

Statement on George Bell

The Bishop of Chichester has issued a formal apology following the settlement of a legal civil claim regarding sexual abuse against the Right Reverend George Bell, who was Bishop of Chichester from 1929 until his death on 3rd October 1958.

The allegations against Bell date from the late 1940s and early 1950s and concern allegations of sexual offences against an individual who was at the time a young child.

Following settlement of the claim the serving Bishop of Chichester, the Right Reverend Dr. Martin Warner, wrote to the survivor formally apologising and expressing his “deep sorrow” acknowledging that “the abuse of children is a criminal act and a devastating betrayal of trust that should never occur in any situation, particularly the church.”

Bishop Warner paid tribute to the survivor’s courage in coming forward to report the abuse and notes that “along with my colleagues throughout the church, I am committed to ensuring that the past is handled with honesty and transparency.”

Tracey Emmott, the solicitor for the survivor, today issued the following statement on behalf of her client:

“The new culture of openness in the Church of England is genuinely refreshing and seems to represent a proper recognition of the dark secrets of its past, many of which may still not have come to light. While my client is glad this case is over, they remain bitter that their 1995 complaint was not properly listened to or dealt with until my client made contact with Archbishop Justin Welby’s office in 2013. That failure to respond properly was very damaging, and combined with the abuse that was suffered has had a profound effect on my client’s life. For my client, the compensation finally received does not change anything. How could any amount of money possibly compensate for childhood abuse? However, my client recognises that it represents a token of apology. What mattered to my client most and has brought more closure than anything was the personal letter my client has recently received from the Bishop of Chichester.”

The survivor first reported the abuse to the then Bishop of Chichester, Eric Kemp, in August 1995. The then Bishop responded to the correspondence offering pastoral support but did not refer the matter to the police or, so far as is known, investigate the matter further. It was not until further contact by the survivor of abuse, with Lambeth Palace in 2013, that the survivor was put in touch with the safeguarding team at the Diocese of Chichester who referred the matter to the

police and offered personal support and counselling to the survivor.

In his letter to the survivor Bishop Warner acknowledges that the response from the Diocese of Chichester in 1995, when the survivor first came forward, “fell a long way short, not just of what is expected now, but of what we now appreciate you should have had a right to expect then.”

In accordance with the recommendations of the Church Commissaries’ report into the Diocese of Chichester in 2012 the settlement does not impose any form of “confidentiality agreement” restriction regarding public disclosure upon the individual. In this case the survivor has expressed the desire to remain anonymous.

Following a meeting between the survivor and Sussex police in 2013, it was confirmed by the police that the information obtained from our enquiries would have justified, had he still been alive, Bishop Bell's arrest and interview, on suspicion of serious sexual offences, followed by release on bail, further enquiries and the subsequent submission of a police report to the CPS.

A formal claim for compensation was submitted in April 2014 and was settled in late September of this year. The settlement followed a thorough pre-litigation process during which further investigations into the claim took place including the commissioning of expert independent reports. None of those these reports found any reason to doubt the veracity of the claim.

The Church of England takes any allegations of abuse very seriously and is committed to being a safe place for all. Any survivors or those with information about church-related abuse must always feel free to come forward knowing that they will be listened to in confidence.

Should anyone have further information or need to discuss the personal impact of this news the Church has worked with the NSPCC to set up a confidential helpline no. 0800 389 5344.

ENDS

Notes to Editors