

## Seven Minute Briefing: Revd Michael Hall Learning Review

As part of our commitment to learning and transparency in safeguarding, an independent learning review was commissioned by the Diocese of Oxford to examine our

practices and responses between 1981 and 2000 to events at St Margaret's Church, Tyler's Green.

### Background

In 2020 a young man tragically died by suicide. He had been a member of St Margaret's, Tylers Green when Revd Hall was the incumbent. An independent investigation concluded that on

the balance of probabilities, between 1981 and 2000 Hall had spiritually abused a significant number of the congregation.

### Spiritual Abuse

A learning review explored the themes from the investigation. Spiritual abuse can be understood as coercion and control, which Hall used to isolate and exploit. Spiritual abuse can include misusing scripture to coerce behaviour, requiring unquestioning obedience, using a sense of divine position

to exert pressure to conform and suggesting this position is unchallengeable. Anyone can be made vulnerable by spiritual abuse. People at Tylers Green did not recognise they were being abused at the time.

### Prevention and detection

The prevention and detection of spiritual abuse requires constant vigilance. The diocese and parishes must continue supporting and nurturing a culture prioritising safeguarding for children and adults. A good culture includes respect

for dissenting opinions, a PCC supporting and challenging ministry, and seeing through complaints. The review makes recommendations related to the discernment process and appointment of clergy.

### Misuse of power

Hall responded to criticism at the time in defensive, adversarial, and litigious ways. He would cite verses of the Bible to command obedience and suppress dissent. While the review describes the adverse effect on parishioners, Hall was widely known as a bully.

Although the Church has improved oversight of the performance and behaviours of clergy, the review highlights how Hall seduced or bullied the PCC, the Patron, and others. His personal use of power stopped people from acting.

### Assurance

Three layers of assurance for safeguarding broke down at the time: people couldn't get redress from Hall because of the power imbalance; the wardens and PCC members appeared to support Hall without question; the bishops took limited action and the abuse was not stopped.

Strengthening the role of wardens as the officer of the bishop and the investment the diocese has made into HR and safeguarding structures has improved practice. These structures need to work well together, based on good relationships.

### Language and vulnerability

The power of spiritual abuse can make anyone vulnerable. The Church continues to refer to "vulnerable adults", and the review encourages better terminology: "adults experiencing or at risk of abuse." The Care Act 2014 makes it clear that

abuse of adults is embedded in their circumstances and those around them, rather than in the characteristics of the people experiencing harm. Thinking about our language may encourage more people to report spiritual abuse.