

not directly involved in the diocesan response, and who can apply critical, independent judgement as to the adequacy of that response. In short, what was proposed was a strong review and audit function within the Church.

This critical element was identified by the author through his involvement in the review of the “*Case of the Reverend A*” and was included as one of the eleven recommendations made in that report. The Review Report was submitted and accepted by the commissioning bodies, and later fully endorsed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, for adoption and implementation across the Church.

This paper seeks to examine the ways in which it may be possible to develop an effective review and audit function within the Church of England in the area of safeguarding practice.

## **The Need for an Independent Review and Audit Function:**

Current practice in the field of safeguarding within the Church of England is to develop and agree national policies to be applied to all of the various bodies that together make up the Church. These policies seek to shape the response that those who receive a safeguarding service can expect. They define the minimal standard of practice and are understood to be a description of the reality on the ground. The question arises as to whether this is the case or not.

What recent reviews have shown is that the creation of policy cannot be relied upon as a consistent determinant of practice with complete confidence. The experience of many survivors of abuse has been reported to be very different from what would be expected if the agreed policies were being complied with fully.

Occasionally, shocking cases come to light and are brought into the public domain either as a result of statutory intervention in the investigation of crime or through other processes commissioned by the Church itself. These cases on occasions reveal misuse of authority as a way of hiding the existence of dangerous practice and of abuse itself. When these cases come to light they dramatically challenge the confidence of the lay faithful in the Church leadership as to whether they are capable of discharging their duties effectively.

The existence of policies, agreed nationally and adopted locally across the Church, is not in itself good enough. If the Church of England is to be a single, coherent body rather than a diverse collection of totally independent entities, then a responsibility exists to ensure that what it says it will do, it delivers. There is a need to confirm independently that each part of the Church is complying with agreed policy and is doing so in every case that it engages with.

There may be a variety of reasons as to why an individual part of the Church may not be complying with agreed safeguarding policy. From proven cases that have come to light, this could be as a result of a strong dislike of safeguarding practices on the part of the person holding authority in the diocese. They could view it as conflicting with their personal preferences in life.

Although this may only be a tiny minority, the existence of just one case is sufficient to legitimately raise the question. Alternatively, there may be some who view safeguarding policy and practice as receiving too much attention and consuming too many valuable resources that would be better used elsewhere. They may feel that these matters are blown out of proportion by the media and that survivors of abuse are best dealt with by robust lawyers who will defend the institution.

For this latter group, the author would refer them to the foundational principles upon which the Church is based. Compassion, and caring responses underpin the national policies but they are rendered useless if those that are to deliver them have not embraced the principles upon which they are based.

It may also be the case that amongst those who are charged with responsibility to lead a diocese, there may be a number who themselves have experienced abuse. This may be a matter that they have kept hidden from even those with whom they share their lives as well as their closest colleagues and friends. This fact can mean that exposure to all safeguarding concerns can stir up deeply unpleasant and distressful memories for them that they seek to avoid and suppress. This can also lead to denial and avoidance in terms of their leadership of a diocese of all safeguarding matters.

It may also be the case that as a result of their own experiences in life, they understand the importance of taking steps to protect the vulnerable in the Church community. Hence, they will prioritize these matters.

The truth is that the history of responding to child abuse both within the Church and within wider society, has been shaped by a process of revelation, resisted and opposed by those who find it too unpleasant to accept that abuse is part of the life of the Church. As evidence continually emerges to the contrary, the task of developing effective responses to that abuse progresses.

The fact is that individuals who have committed offences against vulnerable young people, as a result of their personal sexual preferences, can reach positions of seniority in the Church, in the same way as they can in other organisations in society. There is no room for complacency or for believing that sex offending exists in wider society but is not part of the life of the Church today.

For these reasons, the safeguarding structure in the Church should be supported by a robust process of review and audit that is located outside of the diocese. It would be my strongly held belief that this process of audit and review should be established within the Church but independent of the existing safeguarding structure. The options available to achieve this end will now be examined.

## **The Role of Reviews and Audits within the Church:**

Whenever a case comes to light that causes concern or is the subject of public interest, the practice has been for the Church to commission a review to be carried out by an external, suitably qualified and experienced professional. In this way, the Church demonstrates its commitment to learning the lessons of past mistakes as a way of improving present practice. The author was commissioned to undertake a review of alleged abuse carried out by senior members of the Church some years ago, for example. The drawback of this approach is that it is expensive, slow, and may not directly result in change.

This approach, however, is based on a number of critical elements which are firstly that there is a need to know more about what happened, and secondly there is a need to understand how it can be prevented from happening again.

With regard to the first element, this raises the question as to how much is known at the centre of the Church with regard to what is happening at the level of the diocese today? How many

safeguarding allegations against members of the clergy are being managed today? How many credible or proven allegations of offending exist against the clergy? Where are those people, and how are they being supported? Indeed, how many survivors of clerical abuse have made reports to the Church and how are they being helped? If the only people in the Church to hold this information are the individual bishops and their advisors, how can there be any oversight of their practice, and also how can we gain an appreciation of the overall situation?

Let us assume that every diocese fully implements every policy and responds to every safeguarding concern with real enthusiasm, compassion, and expertise. This would be wonderful but the author would suggest that it is not supported by any objective review of the evidence available. It is simply fantasy to suggest that this is the case. If we accept that this is not the case then the question arises as to how far short of what is expected, is the current reality? What policies are not being implemented, by whom and where?

To establish what the quality of practice is in reality requires information to flow from the diocese to the centre of the Church. Without this happening, you cannot form an accurate view as to what practice is across the Church as a whole.

It is clear that what is needed is a comprehensive understanding of what practice takes place in each individual case as it occurs across the Church. This will not be provided by one-off, specially commissioned reviews that focus on an individual case or even a single diocese. What is needed is not a “snap shot” but rather a continuous flow of information that allows you to assess what is happening today.

The importance of being able to access current information is that it allows appropriate intervention to be made where it is required today. A quick response can avert a crisis occurring and bad or poor practice continuing, which is ultimately what is desired. For a review function to be effective it requires information on practice to be supplied to the centre on a timely basis. Achieving this has proved to be difficult previously within other Church settings, but not impossible. However, it is critical that the diocesan structure should not be allowed to prevent the establishment of safe and effective safeguarding across the Church as a whole. By creating impenetrable boundaries around every diocese, you effectively set in place the context within which abuse can thrive.

Supplying information to the centre should not be viewed as relinquishing any of the independence or authority that is held by the diocese at present. Rather, it should be seen as a positive step taken to facilitate the improvement of practice within the diocese and also within the Church as a whole. Simply confirming what work has taken place and how it has complied with agreed policy, should not be seen as an interference. However, if the information supplied to the centre contains gaps or suggests that the practice has not been sound, then intervention should follow.

Underpinning the introduction of a review and audit function for safeguarding in the Church infers the acceptance of universal standards that apply to every part of it. This implies that good practice in one diocese will also be seen as good practice in another at the far end of the country, or vice versa in respect of poor or bad practice. Universal standards that are directly based on the foundational principles of the Church exist and represent an appropriate and relevant basis upon which a review function should be developed. As the Church develops its national policies for safeguarding practice, it must identify these universal standards and make them explicit. In short, they should be written down.

In simple terms, those that cause harm to vulnerable, young people should be held accountable for their actions and prevented from doing so again. Those that have experienced harm should be cared

Each part of the Church has a responsibility not only to its own members, but to everyone else within the wider Church community. This fact underpins the acceptance and adoption of Church wide policies and practices in safeguarding the vulnerable. It should not be acceptable for one part of the Church to erect boundaries around itself to isolate it from the rest of the Church.

### **The Way Forward:**

The need for change cannot be emphasised enough. What also needs to be mentioned are the likely consequences of not changing. Clearly, a refusal to address areas that have to be managed differently could be seen as placing vulnerable young people at risk. The creation of endangerment is a serious matter which has rightly brought forward strong criticism where it has been identified in the past. There is no doubt that this would also be case if the Church failed to heed the painful lessons that its past experiences have taught it.

The process of change has to proceed at a pace that ensures that those who are both within and outside of the Church, can see that a new approach is underway. The introduction of a review and audit function should be completed within a year. The introduction of universal standards upon which a review function would be based, should not take more than six months. The creation of an information system that ensures that relevant safeguarding data flows to and from the centre could be in place in three to four months.

In each of these matters, a great deal of learning can be drawn from studying the experience of other Churches across the world. The information is available to support the changes. All that is required is a commitment to avail of it and apply it to your own situation within the Church of England.

Signed:

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