

Opening up some Theology around Safeguarding for Wells Cathedral

Any who have experience of abuse may wish to engage with this thinking only with support. If this describes you, please contact the Canon Precentor (Tim Stevens), the Chief Operating Officer (Nerys Watts), or the Cathedral Safeguarding Officer (Patricia Hellier), or consider all options open to you at [Safeguarding - Wells Cathedral](#).

Anyone who has considered the impact of abuse (in its many forms) on victims or survivors will begin to recognize the weighty, albeit often uncomfortable, shared responsibilities for safeguarding in a church context. While we have Safeguarding Leads, and the Cathedral Safeguarding Advisory Panel, we all have the responsibility to be aware of what may be going on around us. Attending church may be for some a comfort from the outside world, but we can't separate our lives in church and beyond church. Christians are called to live in the world (even if not of the world), and to be fully human. Victims or survivors and perpetrators, as well as bystanders, any who are in some way or another caught up in abusive behaviours, are all human. To be human, and recognize the humanity of others, is essential to our Christian calling, and echoes our values of care, respect, and welcome for all.

Beyond safeguarding training which many of us will have done (perhaps with varying feelings of reluctance if we are to be honest about it), any theology of safeguarding in an Anglican context in 2025 will begin well with considering what is already out there. The Faith and Order Commission for the Church of England in 2017 published "Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the aftermath of abuse",¹ which offers some basic reflections still relevant today in the light of the Makin Review (November 2024).² The media, while a complex field of material with which we need to be discerning, can sometimes offer helpful comment on the situation in which our C of E finds herself in the winter of 2024-2025.³ What follows here is some brief and nascent reflection on a few phrases that have caught my attention.⁴

"Religion can make a context conducive to bullying, harassment and manipulation." Stephen Cherry considers grooming as a chilling spiritual abuse where "charm and charisma" in leadership can take people towards "compliance, deference, and obedience". But this may not only be something for which church leaders, charm, and charisma alone are responsible. How often have we sung the beautiful carol *Once in Royal David's City*, and not thought about the couplet "Christian children all must be / Mild, obedient, good as he"? The Church, perhaps with a Victorian inheritance of social order, has confused *goodness* and *obedience*. St. Luke tells us that the child Jesus himself acted in a way that parents might have labelled "disobedient", and certainly Luke after the episode proclaims Jesus "obedient" only after this – a translation that sells short a sense of Jesus being passively put under subjection to Mary and Joseph.⁵ Encouraging "obedience" as a moral virtue in the Church makes us all vulnerable to control *but it arises only from limited and selective Biblical interpretation*.

¹ [Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the aftermath of abuse - CHP 2017 - link to online version](#). This was a companion piece to their 2016 publication "The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church" [The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church - CHP 2016 - link to online version](#). Other publications by the Faith and Order Commission are available at the link [Faith and Order Commission | The Church of England](#).

² See also the recent Jay Report (October 2022): [The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse – HC 720](#) and the Wilkinson Report (November 2023): [isb-review-report-30-november-2023.pdf](#). The Makin Review can be found at [independent-learning-lessons-review-john-smyth-qc-november-2024.pdf](#)

³ *The New Statesman* has run a number of thought-provoking articles in recent months. On this subject, see for example Madeleine Davies' [The Notebook](#) in 15-21 November 2024 edition; Stephen Cherry's [Another Voice](#) in 8 December 2024 - 9 January 2025 edition.

⁴ I am more than aware that some in our community, perhaps still recovering from recent years, may find some of these thoughts either resonant or uncomfortable or both. Please reach out and seek help if any of this is troubling to you.

⁵ Luke 2:41-52. The translation "obedient" is in both NIVUK and NRSV amongst others.

“Naivety, negligence and complicity have let the Church become an arena of abuse.”⁶ Communities which proclaim redemption, hope, and forgiveness, are ripe for exploitation of the *naivety* which is the risk of inclusive love. Interpretation of Scripture suggesting, for instance, anger is wrong (rather than that emotions are healthy, and unchecked behaviour stemming from emotions is where risk really lies) is *negligent*:⁷ we need to be thoughtful about what we are passing on to future generations, and anger can be an essential part of self-protection which the Church removes from the “good” “Christian”. *Complicity* goes hand in hand with an aversion to thinking about these difficult areas – a fear of witnessing something untoward, a denial of any thought that questions the *status quo*, perhaps a bystander’s own feeling of powerlessness. The survivors’ statement “All I needed was just one person to act”⁸ is chilling, and might helpfully direct us towards seeing our own need for education in these challenging areas, as well as steering the Church towards a greater honesty about our human fears, vulnerabilities, and needs – in wonderful contrast with the Divine.

Honesty, truth, and authenticity are recurrently seen as sorely needed in the Church. “Trust from those with less power needs to be met by responsibility from those with more power and more authority. *Trust depends on truthfulness...*”⁹ while “dimensions of abuse... [include] *imbalance of power, betrayal of trust and habits of deceit* on the part of the perpetrator, including self-deceit.”¹⁰ Painfully, victims may themselves become abusers, shaped by the experience of abuse, and separating themselves from the truth that such behaviours are abusive. *What, for us, hinders the Johannine truth that will “set us free”?*¹¹

If we are honest with ourselves, perhaps we yearn for simple answers, for faith to have black and white clarity, so are drawn to binaries (light/darkness, good/bad, male/female, orthodox/heretical, etc.). But to impose binary thinking on fellow human beings risks polarizing individuals, and we can risk choosing either denial or demonization, neither of which does justice to the nuance of a situation or the complexity of individuals, relationships, and communities. Denial may seem the easy option, the blind eye, the support of the person whose power gives us power; demonization may seem the option thereafter to set us apart from denial. By contrast, one genius of Anglicanism is the “middle way”, and here in the Cathedral we do generally seek to be “broad Church” in our inclusivity. Yet following such a calling takes hard personal – emotional, spiritual, psychological – work: being curious about nuance, and not accepting easy answers.

Here we begin to open up thinking around how abuse happens in Church: beyond training, *what can we do about it?* The “depressingly familiar” themes that the Makin Review raised may be summarized as “*abuse of power, deference, the exploitation of theology*”.¹² Good theology, careful study of and thoughtfulness about our God, will go hand in hand with self-awareness, reflecting on our divine-human relationship. Asking questions, stopping to think or notice, not simply accepting what we are told, not regarding the Church as *God*, being wise about the power of others *and recognizing and exercising our own agency, responsibility, and power* – these are all things we can do to make our Church and Cathedral a safer place. If we attend to our own hearts and the heart of our community – how we feel and what we do because of our feelings, what we need and what we want, what we think and what we believe – we will be better able to notice our own vulnerabilities, our own power for *healthy challenge* (avoiding abusive behaviours in response that seek influence or control, or weaponize safeguarding), as well as noticing warning signs of abuse.

“What can I give him, Poor as I am... What I can, I give him: Give my heart.”¹³

⁶ *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, p. 12.

⁷ E.g. 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 4:26, 31, 6:4; Col. 3:8.

⁸ Jay Report, Part F.

⁹ *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹¹ John 8:32.

¹² *New Statesman*, 15-21 Nov 24 edition.

¹³ In the *Bleak Midwinter*, text by Christina Rossetti, 1872