

1.

Introduction

Stripping away the Veneer

Why has everyone involved been so inept, had no sense of urgency, given their rhetoric on safeguarding?¹

A vicar, quoted in Private Eye

In September 2004 I began working as safeguarding advisor for the Church of England in the diocese of Bath and Wells; I was the first person formally to fill the post. Before my appointment, situations had been handled by a group of professionals, on a voluntary basis, occasionally advised by the safeguarding advisor for the Bristol diocese. I inherited this helpful group to act as support, but there was not much else to inherit. As I set about putting together guidelines, training and dealing with cases, I realised that no one else in the office knew anything about safeguarding and, more significantly, that no one really wanted to know about it – apart from the youth worker. Most would have preferred that I and the ‘grubby’ work I did were not there. Looking from my desk out of one of the beautiful mullioned

windows of the twelfth-century building called the Old Deanery onto a corner of Wells Cathedral, the place seemed to me timeless and very peaceful. Everyone was always friendly and smiling and, regularly, there were cakes to celebrate someone's birthday. Six years later I left with exhaustion, partly due to Bishop Peter Ball. By then I understood that, below the veneer of pleasantries, were levels of complexity, deception and anxiety that made the NHS adolescent psychiatric unit where I had previously worked seem like a vicar's tea party.

This book then is about looking below the surface, about uncovering the layers of complexity, deception and anxiety, about analysing the underlying culture, and about looking to see what lies beneath once the veneer is stripped away. It is about exploring the reasons behind the culture of avoidance and denial found especially amongst those in positions of church leadership in their mishandling of disclosures. Whilst shocking examples of this that have occurred in the recent past and that are in the public domain are included in this book, the aim is to understand *why* the Church of England finds itself in such a crisis. The intention is to uncover and to understand *how* the Church's issues of power and control as exemplified in the hierarchical structure, in its theology and teaching, and underlying assumptions as an institution have contributed to the current mess and associated heartache. Whilst the focus is on the Church of England, much of what is discussed in the book could also apply to other denominations.

There have been plenty of good intentions about safeguarding in the Church of England. A policy was first put together in the early 1990s, by the then Bishop of Bath and Wells, Jim Thompson. Unfortunately, the emphasis was on 'responding to any allegation of clerical sexual abuse by contacting the Church's insurers as a matter of urgency'. As Josephine Stein writes² this laid the ground for a confrontational rather than a pastoral approach. A review of clergy discipline resulted in the Clergy Discipline Measure of 2003 (CDM) stating that the burden of proof of an ecclesiastical offence had to be 'beyond all reasonable doubt'. Survivors were then directed to this CDM, a procedure that invariably failed to deliver guilty verdicts. Direct contact with survivors was avoided and the aim was to avoid liability. Stein adds, 'The Church used avoidance behaviour, proceduralism and various barriers and obstacles to frustrate attempts by survivors to be heard.' Yet, when the Compensation Act came into force in 2006 (which

included changes to the law of liability), then, as Stein notes, apologies began to be given and prayers offered for survivors, but mainly from senior clerics who knew neither the survivors nor any detail about the abuses that had occurred. The CDM was eventually amended in 2016 and placed in line with complying with safeguarding guidance, but such ‘legalistic processes . . . tend to fail’ because there is ‘rarely unambiguous written evidence or witness testimony’ and ‘abusers use manipulation and deception as their main weapons in the grooming phase . . . not spotted by the target/survivor’.³ Over the years more safeguarding policies were produced and new structures instigated – nationally and locally – but, as will be shown in this book, the Church’s own policies were not being followed, rather they were being interpreted by the hierarchy. In 2002 *Time for Action* stated: ‘If the Churches recognize that it is the time to act on the recommendations . . . then a new day will dawn for many people who have experienced great sadness and yet have somehow held on to hope.’⁴ This proved to be a false dawn and, sadly, one of many.

However, widespread bad publicity has begun to achieve that which good intentions have not. The recent hearings of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) revealed much that is shameful and in February 2020 at a meeting of the General Synod of the Church of England some significant votes were passed to prioritise the needs of victims and survivors of clergy abuse. It was agreed that words of action must be followed by ‘concrete actions’ including accepting all the 2019 IICSA recommendations. Synod also agreed to give adequate financial compensation and support to survivors and to take an approach to safeguarding that saw things from the survivor’s point of view. The Bishop of Huddersfield, Jonathan Gibb, the new lead safeguarding bishop, said that the response to sexual abuse should be guided by ‘the righteousness and compassion of God’s kingdom, and not by the short-term and short-sighted financial and reputational interests of the church’.⁵ So, has the Church finally been forced to respond appropriately because of the persistence and resilience of survivors and their supporters, many of whose voices are included in this book? Or is it proving to be another false dawn? This remains, as yet, unclear but the immediate signs are not promising.

The basic point is that contemporary reporting in the media of sexual abuse by Anglican clergy arouses pity for the victim, and disgust and horror towards the perpetrator. It also raises

anger towards the institutional Church that has been so quick to comment on and judge everyone else's sexuality, but so slow to control abusing priests and get its house in order. Whilst there have been many positive changes to safeguarding in the last decade, what has become increasingly clear is that the superficial following of procedures and good intentions, sadly, do not mean a change of perspective. Rosie Harper describes how everyone 'is working very hard to produce new systems and more training and issue more apologies. It is hard to see this as anything other than moving the chairs around on the deck of the Titanic.' This is because the underlying culture needs to change fundamentally through a deeper understanding of the problem: 'This is not a little local difficulty. This cuts to the heart of things. It is a test of the authenticity of the Christian faith.'⁶

As Simon Barrow, director of the think tank Ekklesia, writes:

The Christian church supposedly witnesses to a God whose love changes lives, transcends tribal boundaries and puts the poorest and most vulnerable – not least the violated and abused – first. In practice, however, church bodies often behave in ways that flatly contradict this message, even rendering bureaucratic lack of concern, evasion and refusal of accountability in a language of piety that only adds insult to deep, life-long injury.⁷

This book shifts the context of sexual abuse in the Church away from surface policies and guidelines (important though they are). It also aims to look beyond the cycle of harrowing account of clergy abuse followed (eventually) by hand-wringing apologies and reviews of lessons learned by the Church, where someone or some people are blamed and assurances given that practices have changed, only to be – so often – followed by further horror stories. Where accounts are included in this book, it is with the focus of exploring the underlying attitudes, habits, traditions and structures – structures that can dominate ordinary human responses.

Any abuse, and especially sexual abuse, is always difficult to think about (so I could understand the reluctance in the diocesan office), partly because it 'disturbs our normal orientation to reality'. At a deep level it is a breach of one of the central foundations of social order, the maintenance of the sexual boundary between generations, and so it is 'an attack on generational difference',

on the sexually vulnerable and immature child or young person by the adult.⁸ In the Church sexual abuse by the ordained adds a further disturbing dimension, for it is betrayal by those who preach of love and kindness and moral standards. This book argues that it is almost inevitable to want to emotionally defend against these strong disturbing feelings by projection, denial and repression. These same defences are then used by the institutional church when faced with such disclosures and the distress of victims and survivors. In all forms of abuse issues of power and control are fundamental, so, again, perhaps it is not surprising to see these same issues replicated and repeated when the person who has experienced abuse either as a child, a young person or as an adult reports to those in authority about what has happened to them. It is suggested in this book that the secrecy and deception shown by the institutional church in this situation, results from a similar desire for power and control. It is further suggested that the Church has demonstrated an institutional narcissism not dissimilar to the narcissism and solipsism that characterises the self-justification of most perpetrators. The self-serving entitlement and renunciation of responsibility of the perpetrator, demonstrated by preoccupation, denial and lack of empathy, is then too frequently mirrored by the institution in its response.

The damage caused by such re-enactments which are often covert and insidious is shown to be almost as damaging to the person as the original abuse. The closed-system hierarchical thinking, which accompanies a closing of ranks and the protection of the institution, leaves the person who has been abused outside the so-called Church family; it's an 'us and them' – an exclusive rather than inclusive – response. The denial of the reality for the person who has been abused seems a reflection of an incapacity to emotionally understand or fully appreciate the implications of what has actually happened. Many children have been betrayed in what has been seen in the past as a safe setting, and this has left many distrustful of the Church.

THE EXTENT OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

In the context of the Church the findings of various reviews and accounts point out that the overwhelming majority of abusers are men, men usually in a position of authority such as clergy or church workers of some sort. In June 2019 the Church of

England released safeguarding statistics covering the time frame of 2015-17.⁹ The published figures were compiled largely from parish and diocesan self-assessments and, as has been pointed out, this should be a consideration when trying to interpret them, as usually any person or institution who is asked to assess his or its own performance is likely to give a more favourable analysis than an independent and external assessor might. The report shows that in 2017 there were 3,287 safeguarding concerns or allegations recorded by diocesan safeguarding advisers (DSAs), twelve per cent of these related to clergy. These figures show significant increases from past surveys which may be linked to increased reporting. However, the total recorded cases only relate to those reports which reached the DSA and so it is impossible to tell whether concerns or allegations made at a local level made it up the chain in what is essentially a discretionary reporting policy. As the campaign group Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors (MACSAS)¹⁰ points out, another area of concern is that two thirds of those reports which did reach DSAs were not reported to the statutory authorities and so were dealt with internally or dismissed; this statistic is linked to the high threshold that the House of Bishops' guidance sets for reporting a case to the authorities. It also illustrates well the Church's tendency to deal with things in-house which has led to numerous serious safeguarding failures in the past. The same report notes that only 39 cases led to disciplinary action against clergy and only 33 cases led to disciplinary action against lay people, that is, only 2.2 per cent, and it is unclear and unpublished what the outcome of these procedures were.

SOME DEFINITIONS

In this book I regularly use the term the 'institutional church'. As Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead explain, the Church has always been both national and congregational, both are needed. By the institutional church I mean the national and diocesan organisation of the Church of England, where hierarchy, structure, systems and factions take precedence over relationship. Here the complexity that you find in any institution is 'multiplied by its antiquity, linkages with state and society, diocesan and parish system, connection to other churches in the Communion, and scale. . . . It's a recipe for paranoia, paralysis and multiplying

complexity.’ The institutional church is not the local church, ‘which baptized, married, conducted funerals, organized fetes and pageants, ran schools, rang bells and looked after roofs’.¹¹ Local churches have their own formal and informal ways of organising, largely oblivious of decisions at synod, battles between factions and scandals. National projects trickle down via the dioceses through to the parish setting, where they are moulded to fit the setting – or not. The institutional church is the hierarchy of senior clerics and the structures and rules that surround them.

There’s an ongoing debate about the use of the terms, ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’. Some people identify as a victim, while others prefer the term survivor. Victim is often more appropriate when discussing a particular crime, especially if recently committed, or when linked to the criminal justice system. Generally, survivor has been the preferred term in this book where it refers to someone who has gone through a period of recovery. It’s also appropriate when discussing the long-term effects of sexual violence.¹² Survivor is the term used by those campaigning and involved in church safeguarding. However, the value-laden idea of passive victim and strong survivor has led to a counter argument where survivor: ‘paints a misleading picture of victimhood, and healing, while silently promoting a super-human response that encourages victims to “get over” an unspeakable violation. All so that those around them can feel more comfortable when faced with the realities of such a heinous act.’¹³ The term victim can be reclaimed and reinterpreted as exemplifying fortitude and as a reminder of the reality of what happened. For, whilst time passes, trauma sadly does not; and this is discussed in Chapter 2. What changes is the person’s ability to manage and deal with what happened to them.

I have tended to use the term perpetrator or abuser when discussing clergy abuse. As is explained in Chapter 3, there are different labels attached to those who are attracted to different ages, which is why the term paedophilia does not cover some of the clergy involved with adolescents and young people. The term perpetrator or abuser places the crime foremost with the man who has committed it, and in this book all the perpetrators are men. Research has shown that, when the word priest or vicar or clergy has been used, this is seen as a ‘genderless term’, even when the clergy person is male. This can then imply that somehow the desexualised man (because he is a man of God) was ‘led on’ by the sexualised child or young person.¹⁴

Psychoanalysis is one of the main perspectives used to uncover the reasons behind the ineptitude, the lack of urgency and the poor levels of empathy shown by the institutional church when dealing with situations of abuse and the people who report them. By this, I mean awareness of unconscious, as well as conscious, psychological processes and the belief that all people possess unconscious thoughts, feelings, desires and memories – some of which may cause anxiety if they emerge into consciousness and thus against which a person may react defensively. The idea of defence mechanisms has proved useful; these are the ways that an individual or an organisation avoids or resists having to think about something that causes anxiety. This might include denial or repression but, usually, projection, which involves unconsciously pushing onto others one's own unacceptable thoughts, motives or feelings. This can also take place at a collective level against groups or types of people that threaten the organisation's well-being. Interestingly, the Church has often been wary of or threatened by psychological insights and support unless it has the prefix 'Christian' – such as Christian counselling – which perhaps makes it sound a lot safer than psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Rather than enter further into this debate, I quote Carl Jung, who engaged in many a discussion with theologians and religious leaders. He saw analytic thinking as a tool rather than an end in itself: 'Analytical psychology only helps us to find the way to the religious experience that makes us whole . . . analytical psychology teaches us that *attitude* which meets a transcendent reality halfway.'¹⁵ It is this psychological attitude that has been employed in this book to help understand 'why'.

Whilst this book is about a religious institution there is little if any theology included. Spiritual abuse is defined and discussed later in Chapter 10 but any abuse that takes place in a religious context will inevitably deeply alter and often damage the person's relationship with God, especially when religious rituals and theological justifications have been used. The work of Alistair McFadyen¹⁶ is worth noting here; in *Bound to Sin* he traces how one of the after-effects of abuse is that the survivor is left with a constrained identity. Here he discusses the need for the person to hold himself together against any repetition of the chaos and disintegration that was experienced by the sexual abuse. He feels that this then blocks access to transcendent sources of meaning, energy, truth and value. There is an inevitable undercutting of

genuine joy in oneself, others and God. However, therapy means that one's approach to the trauma can change and healing is ever possible and, for many, their personal belief system and a dependence on their faith can help. One further theological thought is on the ubiquitous 'ethic' of forgiveness which has been badly misused by the Church. It has been put forward endlessly as something demanded of the victims and survivors. For example, many survivors speak 'painfully of being exhorted to forgive their abuser, and of being blamed for their own suffering, for the abuser's suffering and for everyone else's suffering if they fail to do so'.¹⁷ So much so that it has become a cliché, catchphrase theology and part of the propaganda, without any appreciation that recovery from abuse is a long-term and deeply personal process. The historic demotion of justice for forgiveness compromises insight, compassion and action and so the person who has been abused once again has his/her trust betrayed. The 'mission of forgiveness' is in this context simply poor theology.

THE CHAPTERS

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 cover recent experiences of abusive situations that have taken place in the Church. We turn immediately in Chapter 2 to the experiences of the survivors. Their voices are central to the book and need to be heard. It is emphasised that each person has a different story to tell and has been affected differently by what happened to him or her. Speaking out and challenging someone who has authority over one is enormously difficult, if not impossible, for most children and, indeed, for adults too. Victims are easily silenced and often remain silent, there are difficult feelings of fear, shame, guilt and uncertainty.¹⁸ As one victim reported feeling: 'What happens to us does not happen to nice people who go to church.'¹⁹ Those who do speak out are very brave and to be praised, but many are never able to speak about what happened to them, or only if their own mental health breaks down later in life. The after-effects of such abuse are life-long and can be deeply damaging for mental and physical health, in relationships, lost income and distress and this is also explored. Three accounts are given of clergy abuse; the third account is of someone whom I worked with in psychotherapy many years ago. The accounts are sad and at times horrific, but within each account there is also a sense of resilience.

In Chapter 3 the mind of the abuser is explored. The accounts included in this chapter have proved to be a contrast to the survivors, who were clearly aware of their feelings of distress, looking for ways to relieve this and get justice for or understanding about what had happened to them. When running training courses in the diocese of Bath and Wells, I sometimes used videos provided by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation. These included extracts from two priests. My experience of those film accounts was the same as that described by Alex Renton: 'watching the videos, there's a disturbing sense that they are performing in a scene of their own long life story, that this latest turn provides another outing for their egos'.²⁰ The bland accounts and the false lines learnt, contribute to colourless narratives. This seems to suggest that the inability to be able to reflect on what they have done reveals the extent of their psychological damage. In this chapter I attempt to understand what might have been going on in the mind of Peter Ball and also draw on material connected to three of the abusers from the diocese of Chichester. How did their role as priests and belief in God co-exist with being an abuser? The final part of this chapter includes the account of a paedophile who sought treatment so that he would not offend. I suggest that this is what taking responsibility, and being able to take responsibility, for your life and actions looks like.

Chapter 4 is based on three accounts of the way that the Church handled abuse allegations. The first is a situation from Bath and Wells during the time that I was working as safeguarding advisor. When one is in the middle of dealing with something it is often hard to understand what one has been caught up in but, in this case, and indeed in the other two that are discussed in this chapter, it becomes clear that the Church has responded using a pattern similar to that of the abuser. This means that secrecy is to the fore. The second case discussed shows how the Church engaged in avoidance, proceduralism and obfuscation. This was not only about handling the actual disclosure but also in the follow-up claim for compensation where litigation games were played in the name of the Church and caused further trauma for the survivor. The third situation explores the strange system whereby one bishop is investigating another bishop. It may appear anomalous but unfortunately reflects a great weakness in the way that the Church has dealt with allegations. The situations described have contributed to a sense of frustration, anger and betrayal within and towards the Church.

The next part of the book turns to look at why the Church has been unable to respond appropriately, despite all the apologies, the new policies and even new systems put in place, and the series of lessons-learned reviews and reports – including some that are currently in the pipeline. Chapter 5 explores how the superficial adoption of safeguarding guidelines and training programmes and the appearance that the problem is being tackled has failed to make inroads into what is a deeply embedded structure of power and control in the institutional church. Examples are included about how the guidelines have been interpreted or misinterpreted. There is also a look at the system of the church insurers and their relationship to the institution, and how this has impacted on post-abuse compensation claims. Whilst there is currently a renewed focus on survivors, the question remains whether this can translate into a meaningful real change, or whether it is merely, as before, window-dressing.

Chapter 6 gets to the heart of the problem which is that the organisation of the Church is more or less a closed hierarchical grouping, which by its explicit and implicit structures nurtures a culture of almost unchallengeable authority. The explicit structure is characterised by a division into the central ‘subjects’ and the ‘others’ whom one could call ‘objects’. Using this split between ‘us and them’ means that the subject is the clergy and the object is the laity (those who attend). In the implicit mode, men, whether clergy or laity, are the subject and women laity and children (if seen at all) are the object or are absent (and, as the predominant discourse, this perspective is then unfortunately almost inevitably adopted where women are also clergy). Within the implicit mode, archbishops, bishops and archdeacons are ‘super subjects’. Looking at instances of what has happened in the past and contemporary examples show that the ‘victim’ who discloses is neither ‘subject’ nor ‘object’ but rather placed in a liminal place, on the boundary of the Church as ‘family’, a ‘special’ category rather mirroring the ‘special relationship’ – a term that some perpetrators use to impose silence. The chapter discusses how the powerful central core and those on the margin interact. There is analysis of networks, those that are formally set up and those that have evolved informally. Finally, I look at the issue of class within the Church and how this emerged in a specific situation.

Chapter 7 looks at two specific examples of charismatic leaders who have gone on to abuse their power and prestige. The Church

is excited by charisma and what seem to be especially 'holy' leaders – particularly when it leads to success in terms of increased church attendance or positive media publicity. However, such reflected glory came at a price in both these situations for the Church too was hoodwinked, or, perhaps, instead chose not to see what was happening, with dire consequences for the victims caught up in abusive practices. For when allegations were made the response of the Church was to deny and diminish those who came forward – until there was no alternative.

In Chapter 8 it is suggested that the tradition of the British public school system has influenced, and continues to influence, the institutional church and so continues to affect the way that the Church responds to child sexual abuse allegations against clergy. This chapter looks at boys' boarding schools and includes discussion on the long-term effects of the emotional damage done by removing children from their parents at a young age. The ethos of entitlement fostered by such schools continues to affect the institutional church and senior clerics. Such privilege and sense of entitlement comes at a cost, not only in the constricted emotional response found amongst those in the hierarchy who were sent away to school, but also in the rule-bound ethos and traditions that, as a result, have become embedded in church structures. The abuse experienced by a large number of public school boys at Christian summer camps is discussed.

Sex, sexism and gender are discussed in the context of power and control in Chapter 9. Divisions over who can become clergy in terms of their gender and sexual orientation have preoccupied and dominated the Church for many years. Sex and gender issues are also important to any understanding of the institution's response to child sexual abuse allegations. The dilemma of the ordination of women and the issue of gay clergy (married or not) have provided and continue to provide preoccupying diversions from tackling the inherent discomfort and reluctance to acknowledge that sexuality, in all its diverse manifestations, is an essential aspect of what makes us human and alive.

Finally, in Chapter 10 I define what has gone on as a deep spiritual sickness within the institution. The Church has in its mishandling further spiritually abused many survivors. As Rosie Harper writes, 'How the Church responds to survivors, how we as individuals respond to survivors, is an infallible indicator of the sort of God we believe in. . . . That sort of God is a tiny, religious,

defensive God and I think that is where we are.²¹ It seems that there are possibilities of small changes but whether these can really take hold and affect the underlying culture remains in the balance. The much-vaunted survivor-led renewal that the Church is promising will turn out to be another avoidance or deception unless the whole Church takes on the responsibility.²²

SAMPLE