

## Titus Trust – Independent Culture Review

On 8 December 2021, the independent Christian safeguarding charity Thirtyone:eight published its review<sup>1</sup> of the culture of Titus Trust, who run Christian activity holidays for children and young people at independent schools.

The Executive Summary explains the background following the harmful behaviour of John Smyth<sup>2</sup> in the 1980s and Jonathan Fletcher more recently:

“Over recent years, two volunteer leaders on Iwerne camps have faced separate allegations of harmful behaviour. The Titus Trust itself has come under criticism for some aspects of the culture of different camps it runs for young people, and for the way it has handled these allegations and its response to survivors. [...] the Trust has commissioned this independent review into its wider culture, including how it relates to safeguarding. This review will help to identify any aspects that may have contributed to recent concerns or prevented appropriate action from being taken so that the charity may continue to improve its culture and safeguarding practice moving forwards.” Page 5.

In terms of the positives, the Review found:

“One dominant and overarching theme which emerged throughout the review, has been the environment of fun and care that the Trust creates for the children and young people who attend the camps. Nearly all the contributors expressed how much they enjoyed the camps, and how valuable they have been to their own personal, emotional, and spiritual development. Comments from young people at camps this year echoed these views.” Page 6

“The over-riding impression gained is that for campers, camps are places of fun, where young people can feel at home, develop friendships, and learn about the Christian faith. This was confirmed by our discussions with young people and by the responses they gave to the questionnaires they completed. Where there have been criticisms about the holidays and culture, these have related almost exclusively to when people became leaders, and not when they were campers. Amongst the people interviewed, no one expressed concerns that they had felt coerced to make a commitment to faith as a young person. Some of the respondents who had criticisms of the camps were still keen to point out that they felt the positive benefits of the camps outweighed their concerns.” Page 28.

In relation to leaders, the Review found:

“there appears to have been a narrow view about safeguarding within the Trust over the years. Respondents were very clear that safeguarding practices were of a high standard, but this was usually in relation to safeguarding children. The focus, until recent years, has been on child protection and it was only more recently that safeguarding adults, including leaders, has become more prominent.” Page 67.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.titustrust.org/culture-review/>

<sup>2</sup> Page 144 of the Review refers to a 1992 report by David Coltart on Smyth’s subsequent activities in Zimbabwe. My book review of David Coltart’s book on a different subject is on the Book Reviews section of my website.

I was a junior leader on three camps from 1991-93. It was a valuable and special experience, particularly working alongside some really wonderful people. The camps I attended were Lymington Holidays, run by Scripture Union. The Titus Trust only came into being in 1997 and took over the running of these holidays in 2000, so my experience is not with the same organisation. But this passage does chime with my personal experience:

“Camp leaders or room leaders review and approve talks and prayers before they are given, to ensure they meet the brief. Again, some people felt this was positive and needed, so that poor theology and content could be addressed. Others thought that it felt controlling and that talks were amended or doctored so they fit the brief.” Page 62.

One year as a junior leader I had been on the list to give a talk to the young people about church. The key message in the brief was that going to church does not make you a Christian. The camp leader asked to see my notes. I had that part in my draft talk but I had also added at the end that going to church is nonetheless a good thing and they might like to give it a try sometime. The camp leader was not happy with my addition. He took my speaking slot away and gave the formula talk himself.

The Report also quotes from two leaders:

“You have to be a XXXX person' - you have to be sporty, full of energy, always raring to go, always full of fun ideas, always willing to go along with the banter, don't take life too seriously, can't get down or sad..... Conservative evangelical Christian - you have to go to a certain church.” Page 53.

“I have never felt as though my thoughts have been heard. I have often tried to voice that there is a certain person they want you to be on camp. They only want people who look sorted and have no problems. When did God ever use those people who were sorted? He used the weak and the lowly to bring around his plan.” Page 62.

To balance that, it was also at one of the camps that I heard the best talk I have ever heard. I know it is the best because I still remember it thirty years later! This particular leader was a very gentle man and his talk addressed the concerns of everyone who might feel that their faith was not strong enough, or they were not a good enough person. He gave us each a mustard seed stuck on a piece of card, to remind us that we only need faith the size of a mustard seed to move a mountain. He also put up a drawing of a person standing at a railway station, holding in their hand a ticket in the shape of the cross, and with them was their suitcase. One the suitcase was written a large number of sins, bad habits, bad thoughts etc. The leader said that the passenger went up to the guard on the platform and said, “I don't think that I will be allowed on the train because look at all bad baggage I'm carrying, I'm not a good person”, to which the guard replied, “just hold on to your ticket and you'll be alright.” He said that we will return home from camp and over time we will fail and do wrong things and feel that God won't want us. But we just need to hold on to our ticket – the Cross – and we will be alright.

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Adrian Vincent