

Two Church of England Safeguarding Reports

1.) A Betrayal of Trust:

The independent report into the handling of allegations that have come to the attention of the Church of England concerning the late Hubert Victor Whitsey, former Bishop of Chester.

**by His Honour David Pearl, Kate Wood and Hannah Sinclair
published October 2020.**

<https://chester.anglican.org/news/publication-of-review-into-bishop-whitsey.php>

This 144 page report makes for grim, distressing and necessary reading. Mr Whitsey had been Bishop of Chester from 1974 until his retirement in 1981. He died in 1987. The report found:

“453. We have reached the conclusion applying the appropriate standard of proof that Whitsey sexually abused a large number of children and vulnerable adults during a period from 1966 until after he had retired in 1981. We have identified some 18 victims, and there may have been more who have not come forward. Much of his behaviour constituted grooming, and he used his position in the Church to abuse prospective ordinands, and children experiencing personal family difficulties such as a death of a parent, or the departure of a parent.

454. We are of the view also that opportunities were missed by senior members of the Church in the late 1970s and early 1980s to deal with these matters whilst Whitsey was still alive. Subsequent to his death, opportunities were lost at the very least to try to provide support to the victims when the abuse was reported to clerical leaders in 1992 and again in 2002.” (Page 90).

Whitsey tended to select as his victims those who were vulnerable and who felt unable to report because they thought that their word would never be believed against the word of a vicar or bishop. Some disclosures were made in the 1970s and 80s but were not properly acted on or reported to the police. In those days there was no Church of England safeguarding training or guidelines. There was no Safeguarding Officer or even a Human Resources Department (page 68, para 297). When allegations come re-emerged in the 2010s they were then acted on and reported by the Church to the police and action taken. Nevertheless, even with the more recent response, the Report finds that there are lessons to be learned.

The Diocese of Chester’s Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser did a good job and the National Safeguarding Team did OK, but were slow in arranging meetings due to lack of resources. The National Safeguarding Team consisted of only two members of staff in 2015. By 2018 this had risen to 13 members of staff (page 115, para 621). The report recommends even more resources be provided to the Team (page 121, para 659).

(Contrast that recommendation with an article in the Daily Telegraph 1 March 2021 calling for staff cuts: “Church bureaucracy is out of control. Why does the CofE cull parish vicars, instead of reducing bloated top ranks and managerial layers?”. So on the one hand the CofE has calls for more staff and procedures, and at the same time are demands for fewer. A no-win situation).

The Report is critical of the actions of the now retired Peter Forster who was Bishop of Chester 1996-2019 at the time the allegations against Whitsey re-emerged. Whitsey had been Bishop Peter's predecessor's predecessor. Bishop Peter appears to have taken on the role of amateur detective, carrying out his own enquiries into what happened. He was warned at the time that the Church of England Guidelines stated that the safeguarding investigation should be left to the experts - the Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser and the police - but he apparently thought he knew best. He points out that if it wasn't for his enquiries one of the crimes would never have come to light (page 62, para 260). However, he interviewed the victim in his office at Bishop's House, which, unbeknownst to him, was the very room in which Whitsey had sexually abused that victim (page 64, para 267). Consequently, his well-meaning efforts only added to that person's distress.

2.) Independent Review into the Case of George Granville Gibson

**At the request of the Chair of the Durham Diocesan Safeguarding Management Group
Dr Stephanie Hill,**

April 2017, published December 2020

<https://durhamdiocese.org/granville-gibson-report-publication/>

The publication of this report was delayed until December 2020 due to a further criminal investigation against Mr Gibson, when towards the end of 2019 he was convicted of a further offence. Gibson was a vicar in Durham Diocese from 1977, was Archdeacon of Auckland from 1993 until 2001 when he retired. This 57 page report found:

“a background context of inappropriate behaviour by Mr Gibson towards young, exclusively male, clergy, seeming to target them within various situations, sometimes in the context of significant alcohol consumption, invading personal space and being physically and sometimes allegedly sexually inappropriate. However, although many were aware of this, there are no formal records and no specific complaints were made, the matters being dealt with at an individual level rather than shared with the safeguarding team. It is also more likely than not that the then Diocesan Bishop, The Right Revd John Habgood, was informed in the early 1980s of concerning behaviour by Mr Gibson but failed to act appropriately on this. There is certainly no record of it.

In 2001, an alleged, known indecent assault on a young man was not reported to the Diocese's safeguarding team, a red flag clearly missed. In 2004, allegations of historical abuse from 1982 were reported to the Diocese who responded appropriately in informing the Local Authority's child protection officer and the police; there was also regular and good communication with the family. In 2009, a self-completed declaration form referring to an arrest around 1980 was missed by the Diocese and not followed up on and, in 2012, non-specific concerns at time spent with young male servers and altar boys was addressed internally but not shared with a local school where Mr Gibson had considerable involvement with teenagers.

Following Mr Gibson's arrest in April 2014, the Diocese largely responded well to its multiple responsibilities to various clergy and parishioners as well as survivors of Mr Gibson and members of his family.” (Page 6).

Both this report and the Whitsey report found that personnel files had been thinned by staff due to a mistaken assumption that they were obeying data protection regulations by not keeping personal information longer than necessary:

“In 2008, the Diocese of Durham commissioned an independent report from a consultant (“Consultant 1”) which was completed in March 2009, to review files for past cases of safeguarding children issues following direction from the then Archbishop Rowan Williams.

[...] Consultant 1's Review included a letter trawl which apparently highlighted Mr Gibson's case as one of concern. However, the current safeguarding officer advises that a number of attempts have been made to locate this information but it is no longer available, although nobody can articulate why. DSMG minutes of 25th March 2009 also noted that Consultant 1 would shred all documents and delete any electronic records associated with this report and, therefore, there is little which can meaningfully be gleaned from this now as it is heavily anonymised.” (Page 23, para 8.4.1)

The report explains why allegations are often not believed:

“Many clergy and lay members of the church are caring and compassionate, embodying the core principles of Christianity. However, in those who also sexually abuse others, these positive character traits, supported by a lack of general criminality, lead to a skewed perception of the possibility of abuse or a disavowal of it altogether, as though a person who has done such good cannot also have done such harm.” (Page 34, para 10.5).

“Within institutions there can also be a ‘them and us’ mentality, maintained by in-group bias. Clergy and those attending church automatically share a belief system and world view. There is a commonality and, to varied degrees, a sense of likeness which makes acceptance of sexual abuse by clergy more difficult to contemplate and accept by those close to them. An acceptance of abusers’ denials reduces this tension as denial reaffirms the status quo. It is easy to fail to balance this against the equally reasonable interpretation of denial: that it is human nature to deny in order to avoid negative consequences and maintain one’s positive self-image and which should, therefore, always be robustly considered and challenged where indicated.” (Page 37, para 10.14).

The report also explains that forgiving someone who is repentant does not mean that you should allow them to continue in ministry:

“Conceptualising sexual abuse as a sin which can be overcome by repentance and absolution (and therefore managed and the abuser considered worthy of trust again with a chance to move on) significantly misses the point that sexual abuse is often insidious, with on-going risk factors evident in many cases. Whereas the church may equate repentance with trust and a new start, the scientific community which studies and works with adult sexual offenders would equate remorse with a good first step but insufficient by itself to negate risk, with underlying motivational factors for abuse still likely to be present. Sexual abuse of children or vulnerable adults should not be seen as a short-term aberration or giving in to temptation but the surface manifestation of

significant underlying problems which requires active intervention and, in many cases, long-term management.” (Page 35, para 10.8)

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