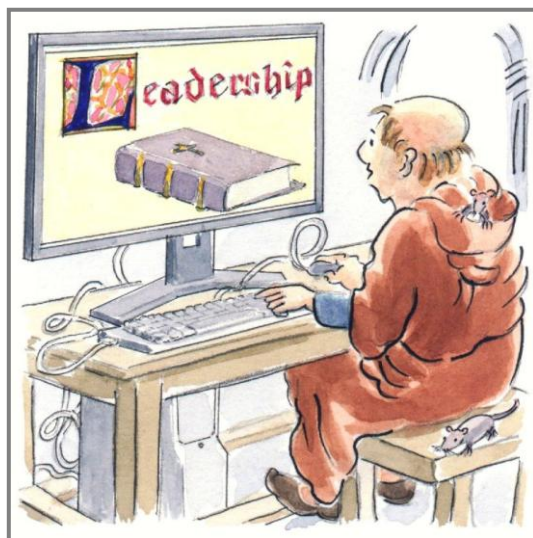




Safeguarding – a vital responsibility

TN159 Training Notes series: Leadership

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Proper safeguarding is the responsibility of, in particular, all church leaders, Elders, Trustees and councils. Day-to-day actions are usually delegated to a church's safeguarding officer(s). Whether it is DBS checking or ensuring everyone required to undertake training does so, good safeguarding practice is a vital requirement of every church's life.

But have we considered just *why* it is so important or just assumed that that is obvious?

These notes do not tackle issues on a denominational or national scale, such as whether safeguarding should be the responsibility of an independent body or supervised in-house. Nor are they an attempt at a thorough theology of safeguarding as others (see page 4 below) have provided excellent resources on this already.

Instead they seek to demonstrate to local church leaders why the subject should be treated seriously from a practical point of view. It is written for Ministers, church and activity leaders, operations staff and church councils to ensure we all understand just why we should invest time, staffing and money into a proper approach to this topic.

Safeguarding is far from just another box to be ticked. Its foundations go deep down into an understanding of what it is to be a local church. Here is why.

In my writing elsewhere on this website on what it means to be a healthy church, I look at the 'Godward', 'Usward' and 'Outward' aspects of church life*. So I use this structure for what follows.

*See the *Church Health Review* at HC4 & HC5 in the Health-checks index page of the Resources section of this website, with a simplified version included in Article A35, *Mapping your church*.

Safeguarding is simply a name, in a world of danger, for the protection of people, especially children and vulnerable adults, from abuse in any form whether by direct harm or neglect.

The 'Godward' aspect

Safeguarding takes the concept of temptation and sin very seriously. Its assumption is that anyone is capable of toxic behaviour against others, and very often it is Christian leaders who are discovered to have fallen from godliness. In fact it is those in leadership who are most capable of inflicting damage on others by virtue of the opportunities they have to do so when in positions of local or national authority.

No human being is incapable of gross behaviour towards others and this means that systems of protection are most needed in positions of greatest authority. Take cases of Christian leaders who have made the headlines in the last year or two and this becomes clear.

Safeguarding is no less than seeking to protect everyone from the dangers of sin, for that is what abuse is. And this sin is perpetrated against those who are created in the image of God and carried out by abusers who are also created in God's image but at the same time fallen in nature.

The requirement for all Christians, but especially for those in leadership, is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. The Pastoral Epistles set out person specifications for church leaders and the bar is set high. Praise and worship of God our Father must mean living lives that reflect that of Jesus yet we are all capable of very much the opposite. Safeguarding should be seen as one part of our response to God in our daily lives of worship.

God is creator of us all but also a God of justice, with the lowest in society given special care. It is our duty to stand out for justice against the most abused people on the globe: those who have dignity stripped from them by war, the ongoing slave trade or utter neglect. But the same applies in our local communities of church and home.

It is our duty to worship God as his creatures by seeking his desire for justice, caring for the quality of life of all people and avoiding the sin of abusive behaviour.

The 'Usward' aspect

The Church is taught to be a community of 'care-takers', those who take care of each other. We are to love others as ourselves, to share what we have and that must surely include protecting others from danger and living godly lives.

Good pastoral care is more than home visits and caring for the poor and needy. It also means creating structures and systems that protect everyone, especially the vulnerable. Safeguarding includes being aware of danger both in church itself and in people's homes. Good safeguarding training includes being wise to the signs of abuse in church members of all types, and so often it is the people you might least expect who are struggling.

If safeguarding is viewed as a box to be ticked, or just training to undergo, checks to be undertaken, and paperwork to be processed, it becomes an agenda item – and an extra agenda item in a crowded market-place. It needs to be seen as no less than pastoral care itself and as this 'care-taking' that Christians are called to undertake. The picture of the shepherd is relevant here for the shepherd provides protection as well as leading the flock to the place of feeding. Disciples follow a master who had compassion on the crowds.

The article on this website on organising pastoral care (Article A53) includes the following:

'Pastoral care is, literally, taking good care of people of all ages so that they flourish in the faith. It is all about meeting needs of the whole person: body, mind, emotions, spirit. Jesus came to offer life in all its fulness (John 10:10). Pastoral care opens up that possibility to all. It seeks to help people in the church, and those outside it too, through the chaos of life today. It brings Christ's message of salvation into the ordinary, everyday, messy world that we live within. It brings wholeness, it brings assurance. It surely includes Bible teaching but is much more than just that.'

Some are particularly vulnerable especially the young, but others are or have been victims and now seek to be survivors.

It is our duty as disciples of Jesus, who has given us salvation through his cross, to care for all people as he did.

The 'Outward' aspect

The following argument from damage done is certainly no reason for good safeguarding alone, but adds to the two sections above.

Sadly, a considerable number of safeguarding failings in the Church throughout the UK have hit the national headlines and new cases continue to do so. Some relate to children and others to vulnerable adults. Some concern financial matters, others to issues of leadership bullying and many to sexual misconduct in some form or other.

Each story acts as a powerful denial of the Gospel that Christians seek to proclaim. In fact these stories receive far more airtime than press releases from any part of the Christian Church. Why should anyone believe the good news of life in Jesus Christ if those who claim to be his disciples behave in such ways and bring such trauma to survivors and others? Each story more than cancels out every effort to present the life of transformation that the cross and resurrection offer.

But the same applies to local issues too. News quickly gets round a town or housing estate, fuelled by social media and the grapevine, if a Christian leader is in court or has to be reprimanded by their denomination. The impact may be more local but still acts as a brake on any church attempt to welcome new members and offer outreach events.

Without wise accountability structures, properly checked volunteer appointments and rigorous DBS work, any church, your church, could be the source of a safeguarding scandal that impacts the success of outreach from your church or all the churches in your area. It might even be a national issue if the media pick it up and run with it.

The story does not even have to be true if there is enough evidence to create a rumour that is then magnified in its onward retelling. Lax record keeping, church members turning a blind eye or oblivious to the warning signals, leaders appointed without proper references and checks, all put the reputation of your church at risk.

Proper safeguarding practices are vital to minimise the risk of abuse which then can have a huge, negative impact on evangelism.

It is our duty to be witnesses in the world today to the transforming power of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

Group discussions

These notes are written for church leaders and Trustees among others. So it would be worth setting aside time at a meeting to consider this paper and how it might impact people's attitudes to safeguarding. Here are some questions to consider.

- 1 Safeguarding is part of our worship of our Creator and Judge. In what senses might this statement be true?
- 2 What passages in Scripture might you call on to support the section on the 'Godward' aspect of safeguarding?
- 3 Safeguarding is a key element in our pastoral care for everyone. In what senses might this statement be true?
- 4 What passages in Scripture might you call on to support the section on the 'usward' aspect of safeguarding?
- 5 Safeguarding should protect the Church from the damage done in preventing our proclamation of the Good News. In what sense is this a valid argument for seeing its importance?
- 6 What passages in Scripture might you call upon to support the section on the 'outward' aspect of safeguarding?
- 7 What time and attention should our own church leadership bodies spend in consideration of this topic?
- 8 How should we view the choice, oversight, support and work of our own church's safeguarding officer(s)?
- 9 How can we make our congregation more aware of the depth and importance of this topic, and that it is everyone's responsibility, not just that of leaders?

For a theology of safeguarding, see the paper, *On behalf of the voiceless*, by Dr Krish Kandiah with Justin Humphreys, published by thirtyone:eight: <https://thirtyoneeight.org/media/mstpfifO/theology-of-safeguarding.pdf>.

Or the paper, *Theology and safeguarding*, which covers trauma, justice, forgiveness, wholeness, experience and calling from a survivor's viewpoint: <https://survivorsvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Theology-for-safeguarding-paper.pdf>.

The Methodist Church have a wide range of materials and group work on this theme. See: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/safeguarding/>.

Other denominations have various resources on the theology of safeguarding and training materials.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN159. See also Articles A12/13, *The leader as a shepherd*, and A53, *Organising pastoral care*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN159 under Leadership (with a link to Management).

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