

Safeguarding Children in the  
Church of England:  
A Theological Understanding of  
Child Abuse and Safeguarding  
through a Child-Attentive Lens

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# Summary

This briefing paper presents a summary of a research project seeking a deeper theological understanding of child abuse and safeguarding within the Church of England. The research developed within three strands:

## ***A discourse analysis of the Church's safeguarding policies***

Identified a gulf between the theology and praxis of safeguarding:

- A positive but limited understanding of each child being made in the image of God and therefore having inherent value and dignity
- A limited theological and sociological understanding of child abuse and its impact
- Recognising the Church as an institution and a worshipping community, but missing the centrality of the Church in relation to God.

## ***Focus groups with children and young people***

Participants brought unique insights into how churches can help children and young people be safe and feel safe:

- Young people want to feel welcome and able to join in
- They want to be respected and included
- They want a safe and secure environment built on trust

By making its theology central to its approach to safeguarding, the Church could bridge the current gap between theology and praxis, integrate safeguarding more strongly with the totality of the Church's ministry with children and young people, and do so in a more holistic, respectful and participatory way.

## ***A review of 'child-attentive' theologies***

- Identified a richer theological understanding of:
- The child as both being and becoming a beloved child of God
- Abuse as both evil and sinful: profoundly destructive and robbing children of fullness of life
- The Church as both an institution and the mystical body of Christ

# Background

Child maltreatment, in its various manifestations, is a problem that besets all cultures. While much progress has been made in the wellbeing of children and recognition of children's rights over the past century, many children continue to live in homes characterised by violence. Child victims of abuse and neglect experience the terror of intimidation, verbal or physical injury and many continue to carry the emotional pain of their experiences throughout their lives.

As an institution, the Church is not immune from the reality of child maltreatment. Individuals within church families may experience abuse and neglect, and many suffer abuse even within the supposedly safe confines of the church family. Child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, within the institution of the Church has been the subject of careful scrutiny and criticism, and the Church's response has not always been helpful. This has led, more recently, to a crisis within the structure and leadership of the Church of England, with the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury and calls for a complete shakeup of safeguarding structures within the Church.

In 2016 and 2017, the Faith and Order Commission of the CofE published two theological resources, *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse, and the Church*<sup>1</sup> and *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse*.<sup>2</sup> These documents emphasise that safeguarding children is a theological issue, precisely because 'it concerns how we speak about the God of Jesus Christ in relation to the practical challenges the church faces'.<sup>1</sup>

It is within that context that I have sought to explore whether the riches of theology can provide a meaningful framework within which to understand the phenomenon of child abuse and inform a better response to safeguarding children within the Church of England.

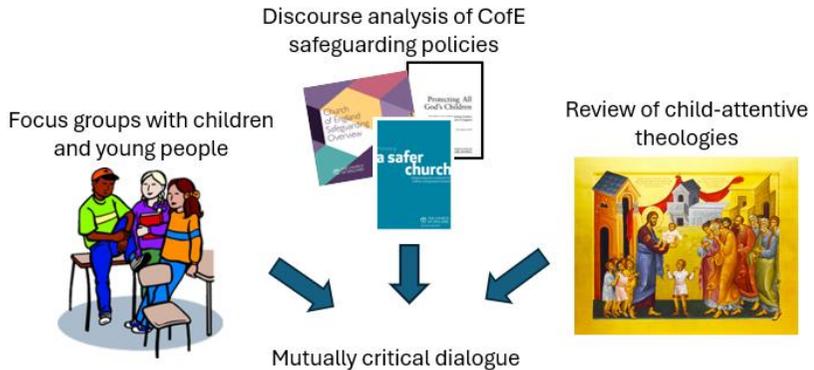
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<sup>1</sup> Church of England Faith and Order Commission. (2016). *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church : A Theological Resource for the Local Church*. London: Church House Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Church of England Faith and Order Commission. (2017). *Forgiveness and reconciliation in the aftermath of abuse*. London: Church House Publishing.

# Approach

The research developed within three strands, which I sought to bring together in a mutually critical dialogue:



The first strand drew on the practice of Discourse Analysis to understand and critique the current CofE policies and guidance on safeguarding children. I focused on three key policy documents identified from the Church's safeguarding webpages: the *Safeguarding Overview*;<sup>3</sup> *Promoting a Safer Church*;<sup>4</sup> and *Protecting All God's Children*.<sup>5</sup> I identified and critiqued key themes in these policies and interpret these in the light of other CofE literature on children and safeguarding, the perspectives of children and young people, and a wider body of child-attentive theologies.

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<sup>3</sup> Church of England. (nd).

[https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/cofe\\_02713\\_safeguardingreview-april19-004.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/cofe_02713_safeguardingreview-april19-004.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Church of England House of Bishops. (2017). *Promoting a Safer Church: Safeguarding policy statement for children, young people and adults*. London: Church House Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> Church of England House of Bishops. (2010). *Protecting All God's Children: the policy for safeguarding children in the Church of England* (4th ed.). London: Church House Publishing.

In the second strand, I worked with 28 children and young people (aged 9-17 years) from four churches in Coventry Diocese, and a steering group of four young people from a church in St Alban's Diocese, to ascertain their views and gain insights into the kind of situations and factors that help young people feel safe or unsafe; how those relate to their experiences in their youth groups; and what the Church might do to help ensure that children and young people are safe and feel safe. Approval for the study was given by the Luther King Research Ethics Committee, University of Manchester. The members of the steering group helped to design and pilot the approach and participated in analysing the focus group data.

The third strand of the research involved an exploration of how children have been portrayed in Christian Theology, including in Child Theology<sup>6</sup> and other Child-Attentive Theologies.<sup>7</sup> I used similar processes of Discourse Analysis to identify and critique both what is good and wholesome in these theologies and what is potentially harmful in the context of safeguarding children, identifying core themes in relation to *the Child, Society and the Church*, and *the Church and the Kingdom*.

Finally, I brought all three strands together in mutually-critical dialogue to address three theological questions:

- a) Who is the child whom we are seeking to safeguard?
- b) What is the nature of the abuse from which we are safeguarding children?
- c) What is the nature and role of the Church in safeguarding children?

Full details of the methods used and the findings of each of the research strands are published in the full thesis which is available at:

<https://petersidebotham.org/safeguarding-children-in-the-church/>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://childtheologymovement.org>

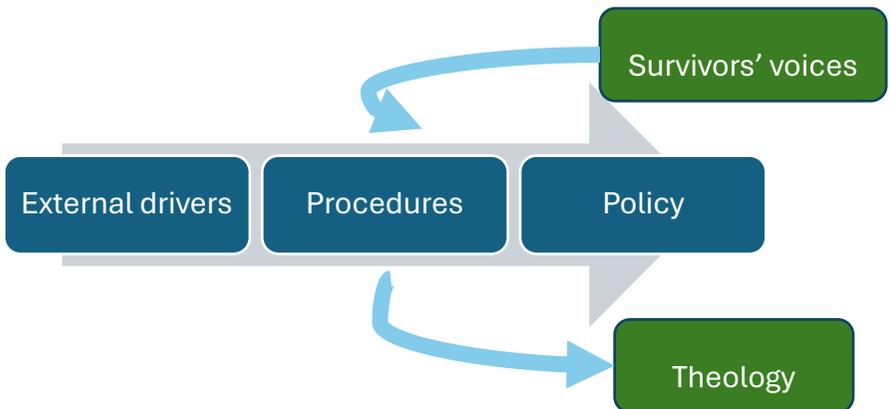
<sup>7</sup> I use the term 'Child-Attentive Theologies' to encompass a wide range of theological thought which seeks to recognize the dignity and full humanity of children, and approaches the theological task of examining beliefs and practices through a child-attentive lens.

# Findings

## Developing policy and procedures

My analysis of the CofE's safeguarding guidance identified an apparent humility, willingness to listen and acceptance of responsibility for safeguarding within the Church. It also identified significant gaps and ambiguities in the underpinning theological understanding of abuse and safeguarding and in how this relates to policy and practice.

While there are two strong theological resources, these came across as disconnected from the policies and procedures and developed later as an afterthought. Likewise, while there is an apparent commitment to listening to survivors, this, too, has been a late development. The pathway that has been followed by the Church comes across as one of external drivers leading to a profusion of procedures and only later to the articulation of more coherent and holistic policies (Figure 1).



## Changing culture?

In response to the inquiries into abuse within the Church, one of the most frequent calls – from both within and outside the Church – is that there needs to be ‘a complete change of culture’. This was stated unambiguously in *Promoting a Safer Church* and was a major theme of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse report on the Anglican Church.<sup>8</sup> It is not always clear, however, what is meant by the call, and what it is that those who call for a culture change are looking for. A culture of suspicion, blame and recrimination will not protect children any better than one of deference, clericalism and protectionism, and is surely not the kind of culture anyone in the Church wants. Without specifying what is meant by culture and what aspects of that need to change, the call becomes a meaningless – and potentially dangerous – trope.

To talk of a single, unified culture in the Church is unhelpful: there are a variety of experiences, meanings and values across and within the churches and traditions that make up the CofE. Nor are these cultures fixed or static: the cultures within the CofE have changed, are changing, and will continue to change. What is important is how those within the Church can shape and mould those experiences, meanings and values that contribute to the culture or climate within the Church, while holding on to the foundational beliefs that make the Church what it is.

Shaping the climate of the Church in an appropriate way depends on being clear about the values and priorities one wants to see in the Church. And that, in turn, depends on what one believes: about the Church, its identity and purpose; about the people (adults and children) who make up the Church and those who come into contact with it; and about the nature and impact of abuse and other forms of harm.

*So, one thing I like about the youth group is that you can be who you are like. You can be yourself without being criticized and everyone respects who you are.*  
(Dylan, 17, he/him)

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<sup>8</sup> Jay, A., Evans, M., Frank, I., & Sharpling, D. (2020). *The Anglican Church. Safeguarding in the Church of England and the Church in Wales*.

## A limited theology?

While there is much clear and thoughtful engagement with the issues raised by abuse in *Forgiveness & Reconciliation* and *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse & the Church*, this is not reflected in the safeguarding policies. I identified ambiguities and limitations in the theology implicit within the policy documents:

- First, a limited theological anthropology, focused on an understanding of children being created in God's image and therefore loved and valued by God. This is placed alongside a portrayal of the child as vulnerable and in need of protection. While both perspectives are good, they are incomplete and fail to capture the wonderful complexity and mystery of what it means to be a child. They risk stripping children of their agency and potential flourishing, denying their brokenness and struggles, viewing them as passive recipients of harm or care.
- Second, a limited theology of sin and evil. This is reflected in a failure to express the truly abhorrent nature of abuse and its immediate and longer-term impact on children. While the Church talks about taking safeguarding seriously, this does not come across as a stance of appreciating fully the seriousness of abuse itself. Alongside this, there is a simplistic portrayal of all abuse as being a misuse of power, failing to capture the complex and nuanced pathways to abuse and a tendency to view all power as harmful, ignoring the necessary and positive aspects of nutritive and integrative power.
- Third, a limited ecclesiology, with the Church portrayed primarily as an institution, and to a lesser extent as a worshipping and witnessing community. The absence of any reference to the more mystical or sacramental aspects of the Church as the Body of Christ runs the risk of separating safeguarding from the heart of what the Church is, of seeing safeguarding as something imposed from outside, rather than stemming from who its members are and what they believe.

The limited and ambiguous theology implicit within the safeguarding policies appears to be at odds with wider thinking within the CofE. The Church, in its literature as far back as the 1980s and in its wider work with children and young people presents a more inclusive, holistic and empowering view of children.

In contrast to the policy documents, the two theological expositions are much clearer in labelling abuse as both sinful and evil, and in acknowledging the profound harmful effects of abuse. They present some thoughtful exploration of the implications of this, particularly in terms of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. They also present a more nuanced view of the nature, use and misuse of power, recognising power as a gift of God to be used well, and exploring how it can be misused in the context of abuse.

In its wider literature, the CofE presents a more explicit and clear ecclesiology than that implied in the safeguarding policies. It is an ecclesiology that affirms the CofE as a communion of churches, part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, embracing both sociological and mystical elements.



## A narrow approach?

My analysis of the CofE safeguarding literature points towards an adult-focused approach with ambiguous and, at times, problematic understanding of the nature and impact of abuse.

While the policies identify the broad nature of abuse and the wide scope of safeguarding, the procedures themselves have a much narrower focus on child sexual abuse by church officers and within church activities. The spiritual impact of abuse is portrayed as only arising out of abuse within the Church, ignoring the profound effects that *any abuse* can have on a child's spiritual development.

The ambiguities and discrepancies between the policies and the procedures risks minimising the importance of a clear focus on directly protecting children from harm within the church context, while at the same time missing the opportunities for the Church to play a broader role in supporting and nurturing children and families.

Both the recent policy documents and the wider CofE safeguarding literature repeatedly emphasise the importance of listening to survivors of abuse and learning from them. The perspective of too many survivors of abuse in the Church, however, is that this is more rhetoric than reality. My analysis of the voices represented in these documents is that these are almost exclusively the powerful: senior clergy, church officers, and educated professionals. There is a striking lack of diversity in what is presented, and a complete absence of any children's voices.

While the most explicit portrayal of children in the policy documents is that they are made in God's image and loved and valued by God, the more pervasive (though implicit) portrayal is that they are vulnerable and in need of our care and protection; children are typically portrayed as passive recipients of harm or care. Nowhere is the horrific impact of abuse on children spelt out, nor is there any concept of the brokenness that is present in so many children's lives.

The manner in which children are spoken of in the documents is bland; it captures nothing of the vibrancy, life and energy that children bring, nor of the sorrows and hurts that are an inherent part of growing. The effect of

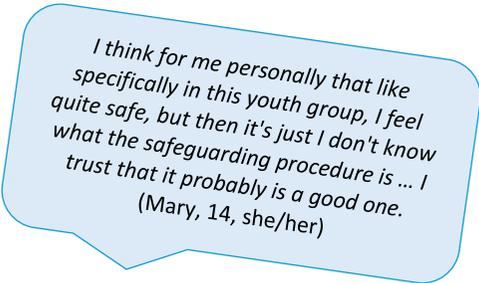
this is to make children almost invisible within the policy documents: they may be policies for children, but the children themselves are missing.

In a similar vein, there is a striking absence in the safeguarding policies of any recognition of families as a part of the church community or a significant aspect of children's lives. This narrow approach is at odds with a much richer, more nuanced and empowering perspective in wider CofE materials on children and families.

In contrast to this, the children and young people who participated in my focus groups came across as enthusiastic and keen to be involved. They were able to express their views freely and at times with impressive breadth and depth.

Two of the strongest perspectives to come from the focus groups were the desire to be accepted for who they were – with all their diversity, and an emphasis on having agency and choice. The young people wanted to be respected, and reacted to any sense that others in the church were judging them. While they clearly appreciated structure and boundaries, they also wanted to be able to choose how and when they participated. All these perspectives were important to the young people in how safe they felt within their churches.

These young people valued and enjoyed their churches/youth groups and wanted to see them improve further for children and young people. In a way, for these young people, an inclusive, welcoming and participatory atmosphere in the church was more important than any specifics of policies and procedures. The young people expressed trust in the safeguarding procedures and trust in their leaders. This aspect of trust came across implicitly as central to effective safeguarding and extended to the whole church community.



*I think for me personally that like specifically in this youth group, I feel quite safe, but then it's just I don't know what the safeguarding procedure is ... I trust that it probably is a good one.*  
(Mary, 14, she/her)

## A pragmatic atheism?

In his book *Being the Body of Christ in the Age of Management*,<sup>9</sup> Lyndon Shakespeare critiques what he sees as current managerialist approaches to understanding the Church. He argues that a managerialist approach portrays the Church as a social body in materialist terms with a purpose limited to survival and growth, and, as such, fails to capture the unique and profound purpose of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ.

The fundamental assumptions of this managerialism are that given the right strategies, people can control their world, and that the true worth of any activity is demonstrated through objective, measurable outcomes, notably growth. These assumptions – analogous to a ‘pragmatic atheism’<sup>10</sup> – are then reflected in the pragmatic ecclesiology implicit within the safeguarding approach: one which sees the Church primarily as an institution, a managed organisation, and secondarily as a social network, a worshipping, witnessing community, but ignores any understanding of the Church in relation to God.

Within this framework, anything that threatens the efficiency and effectiveness of the Church as a managed organisation needs to be controlled or eliminated. Abuse within the Church can be seen primarily as a threat to the Church, and the primary goal of safeguarding becomes protecting the integrity of the organisation. In such an environment, the abhorrent nature of abuse itself and its impact on victims (and on perpetrators and others) becomes lost in the overriding need to manage it as a threat. My findings suggest that this approach certainly has been and may still be prevalent within the CofE.

The striking absence of any reference in the safeguarding policies to abuse as evil or sinful betrays a rationalist mindset: that abuse can be explained in purely sociological or psychological ways and therefore managed as such. The implications are that if we can properly understand abuse and the circumstances and factors leading to it, we can then eliminate it.

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<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, L. (2016). *Being the body of Christ in the age of management*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

<sup>10</sup> McFadyen, A. I. (2000). *Bound to sin: abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian doctrine of sin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This perspective is implicit within the frequent statements in both secular and church reviews that ‘this must never happen again’. Such an approach fails to acknowledge the profound and pervasive nature of sin and evil; that there will always be those who harm children – both intentionally and unintentionally; and that we can never fully keep children safe from harm, no matter how many procedures and protections we put in place. It also fails to grasp the deep and profound nature of the impact of abuse: that it is not only a violation of the child’s body, nor even of their mind or emotions, but it is also a violation of who they are in relation to God: their very identity, their soul, and their ability to know and respond to the God of love who made them, loves them, and longs for them to live life in all its fullness.

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*

*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*



*Things that make me feel safe  
(Dennis, 10, he/him)*

# Reimagining safeguarding in the Church of England

## Reframing the discourse

Reframing the discourse around child maltreatment as a theological as well as a sociological and psychological narrative is essential if the Church is to take seriously the nature and impact of child abuse and its role in safeguarding children. In his thesis on abuse and the Holocaust,<sup>11</sup> Alistair McFadyen points out the limited standard of reference in many secular discourses: that of the need to maintain ‘normal physiological, emotional or social functioning’. In a similar vein, a rights-based discourse sets the standard of reference in a limited way as the preservation of an individual’s rights – rights to protection, provision and participation.

In contrast, a theological standard of reference is based on God’s invitation to abundance of life in relationship: with God, with our fellow creatures and with the whole of creation. My exploration of Child-Attentive Theologies leads me to a similar conclusion – that the narrative of safeguarding in the Church needs to move beyond that of protecting children from abuse to promoting their full flourishing as children of God, invited into the abundance of life that God wants for them (John 10:10).

In my review of Child-Attentive Theologies I identified the kernels of a more holistic and affirming theology in keeping with a deeper narrative of the nature of the child, the nature and impact of abuse, and the nature and role of the Church:

- First, these Child-Attentive Theologies suggest a move from a narrow perspective of the child as created in God’s image to one of the child as both being and becoming a beloved child of God. This perspective is rooted in the Incarnation: in God’s identification, in Jesus, with the vulnerability and interdependence of humanity; in Jesus’ development as a child, growing in wisdom and stature and

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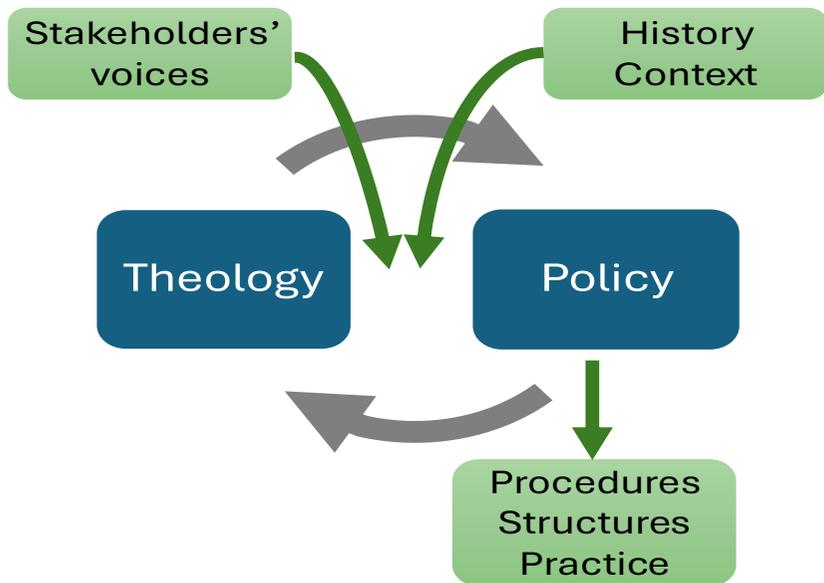
<sup>11</sup> McFadyen, A. I. (2000). *Bound to sin: abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian doctrine of sin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

in divine and human favour; and in the affirmation of Jesus as God's beloved child. Such a perspective affirms the dignity and belovedness of the child; it acknowledges their incompleteness and vulnerability as well as their agency; and it looks forward to God's invitation to fullness of life in Christ.

- Child-Attentive Theologies recognise that abuse is both evil and sinful; they acknowledge the profound destructive impact of abuse, recognising that all abuse has a spiritual impact, robbing the child of the fullness of life which God intends and extending in its impact to include those around the child. Such a perspective recognises the perpetrator's responsibility for their actions, while acknowledging the many factors that may have contributed to the abuse. It recognises the potential in each person to hurt a child, or to be drawn into the betrayal of trust that occurs with abuse. It sets abuse within a wider context of societal values and attitudes that may objectify, dismiss or devalue children, and each person's complicity in that. It locates the response to abuse in a framework of both temporal, human justice and ultimate divine judgement and justice. And it recognises the potential for healing, forgiveness and restoration inherent within the Gospel.
- Child-Attentive Theologies embrace Jesus' call and example to welcome and bless children. They move from a portrayal of the Church as simply an institution or a worshipping community to one that embraces the mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ, a covenantal, pilgrim community, learning and growing together in relation to God. Within this perspective, children are welcomed as an integral part of this covenantal community, supported by the community in nurture and discipleship, and bringing their gifts to the community. It welcomes children with their families, as part of the bigger family of the Church, and supports parents in their divine vocation of loving and nurturing their children and helping them respond to God's love.

## Theology and praxis: resetting the relationship

Recognising the gaps between the theology and praxis of safeguarding in the Church, I believe there needs to be a resetting of this relationship, to allow a deeper theological understanding to inform the safeguarding policies of the Church. This needs to draw on the riches of both scripture and tradition, and to take account of the voices and experience of all relevant stakeholders, including both survivors and children, and of the current and historical context of safeguarding in the Church and society (Figure 2).



This approach to safeguarding is not a static or fixed model. It involves an ongoing dialogue between theology and policy in which both are open to fresh perspectives and can evolve to take account of the context and experience of all those affected, while retaining and building on the riches of tradition. Out of this dialogue, the procedures, structures and practice can be modified as needed, but form part of a cohesive and meaningful whole.

The recent Archbishops' Commission on *Reimagining Care*<sup>12</sup> provides a creative example of mutual dialogue between theology and policy, informed by relevant stakeholders' voices and taking account of the history and context of contemporary social care. While the underlying context and the specific values may be different, the Church could learn a lot from this Commission as it moves forward with its reforms of safeguarding.



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<sup>12</sup> Dixon, A., & Newcome, J. (2023). [\*Care and Support Reimagined\*](#).

## Respectful Listening

For this dialogue between theology, policy and praxis to be truly meaningful and relevant, it needs to engage with the whole church community and to listen respectfully to the voices of all those with a direct interest, particularly, though not exclusively, the voices of both survivors of abuse and of children and young people.

The need to listen to survivors has been well recognised and acknowledged by the Church over a long period. The recent *Survivor Participation Framework*,<sup>13</sup> which has been co-produced with survivors, represents an important development in this.



Building on this, the Church – both local and national – needs to hear the prophetic voice survivors can bring.<sup>14</sup> This prophetic voice extends beyond pointing out its failures in responding to abuse and may reflect a far deeper area of learning and growth for the Church.<sup>15</sup> The experience of survivors needs to inform not just the safeguarding policy and procedures of the Church, but also any ongoing theological reflections on abuse and safeguarding, and the outworking of the life of the Church in its worship, witness and service.

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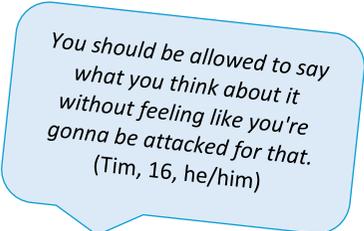
<sup>13</sup> Athanasiou, I., & Church of England National Safeguarding Team. (2025). [National Survivor Participation Framework](#).

<sup>14</sup> Church of England Faith and Order Commission. (2017). *Forgiveness and reconciliation in the aftermath of abuse*. London: Church House Publishing. (p. 56)

<sup>15</sup> Shooter, S. (2012). *How survivors of abuse relate to God: the authentic spirituality of the annihilated soul*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

So, too, does the voice and experience of children and young people. The children and young people who participated in this project demonstrated important insights and, I suggest, have something truly valuable to contribute to the Church. In the focus groups, the young people highlighted the importance of the atmosphere of the Church in helping them feel safe and secure. They emphasised being respected for who they are, being welcomed and included, and having both structure and choice in their engagement. They also demonstrated how important trust is in their participation in the Church: trust in their parents, their leaders and in others in the church community.

Listening attentively to young people is challenging. Nevertheless, they have something crucial to contribute – not just to the ongoing development of safeguarding, but also to the overall worship, discipleship and mission of the Church. It may not be easy, but with commitment, courage and imagination, children and young people could be far more effectively included in the life of the Church.



*You should be allowed to say  
what you think about it  
without feeling like you're  
gonna be attacked for that.  
(Tim, 16, he/him)*

The Methodist Church's Youth Participation Strategy,<sup>16</sup> for example, includes a wealth of approaches to and resources for engaging with young people. In a similar vein, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has developed a highly effective programme enabling young people to be involved in its strategy and more broadly in contributing to the development of health policy.<sup>17</sup> The CofE could do a lot more to prioritise the participation of children and young people in its safeguarding and in the wider life of the Church, at national, diocesan and local parish level.

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<sup>16</sup> Boyd, J., Dodd, C., Norman, L., Quinlan, R., & Rowe, S. (nd.). [\*Voice Activated: Developing Participation in the Methodist Church.\*](#)

<sup>17</sup> Wood, D., Turner, G., & Straw, F. (2010). [\*Not just a phase: A Guide to the Participation of Children and Young People in Health Services.\*](#) London: RCPCH.

## Agendas for Safeguarding

In his theological reflections on *Renewal and Reform*, Sam Wells pointed out the need to address ‘what is good, and needs keeping and fostering; what is no longer helpful (and in some cases never was); and what we don’t currently have, or have regard for, but we need’.<sup>18</sup>

I suggest the same approach is needed in reimagining safeguarding within the CofE. While I intentionally set out to critique the Church’s current safeguarding policies and guidance, I found much that is positive within those. Others have argued for changes to the structures supporting safeguarding<sup>19 20</sup> and the Church is actively responding to this.<sup>21</sup> I believe that the procedures themselves are appropriate and rigorous and that the policies are basically sound. The two theological reflections, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation* and *Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church* are deeply thoughtful and helpful resources.

What is needed is a more coherent and integrated approach between these different elements, the training, online resources, and the wider ministries of the Church, including its ministries with families, children and young people. This, in turn, could lead to a simplification of both policy and procedures so that the practical outworking of safeguarding is more caring, compassionate and just, and flows from a deeper conviction and commitment by all, rather than from any sense that this has been imposed on the Church or done begrudgingly.

The more recent e-manual and the safeguarding learning and development framework both show signs of a shift in that direction. However, my analysis shows that the Church still has a long way to go if safeguarding is ‘to move away from something that is in some respects external/imposed upon the Church, to something that flows from within the soul of the Church’.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wells, S. (nd.). [\*A future that’s bigger than the past: renewal and reform in the Church of England.\*](#)

<sup>19</sup> Jay, A. (2024). [\*The Future of Church Safeguarding.\*](#)

<sup>20</sup> Wilkinson, S. (2023). [\*Review of the Independent Safeguarding Board.\*](#)

<sup>21</sup> General Synod. (2025). [\*GS 2378 Future of Church Safeguarding.\*](#)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/learning-and-development>

My exploration through this thesis suggests three different agendas through which the Church could reimagine safeguarding:

- First, to prioritise the prevention of and response to abuse within the context of the community, worship and mission of the Church. This is the **protection** agenda: seeking to protect children and adults, including those with particular vulnerabilities, from abuse. It focuses on sexual abuse and spiritual abuse but is not limited to these. It recognises that the perpetrators may be clergy or lay people, church officers or ordinary members of the church family, or participants in any church activities.
- Second, to engage with a broader **safeguarding** agenda, recognising that most maltreatment occurs outside the Church, within neighbourhoods, homes and families, and includes a wide spectrum of abuse and neglect. The Church can offer something through its teaching, discipleship, service and mission, through its support of parents and families, and through proclaiming and modelling an alternative narrative, one of hope, respect, empowerment and inter-dependence.
- Third, to listen respectfully and respond with humility to those who have been abused in the Church and have been let down by the way in which the Church has responded. This is an agenda of **repentance and restoration**. The voices of survivors are clear: the responses they have received have too often compounded the abuse they experienced rather than providing any safety, healing or restoration. This is a complex area, one in which the Church has done a lot, but clearly still has a long way to go. It will involve further listening, sensitive approaches to repentance and apology, careful consideration of reparations and reconciliation, and attention to the gifts that survivors themselves bring to the Church.

It is important to distinguish these three different agendas. **Protection**, if it is to be meaningful and owned, needs to be implemented by the Church – in its local manifestations. It may be accountable to or overseen by an independent body, but cannot be delivered by such without becoming divorced from overall Church life and seen even more as an unwarranted imposition. The broader **safeguarding** agenda will only be meaningful if it is an outflowing of what the Church believes, and therefore is embedded in the worship, teaching, discipleship and life of the Church. **Restoration and repentance** presents a mixed challenge: **repentance** can only come from within the Church; but, as a party in the hurt experienced by so many survivors, the Church cannot lead in any steps towards **restoration** or reconciliation.

It is my belief and hope that approaching safeguarding in the Church as an ongoing dialogue between theology, policy and praxis, taking note of the history and tradition of the Church and of the current context of community and family life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and listening attentively to the voices of all stakeholders, including both survivors of abuse and children and young people, the CofE could bridge the current gap between theology and praxis, integrate safeguarding more strongly with the totality of the Church's ministry with children and young people, and do so in a more holistic, respectful and participatory way. Such an approach can help the Church move away from a pragmatic atheism which sees abuse primarily as a threat to the institution, to one based on core Christian beliefs that recognises the full horror of abuse as evil and sinful, and that seeks the fullness of life of all children as integral members of the mystical Body of Christ in today's world.

Make sure that everyone there feels safe  
and welcome and not feel like they feel  
forced to do anything they don't want to do.  
(Maisie, 11, they/them)

## About the Author

I am a retired paediatrician and emeritus professor of child health at Warwick Medical School. I have specialised in child protection work both clinically and academically for over 25 years. I have served in child protection practice at a local and national level, including sitting on the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, and have helped develop systems for child death review and serious case review in the UK, Jordan and Poland. I have over 100 publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals.



As a practising Christian I am keen to apply my faith to every area of my life, including my work. I am particularly interested in how the Church of England can further develop its approach to safeguarding, building on a strong theological base and making sure that children, young people and families are kept at the centre.

This briefing paper summarises research submitted to the University of Manchester as a thesis in contextual theology. The thesis and other materials relating to the research are available at:

<https://petersidebotham.org/safeguarding-children-in-the-church/>