

How does The Episcopal Church deal with clergy misconduct?

“Title IV” refers to The Episcopal Church’s canons (or rules) that address potential misconduct by the church’s clergy, that is, its bishops, priests, and deacons. It defines conduct that is required of clergy as well as conduct that is prohibited. It also sets out a process for responding when misconduct is alleged and provides a variety of measures for dealing with the situation, informed by the church’s Christian values. Title IV helps to ensure the fitness of the church’s bishops, priests, and deacons within a framework that promotes healing, repentance, forgiveness, restitution, justice, amendment of life, and reconciliation.

How do I make a complaint?

Any person who has information about potential clergy misconduct may provide those allegations to an “intake officer.” Each diocese has at least one intake officer assigned to receive allegations about misconduct by priests and deacons. In addition, there is an intake officer who receives allegations about bishops.

What happens once a complaint is made?

The intake officer performs an initial inquiry and decides whether, applying the standards for evaluating the allegations, the matter should be dismissed outright or considered by a referral panel that includes the intake officer, the bishop, and the president of the diocesan disciplinary board. Those three persons—the “Reference Panel” —then decide whether to conclude the matter with a pastoral response or send it on for further action. Further action can include mediation, investigation, or consideration by other panels. At any time, the clergyperson can reach an agreement with the bishop to end the matter. During the early stages of a matter, the intake officer is the primary contact for the involved people, providing monthly updates. The large majority of matters are concluded by dismissal, conclusion with pastoral response, or an agreement with the bishop. A small minority proceed to conference panels (informal hearing) or hearing panels (formal hearing). These processes are time-consuming and both emotionally and financially burdensome (although sometimes necessary).

What protective measures can be taken while a matter is pending?

At any time while a Title IV process is unfolding, the bishop may issue temporary orders to the clergyperson whose conduct is at issue. These orders—pastoral directions, restrictions on ministry, and orders of administrative leave—typically expire once the Title IV process is concluded. The bishop may also issue a pastoral direction to the clergy member as part of the resolution of the process.

Are there other ways to address conflicts with the clergy?

In order to fall within Title IV, misconduct must be “material and substantial or of clear and weighty importance to the ministry of the Church.” However, the church is invested in addressing issues about clergy behavior and interpersonal relationships and other mechanisms are available for addressing these concerns. The presiding bishop’s office under Bishop Rowe is investing significant resources to develop such mechanisms with the aim of making them available throughout the church.