

## Safeguarding Sunday

Let us begin with a question. Why does any caring Christian Community need to be aware of safeguarding issues for both adults and children? Surely nothing as awful as physical, sexual or emotional abuse, to name just three Safeguarding issues, could take place in any church, let alone our church.

Well sadly history shows that evil has penetrated our Christian communities on many occasions and has not been recognised or deliberately ignored. We are all called to establish communities where people can feel safe and listened to. Where any issue disclosed is taken seriously, listened to, believed and where necessary acted upon.

So who is responsible for the safeguarding of others in our Church today? The answer my friends is every one of us. Yes we have Safeguarding Officers at a local and diocesan level, but each of us is responsible for raising our own awareness of the issues involved and how to deal with anything which is disclosed or even just suspected by any of us. It is far better to raise a concern in the correct way and to the right person, than to ignore a potentially damaging situation because we were unsure or perhaps even scared of getting it wrong.

Every one of us should have the Spirit led confidence and assurance to trust our instincts and act upon them. Being wrong or mistaken is not a sin, doing nothing and turning a blind eye when we have doubts or suspicions is. "If only", is a sentiment too late when expressed after the event and the damage of not taking action has been done.

Your involvement will however be minimal. All you have to do is to pass your concerns on to the appropriate person, normally your safeguarding officer or vicar. Then you must be prepared to step back and let due process take its course whatever that may entail. Just by raising the concern you will have done your job well and perhaps prevented some form of abuse continuing or from starting in the first place. You may eventually receive some feedback as to how things progressed but cases often take a long time to be resolved and you may never know the final outcome. For example I know of a case within the Diocese which has only just come to court some three years after the initial concern was raised. That's a long time but consider how much worse things would have been if the concern had not been

raised in the first place. What matters is that your job is to be aware and to know the safest and best ways to raise a concern in the appropriate manner without putting the person concerned or yourself in any kind of danger or difficulty. In other words proceed by the book and all will be well.

You may think it could never happen here because you know everyone and would be aware of any new members joining the congregation. Sadly perpetrators are clever, secretive and often present different attitudes to fit any situation they find themselves in. Let me give you an example. A well-known and liked male member of your congregation is sometimes over friendly at the peace, hugging everyone. Then you realise that he never hugs other male adults or children only girls and young women. Should this be a cause for concern after all many people hug each other at the peace, or at least they did until Covid! Sadly I can tell you that this person was reported under safeguarding rules and was discovered to an active Paedophile and is now serving a lengthy prison sentence.

Safeguarding offences do take place within Christian communities and our role as caring Christians is to raise our own awareness, know how to treat any disclosure with compassion and confidentiality, report our concern and then step away. We can pray for all concerned because many people will be affected by the situation especially if things proceed. I know none of this comfortable or easy to hear but it is important because history has recorded that Christian communities have been easy targets in the past and have failed people through lack of care, a lack of awareness of the right thing to do and perhaps not even wanting to be seen as the one who rocked the boat. However the tide has turned and we must ensure our Churches are places of safety for victims but NOT for perpetrators.

The word safeguarding itself does not appear in the Bible. However throughout the history of the people of God we are given hundreds of examples of God's heart for vulnerable people and the expectations he places on communities and societies in how we should respond to and treat people who are vulnerable and voiceless. Even in the Old Testament in Proverbs 31: 8 King Lemuel speaks of an oracle his mother taught him; "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and

needy.” And in the New Testament Paul in his letter to the Romans writes: “So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.”

With regard to Safeguarding we are not asked or expected to judge in fact doing so would prove detrimental to the whole process. No we are called to listen with compassion and to voice and report any concerns we have when issues are raised by others. Jesus taught that what we do when nobody is looking is as important to God as what we do when people are looking. We are called to care and be merciful in all our dealings, but especially with those that may need extra care or protection. As Christians, we are motivated by more than just a moral or social conscience, but also by a desire to demonstrate God’s heart and care for people who are vulnerable and oppressed. Rather than being some kind of add on to the gospel, protecting vulnerable people is central to it. Safeguarding it not always popular but Jesus’ heart is always to care and speak the truth in the pursuit of the wellbeing of others, particularly those in vulnerable position in society. Such actions often cost us emotionally and spiritually and the route is not always easy but in carrying out our duty to God and the community will in the end bear much fruit.

The role therefore for all of us is to become more aware of safeguarding issues and how to report them safely, to protect the vulnerable and further the kingdom in a safe, positive and healthy environment, to the Glory of God the Father. Let us pray.