

Diocese of Exeter - Safer Touch Guidance

(with acknowledgement to Truro diocese for original template)

This guidance is issued under the Church of England's [Promoting a Safer Church](#) policy and should be read in conjunction with the over-arching policy principles and the [Code of Safer Working Practice](#), as well as the updated [Equality Act \(2010\) legislation](#) on sexual harassment.

Introduction and scope of guidance:

All individuals within the Diocese of Exeter are entitled to worship in an environment where they feel safe, secure and respected. The diocese dedicates itself to ensuring that no-one feels threatened or disrespected in terms of physical contact between themselves or another person.

The Safer Touch guidance has been created with the aim of ensuring that all clergy, officers and volunteers are aware of their responsibilities in terms of appropriate and inappropriate touch. The guidance explains safer touch as well as raising awareness of the boundaries involving touch and how individuals may be affected by this. Advice is provided around common scenarios and how to seek support should inappropriate touch occur or if an individual has a safeguarding concern.

What is Safer touch?

It is crucial the Church considers the boundaries of appropriate touch to make sure that the physical contact which occurs in day-to-day interactions and worship is appropriate and ensures that all individuals feel safe. Sympathetic attention, encouragement and appropriate physical contact are needed by children and adults. However, abusers can use touch to 'normalise' physical contact which then becomes abusive. Touch should never be invasive, humiliating or flirtatious. All clergy, office holders, staff and volunteers should remain vigilant in regard to the behaviour of others and contribute to creating an environment which makes it challenging for individuals to use touch which is abusive, invasive and traumatising. It is also important to recognise that this guidance co-exists alongside an individual person's boundaries to touch and does not over-ride the right that all have to autonomy over their own body.

Roles and Responsibilities:

All clergy, employees, officers, and volunteers are responsible for:

- understanding and maintaining an awareness of the boundaries involving physical contact.
- ensuring that they engage in touch only if/when absolutely necessary or appropriate to do so.
- ensuring that no person feels threatened or unsafe at a church as a result of inappropriate touch

- creating and promoting a culture in which an individual's wishes and feelings in regard to touch are respected
- ensuring touch is consensual

General guidelines for safe touch:

- In most situations it is appropriate to ask if you can touch someone. This may for example be requesting if they are happy for you to straighten their tie or brush an insect off their sleeve.
- It is crucial that individuals consider where they are touching an individual and whether it may be construed as sexual, abusive, offensive or inappropriate.
- Individuals must maintain an awareness that some people may actively dislike touch and being touched may be traumatic for them. This may particularly be the case for survivors of abuse or those with sensory sensitivities.
- When discussing touch with a larger group of people, it is advisable to pre-empt issues and agree a signal which indicates they do not wish to be touched. This helps to create a culture where respect for an individual's preference is upheld.
- As a general rule, the use of touch between adults in positions of responsibility and those with whom they are working or volunteering should be kept to the minimum.

Safer touch with adults:

Adults generally have capacity to consent to touch. It is everyone's responsibility to create an environment where people feel able to decline touch. On occasions, some adults may require physical and mental support, therefore:

- Individuals can allow people to 'hold/link arms to help with travel and stability.
- People should be discouraged from touching each other's faces, torso and legs.
- Individuals should discourage others from sitting on their lap and instead offer to sit side by side.
- When considering hugging, always ask permission. Be mindful of your body position and keep it public. A hug in the context of a group can be perceived differently to a hug behind closed doors.
- Avoid touch if the person needing support is very distressed as they may be unlikely to tolerate it.
- In some roles, such as pastoral ministry, touch of the hands or the forearm may be appropriate when supporting the elderly, ill or those experiencing loneliness.
- Awareness should be maintained around consent and that this may change between visits.

Safer touch with children:

Some physical contact with children, particularly younger children, can be appropriate to support their emotional and physical needs, or to prevent risk of injury. The following guidelines regarding touching are suggested:

- Touch should be in response to a child's needs and not related to the worker's needs. It should be age appropriate, welcoming and generally initiated by the child, not the adult.
- Individuals should respond warmly to a child who needs comforting but make sure there are other adults around.
- Allow the child to determine the degree of physical contact with others except in exceptional circumstances (e.g. when they need medical attention).
- Care should be taken if younger children wish to sit on your lap and individuals should be aware of their body position. Older children should be discouraged from sitting on laps and you can offer to sit side by side.
- There may be times when a young child may need physical guiding. In these situations, it may be appropriate to hold their hand.
- Individuals should ensure that the child and parents/carers are aware of any activity that requires physical contact and of its nature before the activity takes place, with parental consent and child assent obtained in advance.
- Activities such as play fighting are not appropriate as they may blur boundaries between adults in supportive roles and children in their care. They may also act as a cover for abusive practices.
- Supervising adults should maintain an awareness of inappropriate behaviours between children including inappropriate touch which may indicate issues of child-on-child abuse.
- It is important to note that parents/carers should be allowed to meet the care needs of their child without needing to follow these safer touch procedures (such as nappy changing). However, if you have a safeguarding concern about the relationship between a parent/close family member and a child, please do refer to the Diocesan Safeguarding Team through the routes described at the end of this guidance.
- Staff and volunteers should strictly adhere to Policy on toileting and intimate care

Safer touch for choirs:

- Due to the nature of church buildings, care should be taken when arranging choir practises, rehearsals and tutoring to ensure policies in regard to lone working and working with children in enclosed spaces are observed.
- When congratulating individuals during and after performances, care needs to be taken to follow the guidance discussed above in terms of consent to touch. Establish a culture for congratulating, such as handshakes, rather than hugging.
- Guidance above, on touch for adults and for children, will also be relevant to choirs.

Appropriate touch during worship:

- During activities such as passing the peace, anointing the sick or the dying there may be a pastoral and liturgical requirement for touch and such touch should be agreed if practicable. Clergy should

remind the congregation that this can be done in a variety of ways and promote consent to touch on a regular basis.

- In part of services, such as Eucharist, clergy may choose to touch a person's head to give a blessing, however others may not wish to do this. It is important to allow individuals the option not to touch/be touched should they wish this.
- Survivors of abuse, especially church-based abuse may benefit from the opportunity to openly express their preferences around touch and worship to help ensure that the church is responding in a Trauma-Informed way to meet their needs.

Safer touch and emergency situations/first aid:

It is crucial that the chance of accidents are minimised through careful risk management and de-escalation of incidents. However, there may be times in emergency situations where quick reactions are required to prevent an accident or for the administration of emergency first aid, where permission to touch cannot be obtained in the moment. Typical situations may entail:

- catching someone's arm to prevent them falling.
- moving someone quickly to prevent them being hit by a falling object or another person.
- providing emergency first aid where someone is bleeding heavily or is unconscious
- preventing a child running out into a road
- preventing someone from harming themselves or others
- removing/guiding someone from a room or building.
- Should you suddenly need to touch or move a person quickly for their own safety, it is important to explain to the person why you took the action you did and check that they are not injured.

Safer touch and use of language:

Alongside touch it is crucial to remember that what is said verbally, alongside body language can impact on the interpretation of touch. When interacting with others:

- Be aware of respecting personal space.
- Do not flirt, use innuendo or suggestive language.
- Use people's names rather than terms such as 'gorgeous' or 'beautiful'.
- Be aware of using derogatory language especially that relates to disabilities, sexual orientation, race, religion and age.

When you have concerns- reporting inappropriate touch:

Clergy, officers and volunteers at all levels must take responsibility for monitoring one another in the area of physical contact. They should be encouraged to challenge and report inappropriate behaviour. Concerns about possible abuse or inappropriate behaviour should be reported to your Parish Safeguarding Representative or the [Diocesan Safeguarding Team](#).

Version:	Name of Author:	Date of Review:
V1	Costa Nassaris, Diocesan Safeguarding Officer	April 2025

V2	Costa Nassaris, DSO, after BSM feedback	May 2025