

A pastoral letter from the lead bishop for safeguarding, for Safeguarding Sunday 2024

To: bishops, archdeacons, clergy, diocesan secretaries, diocesan and cathedral safeguarding officers/advisers, parish safeguarding officers, church wardens, and diocesan communications officers

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I write in anticipation of Safeguarding Sunday, the 17th of November.

Many of you will have read or seen coverage of the publication of the Report by independent reviewer Keith Makin into the abuse perpetrated by John Smyth. This appalling abuse has deeply wounded many individuals. The failure of those who knew about the abuse in the 1980s to report it, as well as the failure of the wider Church to respond well to it from 2013, have for many led to a sense shame and anger.

I offer my own profound sense of sorrow for the pain and suffering caused to those who are victims and survivors of Smyth, and of all other abuse. If you are affected in any way by abuse, by the reading of this Report, or by the current news coverage, a full list of organizations providing support can be found [here](#).

Of course, many will want to know what happens next in terms of holding to account those who are implicated by the Report's conclusions. This lies in the hands of colleagues in the national safeguarding team, in the Church's legal team, and in dioceses. It would not be appropriate for me to speak in relation to any individuals, but I want to assure you that there is a careful and robust process for examining any new evidence, reviewing any previous decisions that have been made, and deciding what should happen next.

In the meantime, the work of safeguarding across all our churches, cathedrals, worshipping communities, and mission activities continues. On Safeguarding Sunday, we draw attention to the way that safeguarding must sit at the heart of our faith and our lives as Christians. God is both compassionate and just: "He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds . . . The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground" (Psalm 147). As the Makin Report points out in its first recommendation, safeguarding is everyone's responsibility; it points to who we all are as children of God.

As Christians, our first task is to pray: for victims and survivors of John Smyth, for victims and survivors of any kind of abuse. You can find a liturgical resource, Towards a Safer Church, [here](#), containing prayers and worship materials on the theme of safeguarding. Further church resources for Safeguarding Sunday are [here](#).

Many of us will be asking how else we can respond. In every sphere of life – as family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, volunteers, and as churchgoers – there are practical actions that we can take. These include:

- Being attentive to the needs of victims and survivors of abuse if they come forward, offering patient listening and deep care, signposting those who are in need to appropriate support, with prominently displayed information in all our buildings and on our websites.

- Responding well to any disclosures of abuse, setting aside our own biases to be able to recognize that abuse can happen in any church, any family, any culture or context; being aware that, as well as happening in the past, abuse may be happening now.
- Familiarizing ourselves with how to report concerns, for example to parish or diocesan safeguarding officers, as well as to the police or social services where appropriate; following carefully the policies set out by the Church and by organizations in which we work, study, or volunteer.
- Ensuring that DBS checks are up to date; undertaking training in safeguarding willingly and wholeheartedly.

In every setting, each one of us can take responsibility for good safeguarding and play our own part in helping the Church to become safer every day. Whatever our leadership role, we need to be aware of our own power and willing to be challenged ourselves about our language and behaviour. We need to support a healthy culture where silence is broken, inappropriate deference is dismantled, and the searching light of God's truth is allowed to shine into every corner of our lives.

We need to develop better foundations for safeguarding in the Church of England. A group which I co-chair, along with an independent co-chair, Lesley-Anne Ryder, is developing proposals for a future structure for safeguarding. This follows recommendations in independent reports from Professor Alexis Jay and Dr Sarah Wilkinson. The group includes victims and survivors and a range of people from inside and outside the church, with varied backgrounds, skills, and perspectives. We are working both swiftly and carefully. Based on the group's work and extensive wider consultation, I intend to bring proposals to General Synod in February.

I also know that much has changed and improved in recent years. This includes support for victims and survivors through an independent charity, Safe Spaces, the recruitment and support of parish safeguarding officers, vital volunteers across our 16000 churches, increased resourcing, equipping, and supervision of national and diocesan safeguarding teams, new policies and processes, a thorough programme of training, a new casework management system, independent audits for every diocese, and the development of a Redress scheme, all supported by a framework of survivor engagement. I am grateful for the hard work and dedication of so many across parishes, cathedrals, and dioceses who care passionately about ensuring the church is a safer place. There is good progress, and there is still more to do.

I want to thank all those who, in every kind of role in the Church, are supporting these improvements. I know that you are determined, as am I, that we will continue to make the Church safer every day. Thank you for your perseverance.

The victims and survivors of abuse are foremost in my prayers today. We owe it to them to face up to the Church's shameful failings, to care for all who are in pain or distress, and to take clear actions to create a safer church for everyone.

With my thanks and prayers for your ministry,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne Woolway Grenfell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joanne Woolway Grenfell

Bishop of Stepney, Lead Bishop for Safeguarding