

Towards truth and accountability

I hope we're all agreed that change is needed. Our practice, our culture, our organisation together created the environment where the dystopia described by Makin and other safeguarding reviews could happen - from abuse to cover-up, inaction to irresponsibility, indifference to inhumanity. We can't go on as we are.

The question we need to ask is 'What change?'. 'Independence of safeguarding' is offered as a mantra that will solve all our ills. But just calling for 'independence' and 'culture change' won't bring the transformation that's needed. *What* should 'independence' actually mean? *How* can we change the culture that has brought us to where we are?

Illumination is offered by the statement that was issued by campaigner Andrew Graystone on the 7 November on behalf of a number of victims and survivors of Smyth. Two of its main themes are these. Firstly, that 'in many, but not all, dioceses up and down the country, there is much excellent local safeguarding work going on.' Secondly, that 'the Church continues to engage by utterly inappropriate means with victims and survivors in 2024. It has shown no interest in addressing this throughout the last 40 + years.'

The change that is needed is therefore twofold. Firstly, to scrutinise and to make standard the current good practice happening in many dioceses. Secondly, to find completely different ways to engage with victims and survivors whose abuse happened and was reported years ago and who have been serially retraumatised by the Church's mishandling, delay, obfuscation and disregard of their cries for justice and the truth.

Supporting and ensuring good practice in dioceses is by far the simpler to achieve. An acceleration and strengthening of the existing system of independent audit of dioceses is urgently required. Supportive but non-negotiable assistance must then be given to dioceses who are underperforming both to ensure effective work in safeguarding prevention (through training and policy implementation) and the prompt, timely and humane management of all cases. I suspect that one important driver of the differences that exist between dioceses relates to disparities in resourcing. National standards of safeguarding provision need to be determined and then funded. The service a diocese gives shouldn't be dependent upon the wealth of its congregations or the historic endowment it happens to have, but paid for from the income generated by the Church Commissioners and disbursed as part of the Triennium Funding Agreement.

So called 'operational independence' is not only no remedy, it is a wrecking ball to hurl at systems that both survivors and auditors see in many places as already working well. The ensuing 'reorganisation' it would require would destroy hard won and effective working relationships, demoralise and lead to the departure of existing officers and staff and generate chaos at a time when we need local systems to be working at their very best. That isn't to say that independent scrutiny of existing safeguarding work *is not* needed. A robust

and integrated diocesan safeguarding structure should be strengthened by the establishment of an ombudsman-style system that is able freely, impartially and rapidly to investigate and resolve complaints, identify systemic issues and provide feedback that improves services and practice.

Finding completely different ways to engage with victims and survivors whose concerns have been long-term and systemically mishandled is the much harder task. Einstein spoke disparagingly of 'repeating the same actions again and again expecting a different outcome'. Such a statement does not begin to reflect the rage, disbelief and despair of those who reported their abuse many years ago and whose long-term complaints have been comprehensively mishandled by those named in the victims' statement – 'Church House, the National Safeguarding Team, Lambeth & Bishopthorpe palaces, the Church of England hierarchy of bishops, Archbishops' Council and General Synod'. If, post Makin, the same cast of characters seek to address the long-term complaints of the same group of people using the same methods that have failed for the last forty years and more – even if they are independently overseen - we are on the road to nowhere.

We need a radically different solution. The way forward that I propose for our consideration and debate is one of 'Truth and Accountability'. Backed by a comprehensive and generous redress scheme, such a process would be modelled on approaches such as those of the Hillsborough Inquiry, the Anglican Church in Canada's examination of abuse in its residential schools and the experiences of post-Apartheid South Africa. The Church's version would need to bring together those who have been so hurt with those whose mishandling of their concerns has done so much to traumatise and re-abuse them. Its aim would be to enable a series of humane encounters where all the lies and extenuating circumstances of the past would be laid down in an environment designed to enable vulnerability and truth. The aim of such an approach would be to enable transparency and light, the establishment of facts and an honouring of the stories and experiences of those who have been denied justice for so long.

The remit of this work would not be to investigate those suspected guilty of acts of poor ethical intent or that fall under the criminal law – that is the job of the disciplinary process and/or the police. Rather it would be to hear, investigate and explore actions of omission, deficient process and the deliberate exercise of 'learned helplessness' that have compounded the original abuse of survivors over time. Those called to account would do so in the knowledge that admission of their omissions, misdeeds and shortcomings would not result in their prosecution or defenestration, being sued or cancelled. Rather the aim would be to bring them face to face with a justice that would promote their learning, repentance and change, enabling them to become the strongest voices for doing things differently next time. A Commission brought together to undertake this work would need to draw wholly from people unconnected to the failures of the past and overseen by a figure of authority and integrity, independent, yet knowledgeable of the Church of England. On the basis of 'nothing about us without us' the details of its workings and procedures would need to be developed and co-created with survivors.

A survivor with whom I spoke recently suggested that our current mess has resulted in our Church experiencing a 'soul sickness'. Such sickness is reflected in the feedback offered by another to a diocese that had serially mishandled her case. "I brought my abuse to you. In the shocking absence of competent process, compassionate understanding or a considered time frame, you ambled around my scars with a careless complacency and wounding disregard for what it was like to be me. What has the Church learnt?"

I propose that an approach of Truth and Accountability is the remedy we need to such an indictment, an offer of liberation from the cords that have held our Church in places of untruth and darkness for years. Freedom, restoration and reconciliation are not something that the Church can 'offer' any survivor. After the hurt we've caused, these things aren't ours to give. They can only be received. But if light could shine into the dark corners that are ours, we might just be on the first steps towards a truth and accountability that could set us all free.

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