

Thirtyone:eight
**Independent Lessons Learned Review (incorporating an Audit of
Safeguarding Arrangements)
Concerning Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Church Wimbledon**
Published: 23 March 2021

The Revd Jonathan Fletcher was vicar of Emmanuel Church Wimbledon (ECW) from 1982 until his retirement in 2012. He was a leader in the conservative evangelical movement within the Church of England. I personally knew of him and probably heard him preach¹. In 2017 the first substantial disclosures were made to Emmanuel Church of their former vicar's behaviours. The disclosures increased over time, including of his naked massages of young men in his church for whom he was a mentor in ministry. His Permission to Officiate (PTO) was withdrawn by the Bishop of Southwark in 2017 and in 2020 after a process under the Clergy Discipline Measure a penalty by consent was imposed of prohibition from ministry for ten years.

In 2019 Emmanuel Church commissioned the independent safeguarding charity Thirtyone:eight to undertake an independent Lessons Learned Review. That 145-page review has now been published.² It has learnings that apply beyond Emmanuel Church to the wider conservative evangelical constituency and the Church of England as a whole. The report reads as a very fair and thorough assessment. I pick out some particular themes:

People whom God uses to do good things can also do terrible things

We all know this in theory, but in practice it is difficult to believe it of those we personally know and admire. Mr Fletcher had good and godly qualities, which made it harder for people to disclose abuse, partly because they felt they would not be believed:

“It is really important to reflect on the positive experiences of JF. Firstly, because these positive experiences and his bible teaching made and make it hard for many to disclose and for others to understand, accept or process the disclosures that have been made.” (Page 51)

“[...] incorrect assumptions that individuals who possess positive giftings and behaviours cannot behave in harmful, and/or abusive ways, which render them unfit for office. This myth creates a risk that when victims make disclosures they will not be believed or taken seriously and the disclosures will not be acted upon, particularly in faith contexts. It therefore acts as a barrier to the uncovering and prevention of abuse.

Furthermore, those who wish to disclose abuse or harmful behaviours can be caused to question their experience and reality where the predominant narrative outlines the positive traits of an individual. When this is combined with a narrative of protecting the gospel above all else, then this also becomes a powerful barrier to disclosing abuse or harmful behaviour. (Page 52)

¹ I can't remember where I heard him. He may have been a speaker at the Durham Inter-Collegiate Christian Union when I was there from 1990-93, or at one of the ReNew Conferences I attended in 2014, 2016 and 2017.

² <https://thirtyoneeight.org/get-help/independent-reviews/jonathan-fletcher-review/>

Emmanuel Church as a conservative evangelical church would emphasise the sinfulness of humankind, and the need of a saviour. This should in theory make it easier for people to recognise Mr Fletcher as a sinner. But the irony is, the more a speaker may speak of their unworthiness, the more they might be admired for saying so:

“JF’s status as a leader was referred to as ‘leadership on a pedestal’ and this resulted in it being very difficult to challenge him but also to recognise inappropriate behaviours and ways of operating. [...]

“J taught the sin of the congregation would be to put him on a pedestal and his sin would be to let them. But the truth is he was put on a pedestal and so there was such a strong feeling of him being loved and respected and you would say – who am I to challenge his behaviour.”” (Page 59).

“JF mentioned that he had Church Wardens ‘to hold me to account’ in his sermons. This perception of accountability meant that people were less likely to question or challenge as it was assumed that JF had accountability, which the evidence suggests, did not reflect the reality at ECW.

“Having Church Wardens ‘to hold me to account’. He often mentioned this in sermons. While Jonathan said this in his sermons, I really don’t think he asked his wardens to hold him to account in a genuinely open way but (being quite a tour de force) probably asked them to ask him if he’s having his quiet times. He probably will have set the agenda of how they were to hold him to account because he was such a charismatic / dominant personality, and he ran the show”. (Page 69).

Mr Fletcher’s behaviours amounted to spiritual abuse. One person told the Review team:

“Publicly he was above reproach (e.g. saying that he could never have just one lodger, in case that was mis-interpreted); he appeared to set high moral standards based on biblical teaching, Privately it seems he was controlling his lodgers and ministry apprentices under the guise of pastoral care, but creating a system of absolute loyalty and submission. I am grieved that this abusive control was so strong that nobody was able to speak out for all those years.” (Page 51).

The Reviewers concluded:

“The use of spiritual position, coercion and control within a religious context, the inner circle [...] manipulation, the notion of God as complicit and positive spiritual rationales for controlling behaviour are commonly reported in experiences of spiritual abuse [...] The resultant fear, distrust, self-doubt and sometimes shame are also common. (Page 39).

“Recommendation 40

All faith-based organisations should ensure there is regular teaching on healthy cultures and bullying, manipulation, coercive control and spiritual abuse as part of developing safer cultures. This is to raise awareness of harmful behaviours and their impact and to explore best practice for response in order to create a culture in which these behaviours are more likely to be recognised and responded to effectively in the future.” (Page 17).

Fear that discrediting a gospel teacher will discredit the gospel

Just as was seen in the Roman Catholic Church where cover-ups of clerical abuse were often due to concern that the Church itself would be discredited. So, in conservative evangelicalism there was fear that discrediting Mr Fletcher could discredit the gospel:

“High regard for scripture and the gospel were key elements of JF’s ministry. These can be highly positive elements of ministry. However, some participants reflected that a product of the focus on the importance of the gospel was individuals feeling unable to share their experiences of harm and abuse because this risked discrediting the gospel. It is as though the gospel and JF’s ministry were synonymous and to speak out against one, risked the other.” (Page 53).

A diocesan leadership which is of one theological view needs to bridge the gap with parishes of a different theological view.

Southwark Diocese at that time, and probably still today, had a leadership in the liberal church mould, the opposite of Emmanuel Church. For example, in 2012 I attended a Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans meeting in London, where one of the speakers was the Revd Paul Perkin who reported that in the Southwark Diocese a Lay Reader, who had invited the church congregation to affirm marriage had had his license suspended by the Archdeacon in punishment. Mr Perkin said that this sort of persecution by the Southwark Diocese was having the opposite effect as it was bringing the evangelical constituency together. I later read the Church Times newspaper report of the incident, the Lay Reader had invited people to sign the Coalition for Marriage petition to campaign against the proposed law to permit gay marriage. The Archdeacon responded to the Church Times that he hadn’t officially suspend the Reader, he had simply told the Reader he was not allowed to lead services for a few weeks. That rather sounds like a suspension to me! That is an example of the context in which Emmanuel Church was operating, and this isolation had consequences:

“In the period of JF being Vicar there was no official safeguarding lead. The expectation would have been that the Vicar would have reported any inappropriate behaviour or abuse. JF was in essence safeguarding lead by default. Given that his behaviour was a cause for concern, this raises real challenges to effective and timely disclosure by others.” (Page 8).

So, when a member of the congregation could not report to the Emmanuel Church safeguarding officer about Mr Fletcher, because Mr Fletcher was the safeguarding officer, the next option was to report the matter to the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer. But people did not want to report the failures of their own church to the enemy:

“The focus on ‘sound, solid and orthodox’ teaching within ECW led to some distancing and a clear breakdown of relationship with the Diocese, which was felt by some to hold liberal positions on issues such as women in leadership and sexuality.” (Page 60).

“There was an element of othering of the Diocese and the CofE, a creation of an us and them situation. This in some part, is due to theological differences and it was

reported that when JF was a Vicar, to some extent his approach to the Diocese created mistrust and this had implications for safeguarding.

“Mistrust of Diocese – you can’t distinguish between diocesan safeguarding controls and diocesan theology.” (Page 69).

“There was a feeling of could anything good come out of Southwark, [...] yet again Southwark having a go at the conservative constituency.” (Page 64).

“Diocese was seen as spiritually dangerous, pretty hopeless and useless so why would you go to them. This places you in a very dangerous position as a church if you refuse to be accountable to the body you are supposed to be accountable to.” (Page 70).

That is a lesson for all dioceses. Where the diocesan leadership is of one church tradition, they need to take steps to bridge the gap with their parishes of a different tradition. Warm words about “welcoming diversity” won’t do it. The individual church needs to be in a place where they feel able to trust the diocesan procedures and safeguarding even when they disagree with the theology of the diocesan leaders. One way is for the diocese to have a link person of that church’s tradition who they do trust. Emmanuel Church did have the benefit of a Provisional Episcopal Visitor (‘flying bishop’) who could have played that role, but the official the role of the PEV is providing sacramental ministry. To encourage the parish regarding diocesan safeguarding policies wasn’t part of the role. The report recommends:

“Recommendation 55

Wherever there are Provincial Episcopal Visitors (PEV) arrangements in place the Diocesan Bishop should review arrangements and ensure that there is clarity in writing as to the roles and responsibilities of the PEV and the roles and responsibilities of the Diocesan Bishop.” (Page 19).

Separate church structures and special arrangements are a recipe for problems

“Some churches operating under denominational banners are effectively operating independently and in effect being allowed to do so. This can impact on scrutiny, governance, accountability and safeguarding.” (Page 18).

I have noticed that when there are problems or scandals in the Church of England, a disproportionate number of cases come from churches that have some kind of unusual independent structure. For example:

- The Nine O’Clock Service: this was what would now be called a ‘Fresh Expression of Church’ in the 1980s and 1990s. It was an innovative group where the bishop allowed them to be separate from the normal church structures, and its leader Chris Brain was fast-tracked through ordination training (and he got members of the congregation to write his essays for him). It was later discovered that he was behaving as a messiah figure and was abusing some of the women in his church. The scheme collapsed.
- The Channel Islands: they were proud of their separate legal and organisational church structures. They then got into dispute with their Bishop (of Winchester) and after a big row, have been transferred to the Diocese of Canterbury.
- Christ Church Cathedral Oxford: about twenty years ago when I worked at Church House Westminster, we had a staff outing which included a tour of the Cathedral and evensong.

There was I think at the time some legislation being considered by General Synod relating to Cathedrals. However, the member of Christ Church staff told me proudly how Christ Church has a unique governance structure and doesn't fall under the same rules as other Cathedrals, or even Royal Peculiars. Today there is a massive falling out between the members of the governing body and their Dean, running up an estimated couple of million pounds in legal costs.

Emmanuel Church Wimbledon is another example of being pleased with their separate church structure. They are a proprietary chapel and so had more legal separation from the Diocese than a parish church. Emmanuel Church thought that this was an excellent thing as it helped them have space to not be tainted by a heretical diocese. But it also meant that when things went wrong the normal support and reporting structures were not there:

“As a proprietary chapel ECW is financially independent from the CofE. There was a perception in a number of the interviews that this independence and status led to feeling independent and free from accountability to the CofE in other aspects of church life and this allowed behaviour to occur without being addressed.

“Proprietary chapel is important –right from the outset, we were given a slightly free reign. I do think this helped Jonathan be very autocratic.” (Page 60).

Many members of General Synod don't like 'boring legislation' as they prefer to give speeches about the big topics of the day rather than studying the minutiae of legislation. And, those who do attempt to rationalise legal arrangements are often accused of "centralisation". But these examples show that eccentric and separate legal structures often do more harm than good.

Withdrawing Permission to Officiate doesn't really cut it for a conservative evangelical

When the disclosures about Mr Fletcher first arose, the bishop swiftly removed his Permission to Officiate (PTO) while the investigations were undertaken, but it was a further three years before the Clergy Discipline Measure process concluded in Mr Fletcher's sanction of prohibition from ministry.

If you remove the PTO from an anglo-catholic priest, they feel like their right arm has been cut off, because you deprive them of the heart of their ministry, presiding at the Eucharist. But a conservative evangelical minister (who probably rejects the term "priest" anyway), preventing their presiding at the Eucharist is not such a block to their ministry. Mr Fletcher appeared to continue with his core work of speaking at conferences, preaching, leading Bible Studies and discipling individuals. It was in those very situations that he had perpetrated spiritual abuse. So, removing PTO did not have the safeguarding effect envisaged.

The Clergy Discipline Measure is currently under review. All are agreed that the disciplinary process needs to be transformed so that it takes weeks or months rather than years, and it needs to have more effective sanctions. I expect this will be addressed.

There also needs to be better communication when PTO is removed. It took nine months for the diocese to tell his former church (which he lived near) that the bishop had removed Mr Fletcher's PTO and they should not allow him to lead services. During that nine-month delay in communication, Mr Fletcher had filled the vacuum by spreading false information:

“Feb 2017 JF’s PTO is removed by the Bishop of Southwark.

Feb-Sep 2017 JF repeatedly tells people that he returned his PTO in protest when a colleagues’ PTO was revoked. Also, JF telling people that he did not take his PTO back due to the CofE stance on LGBT. Creating a different narrative to Diocese of Southwark.

Mar 2017 Meeting of ‘Jonathan Fletcher’s preaching group’ reportedly attended by three CofE bishops.

25th May 2017 JF preaches at Burning Man at St Michael’s Chester Square CofE.

2nd Nov 2017 The Southwark DSA [Diocesan Safeguarding Advisor] and Archdeacon met with ECW Vicar and the Safeguarding Officer of ECW to tell them that JF’s PTO had been removed. ECW state details were not given” (Page 140).

Distortions in the conservative evangelical culture

Two positive aspects of conservative evangelical culture, when pushed too far or misused, become negatives: muscular Christianity can become excluding or bullying; and Bible teaching can become intimidation.

Muscular Christianity has the benefit of a positive attitude to stop just sitting around and get on and serve Christ. The Report quotes one contributor saying, “Jonathan said that church was training camp rather than a hospital.” (Page 39). Of course, it ought to be both. The traditional liberal single message of ‘God loves you and if you feel broken and at the end of your tether, the church is here for you’ is helpful for many but may not resonate with a rich professional in commuter belt Wimbledon, happy with life and feeling no need for God. If such a person thinks that the Church is only there to help the vulnerable, and they don’t feel vulnerable themselves, and there is no sense of challenge, they will conclude church is not for them. Of course, we are all weak and in need of God, we are just often too proud to see it, but a bit of active, muscular Christianity has its role. However, a church which has the ‘muscular’ approach can become excluding:

“participants spoke of a strong tendency to favour some people from a public-school background. Background could determine which roles you were given within ECW and how you were treated; some being accepted, favoured and commended, and others being ignored or treated negatively.” (Page 39).

‘Sound’ Bible teaching that helps people to read and know the truth is extremely important, but it can also be turned into a stick to beat people:

“A number of participants spoke of a shame culture in Bible studies. This, in addition to the focus on ‘sound, solid and orthodox’ theology, for some, resulted in a pressure to get every answer right.” (Page 40).

Emmanuel Church is greatly transformed since the days when Mr Fletcher was in charge. On pages 105-136 the reviewers audit the current safeguarding procedures of Emmanuel Church and give them full marks for almost everything. Emmanuel Church has learned the lessons of the past, but there are also lessons for us all.

Adrian Vincent, 6 April 2021.