

Don't read it! Oxford college tries to silence defence of dean

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An Oxford college mired in a lengthy, acrimonious dispute with its dean has banned its governing body from reading the findings of a tribunal that exonerated him.

On Sunday evening all 60 members of the governing body of Christ Church were emailed an unredacted copy of the judgment delivered in secret last summer by Sir Andrew Smith, a retired High Court judge.

The emailed copy was sent by the Rev Jonathan Aitken, the former cabinet minister who was once an undergraduate at the college. He is sympathetic towards the Very Rev Professor Martyn Percy, the dean who was suspended in 2018 for "immoral, scandalous and disgraceful conduct".

The row dates back to 2016 when a man was stabbed by his girlfriend, a Christ Church undergraduate. Dr Percy came to believe that the protocols for safeguarding college members, including those aged under 18, were inadequate or non-existent. He proposed setting up a new job descriptions giving the academics in charge a clear set of responsibilities and training.

This met with considerable resistance from academics and relations deteriorated. They were also under strain over a request for a pay rise from Dr Percy, who said he felt overworked and his £90,900 salary was out of step with what other college leaders earned.

At an employment tribunal, it transpired that the "immoral" behaviour referred to the request for a pay rise. At the tribunal, Sir Andrew found he had not been guilty of any such misconduct and the college reinstated him, only for the row to blow up again last autumn.

The college is refusing to pay the majority of the dean's legal expenses, running to £400,000. Mediation is taking place but is believed to be mak-

ing little progress. The dean is taking the college to an employment tribunal expected to be heard next year. He has been backed by his trade union, Unite.

The latest twist came on Sunday. Within half an hour of Mr Aitken sending his email, Geraldine Johnson, the senior governing body member, had emailed her colleagues asking they delete it unopened. She wrote: "Please immediately delete the email from Mr Aitken, including all attachments, and confirm this by return to the senior censor's email address. It is extremely important that we retain our united front on this matter and that no one opens the attachment, however tempting this may be. We should not let an external individual affect the proper governance of Christ Church in this way."

It is believed that some recipients had by then already opened the email and attachments. The appendices to the judgment included correspondence by the dean's detractors who denounced him in offensive terms.

Originally, the tribunal findings were circulated to the parties involved and the Charity Commission.

The squabble has intensified following an investigation published by this newspaper on Saturday that suggested the campaign against the dean was being orchestrated by a small number of his senior colleagues and that it dated back not to the pay dispute but Mr Percy's attempts to improve the safeguarding of students.

Christ Church later posted on its website that *The Times* account was "deliberately misleading" and "simply not true". Others have praised the investigation. In a letter to *The Times* today Mr Aitken wrote that the "civil war" will not be resolved "until the silent majority" of its governing body "votes to correct the mistakes of its present leadership".

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