

Safe Church: Theological reflection

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'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 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. I have received this command from my Father.'

John 10.1-18

Jesus' teaching about the gate, the shepherd and the sheep in John 10 has inspired countless sermons, reflections, poems, hymns and works of art. Part of its power is how it speaks of a place of safety. Safety is to be found not at a geographical location, nor simply by following a set of procedures, but in a relationship: the relationship of knowing and being known by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In listening to his voice, there is security and fullness of life.

The passage is clear that outside this relationship, there is no lasting security, and we cannot be ultimately safe. Thieves who would 'steal and kill and destroy' are a reality, as are wolves who are waiting to snatch the sheep and scatter them. We do not live in a 'safe' world. Danger is all around. Ultimately, there is no person, no organisation, no institution that can make us truly safe from harm – only life in union with Christ will fulfil the promise.

The good shepherd gives the sheep that safety through which life can truly flourish. He does not do this by taking them to a place where there are no dangers – no thieves, no wolves – but

by confronting those destructive forces himself. He is ready to lay down his life, so that they do not destroy us. Our safety, our salvation, is at the cost of his life.

The church is called by God's grace to proclaim this message and to witness to it. It witnesses not only by its words but by its life as *koinonia* – communion and sharing – in him. Communities of believers should be places where this communion is affirmed, and where the freedom and safety it brings may be experienced. It is the responsibility of those called to positions of authority and leadership in the church to make sure this is so, as they reflect and point to the one shepherd of the flock. Hence Paul says to the Ephesian elders as he speaks to them for the last time, 'Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son' (Acts 20.28).

There are many ways in which the flock of Christ can be harmed. In his speech to the Ephesian elders, Paul is concerned especially about those who by 'distorting the truth' (Acts 20.30) turn Christ's followers away from the path of discipleship. If safety is found in knowing Christ, anything that threatens our relationship with him is a danger which must deeply concern those who 'watch over' the church, and against which they must be constantly vigilant.

Abuse can take different forms, but it is always wrong. It is a sin, and as such the church must oppose it, care for those hurt by it, seek justice for its victims and help to bring to justice those who commit it. The nature of the harm caused by abuse can be far-reaching and deeply destructive, primarily for the individuals concerned, and often also their loved ones. Its effects are also corrosive for the communities and institutions who more or less consciously collude with it (and where there is abuse, there is likely to be collusion of some kind). Churches around the world are having to come to terms with these consequences.

Abuse characteristically takes place within relationships of trust (adult – child, wife – husband, teacher – pupil, doctor – patient, pastor – congregation member), where one or more persons in a position of relative power within the relationship take advantage of the combination of trust and power to cause serious harm to others. It therefore directly attacks the capacity for trust among those it affects. The safety to which the church witnesses is found by trusting in Christ. How will this message be heard by those whose trust has been violated by people claiming to be trustworthy, especially when the abusers also claim to speak and act in Christ's name?

These are questions the whole church must consider. How can the witness of the church be trusted when its clergy and officers have betrayed people's trust by abusing them? How can what it says about safety and salvation in Christ have credibility when people in positions of authority in the church have preferred to tolerate, protect or relocate known abusers, rather than supporting and standing with the ones who have been abused?

Abuse creates a crisis of trust, in which the church's witness to the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ is imperilled. The figure of the good shepherd is obscured by the behaviour of some within the church who have taken the part of destructive 'wolves', by perpetrating abuse, and by others who have acted like hired hands, whose eyes have been slow to see the harm and the wrong that has been done yet quick to spot the risks to their own reputation and that of the institution they represent. *The Charter for the Safety of People within the Churches of the*

Anglican Communion sets out a way for Anglicans across the world, in our different social and cultural contexts, to respond to this situation.

1. *Pastoral support where there is abuse*

We will provide pastoral support for the abused, their families, and affected parishes and church organizations by:

- *listening with patience and compassion to their experiences and concerns;*
- *offering spiritual assistance and other forms of pastoral care.*

One of the effects of abuse is the silencing of its victims. They may be told by abusers, who are generally in positions of relative power, that they must never reveal what has happened. They may be threatened, directly or indirectly, with grave reprisals if they do so. They may be told that they, the victims and not the perpetrators, should be full of shame and guilt for what has happened, and they may for a time at least believe it. They may not want to speak to another of what has happened simply because that would mean remembering what has happened, and for the sake of their own survival they need – for a time – to forget. To overcome this silencing may take many years, perhaps decades.

Churches therefore need to consider how they can become safe places within which those who have been abused can begin to speak, to remember and to find healing for their wounds. To do that, church communities must be willing to listen to the survivors in their midst and those with whom they come into contact. There is no substitute for hearing directly from survivors of abuse about the effects of abuse on their lives, their relationships and their faith. People who think they can speak to survivors without listening to them are incapable of providing effective pastoral support.

The experience of abuse can undermine people's sense of identity and self-worth at a very deep level. There may be special vulnerability for a person who has been abused in beginning to speak about that experience, not least because it involves in one way or another re-living it. Questioning their account of what has happened at this point, or turning away because it is too painful to hear, are not acceptable responses on the part of those who want to share the good news of the good shepherd.

The experience of abuse can have far-reaching effects on a person's faith, including their ability to express trust in a good and all-powerful God, and to take part in the life of the church. Abusers in a church context may draw on their spiritual authority to inculcate false teaching aimed at making people more ready to submit to abuse and less willing to report it; they may claim that silence about what has happened is God's will, and that God will punish anyone who breaks it. They may use activities that are spiritually valued by those they abuse as opportunities to commit abuse. Such behaviour can be termed 'spiritual abuse'. Living in the aftermath of abuse is likely to bring serious challenges on the way of discipleship, and spiritual assistance should be available for survivors of abuse who are facing them.

Benevolent intentions are not enough for the provision of proper pastoral support in this context. As well as the need for an appropriate level of understanding, there has to be a willingness to engage in advocacy for those who have suffered abuse. There also has to be an acceptance that those who have been abused may benefit from being referred to people and

agencies with a depth of wisdom and experience in supporting survivors that the church community and its pastors cannot provide. The seriousness of the harm that can be done by abuse makes patience and compassion especially important.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are integral dimensions of the gospel message, but the gospel also shows how costly they are, and that they are ultimately inseparable from repentance for sin and openness to justice. In human relationships, forgiving and being reconciled take time, sometimes a very long time; they cannot be settled instantaneously by individuals in isolation. Pastors who ask those who have been abused to express forgiveness towards those who have abused them, when there has been no healing of wounds, no provision of safety and no action for justice, do great damage to vulnerable people and undermine Christian witness and care. Pastors who insist on promoting forms of reconciliation that re-establish contact between the person abused and the abuser may not only inflict further distress on survivors but also place them in situations of great danger. The first responsibility of those who share in the ministry of the good shepherd must be to care for and protect the sheep, which in this context means both patient, compassionate listening and accompaniment for those who have suffered abuse, and prompt action to prevent further harm, including alerting the appropriate authorities. At the same time, they will not cease to hope and pray that sinners find the path of forgiveness and repentance, and that relationships torn apart by sin may in God's time be restored with justice and peace.

2. *Effective responses to abuse*

We will have and implement policies and procedures to respond properly to allegations of abuse against clergy and other church personnel that include:

- *making known within churches the procedure for making complaints;*
- *arranging pastoral care for any person making a complaint of abuse;*
- *the impartial determination of allegations of abuse against clergy and other church personnel, and assessment of their suitability for future ministry;*
- *providing support for affected parishes and church organizations.*

Abuse makes it difficult for survivors to speak, and difficult also for communities to acknowledge it, especially when the abuser is a figure of trust, authority and power within the community. Allegations of abuse can polarise and divide churches, with some rushing to defend the person's innocence and others assuming they are guilty before the evidence has been heard. Coming to terms with the truth may leave deep scars within church communities, including a sense of betrayal. Support is therefore needed for parishes and church organizations when allegations are made.

Churches need to remember that they are made up of sinners, and that sin works through deviousness and deceit. They must face the reality that abuse has been committed in the past by clergy and other church personnel, and that however effective their safeguarding procedures may be, it is likely it will happen again at some point. While it is tempting to portray abusers as inhuman monsters, the reality is that in order to abuse repeatedly they are likely to be capable of appearing kind, respectable, likeable and trustworthy.

It is also the case that not all allegations of abuse are true, that testing them takes time, sometimes years, and that in some cases the truth may never be conclusively determined. It is

hard to live with uncertainty about how to view a once-trusted family member, friend, colleague or pastor against whom an allegation has been made. But those in positions of pastoral responsibility and of authority in the life of the church need to be able to do this.

Even when a believer confesses to abuse or is convicted in a court of law, while they have done the work of the thief in Jesus' picture – stealing and destroying – they also remain a sheep, one of the flock for whom Christ gave his life. The church cannot therefore treat them simply as criminals, or expel them, or forget about them. The good news of the good shepherd is for sinners, and it calls them to repent so that the joy of being forgiven may be embraced. Repentance involves facing painful truths about ourselves, and being ready to take action that addresses the damage we have done. For pastors to offer forgiveness in the name of Christ to abusers without speaking about the hard road of repentance and the need to acknowledge before the authorities what they have done as part of it dishonours Christ.

In order to be safe communities that witness to the salvation of Christ, churches must be ready to respond to allegations of abuse in a way that balances the need for pastoral support of all those affected with the need for justice. In Christian theology, there can be no final contradiction between love and justice, and any sense that love could mean avoiding justice in this context – or that justice might mean ceasing to love – should be resisted. Either path leads to a denial of the truth.

3. *Practice of pastoral ministry*

We will adopt and promote by education and training standards for the practice of pastoral ministry by clergy and other church personnel.

As noted above, abuse characteristically happens within relationships of trust, and in particular relationships of trust where there is also some inequality of power, which may change and shift over time. While one reaction might be to seek to avoid such situations, human life depends on them, beginning with the bond between parent and child. They are integral also to the life of the church, specifically to its pastoral ministry.

'Pastor' means shepherd, and all pastoral ministry in the church, as undertaken by clergy and other church personnel, should aim at enabling its members to know the care of the one shepherd for the one flock, Jesus Christ. Those engaged in this ministry need to understand that the authority and the trust that enable them to do their work are also levers that can allow abusers to operate, and that they must therefore accept an appropriate level of supervision and follow guidance that minimises the risks of abuse taking place. The argument that 'Procedures aren't necessary in my case – you can just trust me' is, sadly, one that may be appealed to by abusers to create opportunities for abuse. Moreover, experience indicates that while some perpetrators of abuse in the church take up posts of pastoral responsibility with the intention of breaching proper boundaries ('predators' – the wolf self-consciously disguised as the shepherd), others cross them to some extent through lack of self-awareness ('wanderers' – the shepherd who ends up harming the flock and taking the part of the wolf). Consistent adoption, supported by education and training, of standards for pastoral ministry around e.g. boundaries and the use of power is vital.

Pastors should know how to respond when someone speaks about an experience of abuse. They need to understand something of how abuse can affect people, and the priority of patient,

compassionate listening that follows from that. At the same time, they also need to understand the policies and procedures that apply when an allegation is made – the imperative of justice as well as the duty of love. Finally, they need some awareness of the effect that hearing an account of deep trauma may have upon them as pastors, including the potential emotional and spiritual impact, especially if the person described as an abuser is also known to them.

Pastors should be prepared for the situation where a person wants to acknowledge his or her abusive behaviour to them, perhaps in deep contrition, perhaps in some confusion, possibly with no great sense that anything very wrong has been done. The way that deceit, including self-deceit, can become a deeply-engrained dimension of the behaviour of abusers needs to be borne in mind in such contexts. Yet here too, the pastor seeks to let the person know the care of the one, good shepherd, who calls sinners to life-giving repentance, and to the healing that comes through the work of justice.

4. *Suitability for ministry*

We will have and implement policies and procedures to assess the suitability of persons for ordination as clergy or appointment to positions of responsibility in the church including checking their background.

Anglican Ordinals have placed great emphasis on the pastoral responsibility of priests. In the sixteenth-century service for the ordination of priests, John 10.1–16 is one of two possible Gospel readings. Before the candidates make their ordination vows, the bishop tells them: ‘Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they are the sheep of Christ, which he brought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood.’

Deacons and priests share with their bishop in the oversight of the church. They have a responsibility before God to defend the church from harm and to keep it safe. As we have seen, that must mean responding well to abuse where it has happened and being determined to prevent it from occurring. All clergy should therefore welcome training that assists them in these God-given tasks and policy frameworks that support them. The same applies to lay people who are involved in pastoral ministry.

Because they are entrusted with oversight that extends into many different situations, clergy have multiple opportunities to betray that trust by abusing others in the life of the church. Because priests are called to set the example of the Good Shepherd as the pattern of their calling, abusive behaviour by priests has fearful power to undermine trust in God and destroy the credibility of the church’s witness. The reality is that to be entrusted with pastoral responsibility is to be given multiple opportunities for enabling abuse to happen: the shepherd is in a unique position to let in the thief and the wolf.

Clergy must therefore expect that responsible oversight in the church will mean appropriate scrutiny of all those who offer themselves for posts of pastoral responsibility. Background checks will be one element of this, as also for lay people with pastoral roles, but only one part. While the bureaucratic processes involved here may require time and resources, they should be seen as an integral part of the oversight bishops are called to exercise in partnership with their clergy, so that there can be confidence and trust in those appointed.

5. Culture of safety

We will promote a culture of safety in parishes and church organizations by education and training to help clergy, other church personnel and participants prevent the occurrence of abuse.

The church is the body of Christ and the sheep of his pasture, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit and a people called to proclaim God's mighty works. At the same time, it is a network of communities and institutions which faces similar challenges and risks to other communities and institutions in the same social and cultural context. The idea that because it is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, it can be *less* attentive to those challenges and risks than other institutions is simply bad theology.

On the contrary, because of the church's calling before God to witness to the good news, there needs to be a heightened degree of attention to the texture of our life together. It is right that there should be great vigilance in the church to guard against anything that gets in the way of people coming to trust in Jesus Christ as the one in relation to whom there is true safety and salvation. That is what abuse does, in ways that are both catastrophic for those immediately involved and do incalculable long-term harm.

The challenges of watching over the church in this respect are manifold. There is a specific responsibility for bishops and for other clergy, as well as for all who hold any kind of office in the church. Poor theology and inadequate teaching, e.g. on how ministerial responsibility implies accountability, how forgiveness and reconciliation are inseparable from repentance and justice, and how a welcoming church must also be a safe church, create space for abusers to operate. The cultural change that is needed in our churches therefore requires substantial theological work.

This is also however something that concerns every member of the church and where responsibility extends to us all. Any Christian may become aware of warning signals that abuse is taking place. Any Christian may be told a secret, by a person who has been abused, a person who has committed abuse, or someone who knew about what was happening. Any Christian may be in a position simply to listen with compassion and patience, enabling conversations that could become vital in the long journey to healing for a survivor.

A commitment to enabling all those who come into contact with the church community to 'come in and go out and find pasture' in safety is therefore required on the part of the whole church. Such a commitment is a proper part of the church's response to Christ's gift of life and its desire to give clear and compelling witness to his gospel in the world.