

Theology of Safeguarding

Safeguarding is integral to the mission of the Church and a part of its response and witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

I want briefly to do three things in this too brief session.

Firstly, I want to explore the theology and Christian practices that undergird and support the safeguarding work of the Church, and that help Christian people to create safer spaces for human flourishing.

Secondly I want us to explore the use of power in the Church.

Thirdly I want us to begin to explore the nature of Christian forgiveness.

I need to draw attention to the language used. I will try to use the term 'people who have experienced abuse' and 'people who abuse'. This is the preferred terminology in Time For Action, an ecumenical report which marked a significant point in many churches' responses to those who have experienced abuse.

Safeguarding is a fundamental part of the Church's response to God and sharing in God's mission in the world. God's outgoing all-embracing love for the whole of creation (God's mission) began with the act of creation itself.

As part of this, God created humanity in God's image to be in a loving relationship with God, others and the whole of creation. The mission of God is focused in a new way in Jesus, through and in whom God's kingdom is established (although it is still to come in all its fullness), and through and in whom God offers hope, transforming love and new life.

In a broken world God calls the whole of humanity to become God's people, living in communion with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The Church is a community called into being by God to participate in God's mission, witness to divine grace, and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Church's witness to God through Jesus Christ involves its seeking to be a community marked by love and care for one another and for all whom it encounters.

Christians believe that God wants human beings to flourish and grow in loving relationship with one another and with God. John's Gospel uses the image of abundant life for this: "I am come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

The ways in which Christians relate to one another and others are therefore vital for both human flourishing and the witness of the Church. Church communities are thus called to witness to the God who offers healing, hope and life in all its fullness. In this imperfect human community the presence of the Holy Spirit makes such witness possible.

Safeguarding is about the action the Church takes to promote a safer culture. It includes: promoting the welfare of children, young people and adults; working to prevent abuse from occurring; and seeking to protect and respond well to those who have been abused. Abuse is the mistreatment of a person which harms or injures them. It can vary from treating someone with disrespect in a way which significantly affects their quality of life to causing physical and emotional suffering.

It involves control and manipulation and exercising power over another, and often the people who commit abuse take advantage of a relationship of trust. Abuse can take many forms including physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse.

I love the Church (most of the time). But I listen very carefully to abusers who tell me that the Church is a soft touch. You only have to say you have found Jesus and they believe you.

I also listen to those who have been abused who say that from the outside the Church looks lovely, tells powerful stories of love and grace, but in the inside is cold and ruthless in its protection of those who are powerful and who abuse.

Anyone can become a victim of abuse, but people with care and support needs (such as children, young people and vulnerable adults) are more likely to be abused. They may be less likely to identify abuse themselves, or report it.

Adults can be vulnerable because they have care and support needs, but many adults may be vulnerable at some points in their lives due to ill health, emotional trauma or impoverishment.

Safeguarding is about working together to prevent and reduce both the risks and experience of abuse and neglect (which is a form of abuse), seeking to protect the health, dignity and well-being of everyone.

The Church's recognition of God's desire for human flourishing is accompanied by a recognition of the reality of the human condition, the depths of what people are capable of and the potential of all to cause damage and to abuse trust and power.

Alongside the offer of welcome to the Body of Christ comes the costly challenge of Christian discipleship, taking responsibility for past and present behaviour and being accountable to brothers and sisters in Christ, and to God.

Safeguarding procedures form an important part of establishing healthy relationships within the Body of Christ, particularly prompting us to pay attention to issues around interpersonal boundaries and power. This is the work and responsibility of all members of the Church. There is also a corporate responsibility to establish and uphold appropriate boundaries of behaviour (including on line and in emails) so that all, especially people who have particular vulnerabilities, are valued and treated as people of worth.

God does not intend people to suffer from abuse and God works with us to end the damage and trauma it causes.

Safeguarding is therefore an intrinsic part of the Church's participation in God's mission, and one way in which members of the Church demonstrate their care for each other and all whom they encounter. Safeguarding work seeks to demonstrate the Church's concern to protect everyone, giving priority to the welfare and well-being of children, young people and vulnerable adults, and remembering its commitment to survivors of abuse.

Safeguarding training, procedures and policies are not a distraction from mission – they are part of our mission and help the Church to ensure that it takes appropriate responsibility for selecting, resourcing and supporting those who work with children, young people and vulnerable adults on its behalf. They also help the whole church community to reflect on its ways of relating and to pay attention to issues that help to establish and maintain healthy relationships.

Do you honour your safeguarding teams, do you pray for them and see them as part of your mission and ministry?

I want now to move to discuss issues of power and forgiveness.

I am encouraged by the thought that when God comes among us, and is born as one of us, Jesus, through what looks like passivity and defeat transforms us and all the world. Jesus learns from Mary and Joseph and from his community living under occupation, that human weakness is not something to be frightened of, that weakness and vulnerability can be gifts to others.

We need to be reminded about this because the Church can sometimes struggle with ideas of weakness and fragility. This is connected with some distorted ideas about greatness, power and victory.

The use of power in the Church is something we need to be much more reflective about. It is noteworthy that the use of power in the New Testament is almost always to do with the

freedom to **release people from bondage**, the power to heal, the power to forgive or in the most wonderful phrase in the first chapter of John's Gospel – “the power to become children of God”. Power can be defined (Slide 1) in the human context as the capacity to influence the behaviour, thoughts, emotions and attitudes of others. Scripture leads us to understand that power can be used destructively to oppress others or in ways that are liberative and which enable the flourishing and growth of others.

In Mark 10:42-45 we read: “So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

We do need to exercise power if we are going to make things happen. But power is not usually a matter of all or nothing, of some having it all while others do not. Power is usually a matter of more or less, because the capacity to influence another is relative to who the other is in a given context.

We see that Jesus, in his life and ministry, both exercises power in response to human need when invited to do so, but also relinquishes power and control when he chooses to do so. “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

(John 10:17-18)

Power can be picked up and laid down. I want to suggest that we need to become a humbler Church (to quote Martyn Percy), led by lay and ordained leaders who are immersed in humility, able to be relaxed and non-anxious about being in receptive or listening mode rather than always being in broadcast or assertive mode. We are called to live, as Jesus did, in the liminal space between power and authority, and vulnerability and weakness, and we

must therefore constantly ask

“How do we use our power?”

Rollo May describes how power can be used to oppress others or to expand another's freedom. Exploitative and manipulative actions are expression of domination. They presume a relationship of inequality and a determination not to change that. Nutrient power is that applied for the benefit of someone with less power – it enables or empowers them.

Integrative power respects the freedom of others and is expressed as co-operation and collaboration with the gifts of others and makes team working possible. (Slide)

Forgiveness, repentance and new life in Jesus Christ are central to the gospel. Christianity proclaims that God can transform people's lives. It proclaims a new start, with confidence in Christ, inviting participation in the Christian community where all contribute to its witness through seeking to serve God alongside other disciples. God's unceasing offer of new life and the assurance that, by God's grace, we are justified, set in right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, is at the heart of Christian faith and discipleship. It is important to note that the subject of forgiveness has become a complex and contentious area of theology in the light of the experience of many people who have experienced abuse who have been told to forgive their abusers. That, in itself, has been found to be coercive and abusive, compounded when people who have experienced abuse have been told to do so for their own well-being.

A demand to forgive, including when it comes from within themselves, can seem to be a test of their Christian faith and discipleship. People who have experienced abuse have often also been told to forgive, or expect themselves to be able to forgive, as if forgiveness was an instant event. When it is not possible to do this, then guilt and shame are created or reinforced. For a person who has experienced abuse, reflection on the meaning of forgiveness can only be part of a process of healing which is about their letting go of what has been done to them so that the abuser no longer has power over them. For some, the point of healing and restoration never comes at all, or, if it does, it seems precarious:

“Deep, vicious damage done to people, physical or psychological, often the two bound together as in torture as well as sexual or domestic abuse, has a very long timescale for recovery. Indeed, one of the amazing things is that recovery does, in many cases happen: human beings have an astonishing capacity for resilience in the face of the most terrible trauma.”

There are many differences within the Church as to what forgiveness means, and churches continue to wrestle with how they should speak of forgiveness and how forgiveness should be demonstrated within their structures and processes. There is work to be done in exploring what forgiveness means as experienced by those who have been abused as some simplistic understandings, or misunderstandings, of forgiveness have prompted actions or statements that have caused them further harm and damage, as well as providing an unrealistic view of human relationships and Christian discipleship.

There is a tendency “to be simplistic concerning the ongoing mystery of sin, to neglect the social character of our sinning (which is against our neighbour as well as against God) and to be romantic about actual Christian discipleship and its struggles”.

Thus there are three common misunderstandings that should be avoided:

- Firstly, that forgiveness involves forgetting behaviour that has caused harm so that past sin and behaviour is blotted out and the forgiven sinner can start again with a blank sheet of paper. Language of renewal, or a new start, or of being washed clean, is problematic if it implies that the past has been dismissed. Forgiveness does not negate the consequences of the past: the risen Christ still bears the scars of the cross; in the Hebrew Scriptures Israel’s sins are constantly rehearsed for all to remember. Forgiveness does not change what has happened as if it never happened, but it does enable people to live in a new relationship to the consequences of the past.

- Secondly, that forgiveness means the cancelling of debts and obligations. Paradoxically, forgiveness may well mean that the person who has abused has a greater sense of obligation

than before. Thus, forgiveness should encourage the person who has abused to take responsibility for the damage caused, not least by recognising the profound harm and betrayal of trust involved, as well as by seeking to change their behaviour to ensure that it never happens again. Repentance includes accepting responsibility for past actions and making oneself accountable to others, which includes behaving in ways which enable others to be safe. It is always the responsibility of those who abuse to change their behaviour; and changed behaviour, not just intention, is important.

As with Zaccheus who, after encountering Christ, offered to repay four times those he had swindled, even though the law only required it to be twofold.

- Thirdly, that a person who has abused should be treated as wholly reformed and good. This notion may cause significant further harm to those who have suffered the abuse and provides an unrealistic view of human relationships and Christian discipleship. Forgiveness does not mean that previous patterns of behaviour have been left behind, nor does it remove any risk of reoffending. For some people particular behaviours are pathological. Conversion does not stop people sinning, nor 'cure' abusive behaviour or the temptation to offend.

God's forgiveness, which involves acceptance and the hope of new life through the Holy Spirit, is also a call to a new life, radically different from the old. For those who have abused, a sanctified life includes understanding the ongoing impact of the abuse on the lives of others and a preparedness to limit the ways in which they participate in the life of the Church in order to enable others to feel safer and grow. The one forgiven takes responsibility for ensuring that life will be different, not least by avoiding situations which put themselves and others at risk.

Within church communities theological thinking about people changing has not always been robust or realistic enough. An over-emphasis on new life has often caused Churches to fail to

give proper attention to how repentance is understood. Time and again patterns of abuse are repeated, despite hopes and assurances of change. Change is often gradual, hard, and bumpy, and it does not mean that weaknesses and vulnerabilities disappear. Repentance involves ownership of past actions, acknowledgement and understanding of the harm caused and its ongoing effect on others, and the recognition that there are consequences to all actions which have to be faced. The sign that repentance and forgiveness have happened is then seen in the fruit of change, which can include accepting the kind of disciplined framework that supports change.