



UNSAFE PLACES

In the first of two articles following the Makin Report into abuse in the Church of England, a survivor of church-based abuse responds

When I hear yet another story of senior clergy and church leaders covering up appalling, unthinkable abuse on a horrific scale, I hear God's heart break. Tears flow down my face and God's. Together we share in human suffering, we share in the pain of another. How can this be? So much abuse, so much hiding, so much avoidance, silencing and lawlessness – so much darkness, so much beaten, broken and bruised hearts and lives – the damage done by those whom we are expected to trust and confide in and depend upon....

This is bad news for survivors and for everyone in the Church. Can the Church ever recover from the reputational damage? I suspect not. In our fragmented, fragile world, in a society where post-truth is the norm for so many, our voice of reason, our voice of hope is diminished and very often ignored due to stories such as this. Our light becomes dull and our salt loses its flavour. The very institution that clergy have tried to protect is crippled by these happenings.

Illustration: ©Brent Clark

The church is consequently often perceived as unsafe, cold (literally and spiritually) and irrelevant. How can clergy and spiritual leaders be so convinced of God's love and be so apathetic in working out this love for others? How does being silent when we should be speaking out, ignoring abuse instead of exposing it, and being indifferent and complacent have the final word for so many. What have we become? What type of persons are we? What we do for the least, we do for Christ, he tells us in Matthew's Gospel.

Having been in ministry for decades, working in a professional capacity with and ministering to men who have convictions for sexual offences, I can testify that God's grace is enough. No matter what our story, by his grace and in his strength we can be a conduit of love, kindness and goodness in the places we find ourselves. In our weakness he is strong, in our frustration he hears our call and our sighs, our inner groans – he sees it all.

It is devastating that the Church has been on many occasions an institution whose existence was not for the sake of the smallest, the weakest and most vulnerable in our midst but instead selfishly served the interests of the powerful, the entitled, the elite and most privileged in our society.

The voices of the survivors were so often silenced until now. So much investment is being made by Churches to try to prevent these horrendous failures being repeated. And rightly so – this is to be praised. However, the road to recovery is long.

All clergy and leaders, in fact all of us, owe it to the survivors, to each other, and to ourselves to work with a sense of urgency and sensitivity in the area of safeguarding. It is great to have training, appoint safeguarding leads and have

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in place robust policies and procedures to address these situations, but my plea is for all in the Church to become allies and advocates for justice. We must stand with and stand up for all the survivors of abuse in our presence, known or unknown. We must allow them to share their stories, listen to them without judgment, offer apologies, grant prayers of blessing to replace the cursing, and honour their presence and what they bring, instead of ignoring, casting

The Makin Report

The Makin Report, published in November 2024, detailed 'prolific, brutal and horrific' abuse perpetrated by John Smyth, a reader in the Church of England, in England during the 1970s and 1980s and in Zimbabwe and other African countries in the 1980s and 1990s. At least 30 boys and young men were abused in the UK and 85 in southern Africa.

In 1982, the internal Ruston Report brought the abuse to the attention of Church officers, who responded, Makin says, with 'an active cover-up'. Fresh disclosures in 2012 brought the abuse to the attention of Church authorities 'at the highest level'. An officer made a report to the police in 2013, which the report calls inadequate, including no named victims, and it did not lead to charges. Church leaders cited the police investigation as a reason not to act on allegations themselves.

Channel 4 News reported on the abuse in 2017, after the story was brought to them by Andrew Graystone, who published a book about it, *Bleeding for Jesus* in 2021. The Church of England commissioned the Makin Report in 2019, shortly after Smyth's death. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, resigned in November following criticism of his role in the Church's response to the abuse.

Appearing on the podcast Roger Bolton's *Beeb Watch*, Graystone said, 'There are at least three major church abuse stories affecting the Anglican Church that will break in 2025.'

For the United Reformed Church's response to the Makin Report, see 'News', *Reform*, December/January.

away or crushing. We must intentionally invite them to the table and into the conversation – piece by piece, little by little removing the cloak of shame, the fear and disgrace or humiliation they have experienced in times past.

We must learn to offer sacred places, forums and gatherings, places where survivors can reenvision their life and purpose, their identity and call, we must be a place where they can find truth, wholeness and God's unconditional love. Only when this is done can we begin to look for seeds of change.

As a minister who has suffered abuse at the hands of senior leaders, my prayer for all is to walk humbly, love mercy and act justly, in the words of the prophet Micah. May God break our hearts for what breaks his.

Help us, Lord, to walk in your wisdom and love at all times with all people. May we be channels of peace, restoration and healing. Amen.●

In the next issue of Reform, Sharon Barr, Safeguarding Lead for the United Reformed Church, considers how the Church should respond