal Church's clergy disciplinary ("Title IV") process is at <https://www.titleiv.org/>. If necessary, the Senior Warden will submit the complaint to the intake officer.

## **STEP 2: MEET WITH THE COMPLAINANT AND OTHERS**

- Within one week of receiving the written complaint, the Rector, Senior Warden, and Personnel Committee Chair, as needed (or their designees) will schedule a meeting with the Complainant.

- The Complainant will have the opportunity to state their grievance/issue and to have a friend, witness, or other supporter present. The Complainant must provide prior notice if they intend to have an attorney present.
- If the Rector, Senior Warden, and Personnel Committee Chair deem that the complaint is actionable, then a written recommendation will be provided to the Rector and/or other clergy (Assigned Clergy) for investigation and/or mediation. (If the Senior Warden is the Subject, the Rector and Personnel Committee Chair may consult with the Vestry and/or seek the assistance from the Diocese.)
- If the Rector, Senior Warden, and Personnel Committee Chair conclude that the complaint is not actionable or falls outside the scope of the policy, they will notify the Complainant and explain why the grievance/issue does not meet the policy's threshold. They will also provide pastoral care as necessary.
- If the complaint is actionable, the Rector, Senior Warden, and/or Personnel Committee Chair as appropriate) shall:
  - Determine who will deal with the matter ("Lead(s)"), who may be one or more of them and/or others in the Parish, and the next steps.
  - Inform the Complainant of the next steps and ask that the Complainant keep the matter confidential.
- As necessary, the Lead(s), Senior Warden (or Rector if Senior Warden), Personnel Committee Chair, and/or Assigned Clergy may discuss the matter with others, e.g., witnesses. In doing so, they shall:
  - Disclose only as much information is necessary to ask questions.
  - Request that the other person maintain confidentiality.

### **STEP 3: MEETING WITH THE SUBJECT**

- If the complaint is actionable, generally within two weeks of the initial meeting with the Complainant, the Lead(s) will

inform the Subject of the complaint and provide the Subject with an opportunity to respond in writing.

- The Subject's written response (if any) must be received prior to the meeting with the Subject.
- The Subject will have an opportunity to respond in person to the complaint. They may invite friend(s), witness(es), or other support to the meeting. The Subject must provide prior notice and full disclosure if a supporting individual is their legal counsel.

#### **STEP 4: CLERGY MEDIATION MEETING**

- When appropriate, the Assigned Clergy will meet with the Complainant and the Subject to mediate the complaint. Prior to the meeting, each party will write down their desired result, which will be shared with all participating.
- The Mediation should have the overarching goal to “preserve our community” and for the “respect of every individual” involved in the mediation of the complaint.
- The Assigned Clergy will assist the parties in reaching a resolution of their conflict.
  - If the parties come to an agreement and the Assigned Clergy believes the agreement is in the interests of the Parish, she or he shall inform the parties and ensure that the agreement is clearly stated in writing and that both parties and the Assigned Clergy sign it.
  - If no resolution is achieved, then the Assigned Clergy shall advise both parties to limit further interaction and inform them that the church will retain a record of the matter.
- The Assigned Clergy will provide the Personnel Committee with a written summary and/or verbal briefing of the mediation and the end result.

## STEP 5: PARISH ACTIONS

- If the Parish believes the Subject has made disparaging, unwelcome, or harassing comments and/or has engaged in egregious or concerning conduct, the Parish designate the Subject as an “Offender” and may impose any of these sanctions:
  - Notify the Offender that further incidents will necessitate further action at the Parish level and potential referrals to local law enforcement authorities and/or the Diocese.
  - Prohibit the Offender from worshipping and/or attending any St. Mark’s social functions (pub lunches, Parish retreat, picnics, dances, etc.).
  - Bar the Offender from the St. Mark’s property.
  - Prohibit the Offender from being with children at St. Mark’s.
  - Refer the behavior to the Diocese or law enforcement authorities.
  - Impose other requirements as necessary.
- Some transgressions may be handled with a warning, counseling, additional mediation, recommendations for personal emotional work, etc.
- All Formal Complaint Procedure documents are confidential and access is limited to the Clergy, Senior Warden, Personnel Committee, and Vestry Counsel. The Rector is responsible for maintaining them in a secure place for seven (7) years.