

## Theology of Safeguarding

### Summary

#### 1. Introduction

- a. 'particular attention has been given to the experiences and insights of those who have experienced abuse' – this is yet to 'become part of the fabric of church life' (1.4)
- b. Language: (1.6)  
'people who have experienced abuse'  
'people who abuse'

#### 2. Theological roots

- a. 'affirming the dignity and worth of all people' and safeguarding as part of that (2.2-2.3) within the 'body of Christ'.
- b. Recognising that within the 'body of Christ' comes a 'costly challenge...part of which is taking responsibility for past and present behaviour and being accountable'.

#### 3. Abuse and The Human Condition

- a. How abuse inflicts long lasting trauma and "tears at the fabric one's soul" (3.1-3.5)
- b. Power in the life of the church  
'The trauma of abuse is bound up with abuse of power' (3.6)
- c. The nature of spiritual abuse (3.7-3.8)
- d. Abuse as sin – 'alienation from God...one another...the whole created order...embodied in the failure to flourish as God intends' (3.9)
- e. Repentance of the church (3.12)

#### 4. Theological thinking and how it is used

- a. Paying attention to experience (4.3)
- b. The role of the Bible and the need for critical interpretation (4.4)  
"Christians need to reflect continually on how they draw conclusions from the Bible and how they appropriate life-giving meaning from it. It is not Christian reflection, Christian theology or Christian Bible study to take

everything in the Bible at face value without such interpretative work.”

(4.4.2)

- c. Language about God (4.5)
  - ‘Father’ language, and God beyond gender (4.5.3)
  - Hierarchical images and God as ‘all-powerful’, and how that is reflected in views of human authority (4.5.4)
- d. The Cross and Suffering (4.6)
  - Recognising the centrality of thinking about suffering and the cross as ‘central to Christian belief’ (4.6.1)
  - ‘notions of obedience and the place of suffering...have contributed to abusive behaviour and the contexts which perpetuate it.’ (4.6.4-5)
  - Atonement, and ‘separating’ the Trinity (4.6.7)
  - ‘cosmic child abuse’ – Steve Chalke (4.6.8)
  - ‘In contexts of abuse, coercion and control, neither sacrifice nor suffering can ever be understood as redemptive. Any language of self-denial can only properly be used if there is self-affirmation, self-esteem and the possibility of alternative choices.’ (4.6.10)
- e. The use of symbols in the context of worship (4.7)
  - Particular attention is paid to the significance of anything involving touch for those who have experienced abuse.
- f. Life-giving resources for theological reflection (4.8)
  - A number of points which show how Bible and Christian tradition can be channels of grace to those who have experienced abuse.

## 5. Failure to challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour and maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries

- a. Critique of the Methodist Church, and the continuing need to change practice.
- b. ‘A culture of ‘niceness’ where people are not to be upset’ (5.3)
- c. ‘Those who have experienced abuse have often experienced a community which not only does not want to hear their pain and hurt, but also silences them.’ (5.6)
- d. ‘Challenging harmful behaviour...is part of discipleship.’ (5.7)
- e. Reasons why inappropriate behaviour is not challenged (5.9)
- f. ‘Building a community of love and grace is transforming, hard work.’ (5.10)

## 6. Welcoming people who have experienced abuse

- a. The difficulty of the idea that ‘all are welcome’ (6.1)
- b. Experience of abuse has long-lasting effects, and is disturbing and difficult to hear about. (6.2.1-2)
- c. Working to get away from language of ‘victimhood’. (6.2.5-6)
- d. ‘It is important to recognise that welcome for all does not mean that there are no boundaries to the Church’s inclusivity and hospitality.’ (6.3.3)
- e. Including ‘those who have abused’ can exclude ‘those who have experienced abuse’ (6.3.4)
- f. Reconsideration of Pastoral Care as inclusive of the call to justice. (6.4)

## 7. Grappling with Power

- a. Recognising that power is a part of human relating, and that all hold power in some ways.
- b. 'Honesty is required about how power is used and misused within the Church.' (7.4)
- c. God's power and God's intimacy.

## 8. Forgiveness and change

- a. 3 misunderstandings to be avoided (8.4)
  - Forgiveness does not involve forgetting behaviour that has caused harm.
  - Forgiveness does not mean cancelling debts and obligations but 'may well mean that the person who has abused has a greater sense of obligation than before.'
  - Forgiveness does not mean treating a person who has abused 'as wholly reformed and good.'
- b. Repentance can be a long slow process.
- c. Forgiveness, when it happens, involves the re-establishing of trust, and 'the responsibility to change behaviour lies with the person who has abused.' (8.7)
- d. Forgiveness and reconciliation happen within the context of God's redemptive work, and individual reconciliation 'is not always possible of desirable. God forgives in order to release and bring wholeness. Any Christian understanding of forgiveness has to recognise what makes for wholeness and what does not in different contexts.' (8.8)
- e. Forgiveness as a gift of God.

## 9. Concluding comments and any resolutions

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### Questions For Church Councils and Church groups

‘The experiences and insights of those who have experienced abuse [is yet to become] part of the fabric of church life’ (1.4)

Within your own church:

- Does the statement reflect the situation?
- What challenges are there in addressing this?
- Can you identify a next step in ‘affirming the dignity and worth of all people’ (2.2) with particular regard to those who have experienced abuse?

The report explores ways in which themes of sacrifice, pain and vulnerability need to be explored with reference to the experience of those who have experienced abuse.

Within your own church:

- In what ways are such themes explored in your worship life (e.g. in preaching, song words, prayers, symbolism)?
- What questions does this raise for how worship is experienced by those who have experienced abuse?
- Can you identify one thing your church could do in its worship life which would help to explore these themes in a helpful way for those who have experienced abuse?

The report refers to ‘a culture of ‘niceness’ where people are not to be upset’ (5.3)

Within your own church:

- Does the statement reflect the situation?
- What challenges are there in addressing this?
- Can you identify a next step so that ‘challenging harmful behaviour...is [recognised as] part of discipleship.’ (5.7)?

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### Tim Carter’s Podcast

[The Theology of Safeguarding podcast](#)

18 minutes long.