

Blog from the new lead safeguarding bishop, Jonathan Gibbs, as he takes up the role.

This week I formally take up the role of Lead Bishop for Safeguarding in the Church of England. This was announced back in February in the run-up to General Synod and before the COVID-19 virus changed the face of our daily lives in a way none of us could have imagined.

The Coronavirus pandemic is causing all of us to review our priorities and has added a whole new dimension to the concept of “safeguarding”, making us all the more mindful of the need to care for ourselves and for one another, physically, mentally and emotionally. What follows are some reflections on my own personal safeguarding journey as I prepare to take up my new role.

In February 2019, I attended a meeting at the General Synod which was to change my life – not something perhaps one can always say! The event was a performance by Patrick Sandford of his one-man play “Groomed”. It relates compellingly and shockingly the story of the abuse he suffered as a nine-year-old schoolboy. I knew this before I went, but what I was not expecting was what happened as the play came to a close.

Suddenly and without warning I was overcome with emotion and broke down in floods of tears. Thankfully one of the National Safeguarding Team took me to a quiet place where we could talk. Completely out of the blue, the performance had brought to the surface things that had happened to me as a child at about the same age as Patrick. They were nothing like as horrific as what he had been through, more the kind of thing that is sometimes referred to as adverse childhood experiences, but in that moment some of the pain and hurt and anger that had been buried away for fifty years came bursting to the surface.

Since that time, I have been through counselling, which has been enormously helpful, and I have begun to come to terms with what I have carried inside me all this time. It has helped me to make sense of many things in my life, especially why I have reacted at times quite viscerally to situations of stress or perceived threat.

I am talking about this, because in part it explains why I have taken on the role of Lead Bishop for Safeguarding. I have been involved in this kind of work for some time, as the former chair of a charity supporting vulnerable children and families in Merseyside, as chair of our Diocesan Board of Education and as a member of the NSSG over the last three years. But now I understand more about why at a gut level I have always, at least to some extent, simply “got” what this is about, including understanding something of what a huge and life-long impact abuse and trauma have on those who experience it.

And that leads me to the first and most important priority for my role as Lead Bishop, which is that we should follow through on the promise made in February’s General Synod debate that we must develop a more fully survivor-centred approach to safeguarding. As I said in the debate, the world looks and feels different to those of us who have suffered abuse and trauma, and therefore we need the involvement of survivors to help us see the world through their eyes and to help us to shape the way we do things based on their experience. Their willingness to work with us is a precious and sacred gift – including and perhaps especially when what they say can be difficult to hear. Learning from survivors will be crucial if we are to learn why, as seems to have happened too often, the Church failed to see and understand and act on what it was being told.

The second thing on which we must deliver concerns our promise to move beyond apology towards concrete action, including with regard to redress. At least one survivor has already pointed out to me that they are still awaiting an apology – and the season of lament and apology is by no means over. But at the same time, we must also take action, including undertaking reviews of past conduct, leading where necessary to

appropriate disciplinary action where there have been culpable failures. We also need urgently to put in place proper counselling support for survivors and to devise more humane and compassionate ways of assessing and delivering adequate compensation as part of redress for those we have failed.

We have to also take seriously the need for a greater degree of independence in the organisation and operation of safeguarding throughout the Church. Safeguarding has to be thoroughly embedded in the life of the Church, otherwise it simply will not work. On the other hand, however, we must find ways of building in a degree of independence which means that the structures and hierarchy of the Church cannot either subtly or explicitly impede the work of safeguarding or harm the interests of the vulnerable and abused. We need for instance to clarify the duty of those with concerns to take them to the appropriate safeguarding professional or authority and take out of the hands of clergy (including bishops) and church officials the right to filter or obstruct such reporting. We need to look for instance at what this means for DSAs in relation to their Diocesan structures, and we need also to look at what this might mean for the NST in relation to the National Church Institutions, the NCIs.

Our first commitment must always be to seek God's reign of justice and wholeness, not falsely to protect the reputation of individuals or of institutions, so that in the years to come we can move towards making the Church into what it is meant to be – a community where people find healing and wholeness through Christ, and a place of refuge and safety for all.

+Jonathan Gibbs

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