



Safeguarding children and the surveillance society

In our churches we need to develop healthy environments and informed vigilance to provide safer places for children. This includes the use of strict standards of monitoring to help reduce the risk.



Pearl Luxon

Rev Pearl Luxon is Safeguarding Adviser (child and adult protection) for the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain. She is leaving shortly to work in a freelance capacity. Go to www.pearlluxon.org.uk for further details.

I don't normally read a morning paper but on Monday 17th May I was travelling to work and the first headline I spotted read '1 in 10 children abused'. This wasn't sexual or stranger abuse, it was an overall figure quoted in an article about Kid's Company's latest campaign (started by Camila Batmanghelidjh) supported by the *Metro* to raise funding for them.

The NSPCC from a much larger study state the figures are more like 1 in 6 for sexual abuse and 1 in 4 for physical abuse. The sad truth is that we don't know what the figures really are as it is widely recognised that these crimes are under-reported. These levels of abuse are an indictment on our society and its parenting – as the overwhelming majority of physical, sexual and emotional abuse or neglect occurs within in the home or within the family. So my starting point for a proper consideration of the surveillance society is the priority given to children's welfare and the current levels of harm. The abuse of children damages them and damages society. The repercussions have never been adequately quantified, but the figures quoted above should be enough to galvanise us into action.

Values

What is to be done about this? For Christians the value of children and childhood comes especially from two aspects of our faith. One is the belief that all are made in the image of God and are equally precious in his sight, and therefore they should also be precious to us. Secondly, the value of children and childhood also comes from the teaching that Jesus gave the disciples.

He welcomed children into their midst and said, 'for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these ... anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it' (Mk 10.14–15). There isn't space to unpack these here but either way these represent a huge challenge to adults

As an extension of the same values, we find that Jesus also welcomed and accepted many who were marginalised, those who were widowed or sick or in other ways on the edge or outside of normal society. At that time children were third-class citizens. Jesus challenges us to consider that children and all who are marginalised should be recognised and belong. They can reveal to us something of the nature of God and his kingdom, his reign. At the very least this means that Christians should regard as unacceptable anything that diminishes children, disregards the image of God in them, or destroys the trust of children towards adults.

So what do Christians need to do to enable children to grow in love and trust? This is a job for everyone – for parents, adults, schools, politicians and local government, for churches and all voluntary organisations. It concerns building a safer community, a world in which everyone finds a place of nurture where they can grow and be truly themselves as God intends.

Practical wisdom

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that we as church people need to be savvy. It means that everyone, without exception, but especially those with responsibility in the Church, need to do all they can

to provide safer places for children, so that they may participate in church or in any activity they choose without fear. It means that people must also be ready to respond with compassion and understanding to any child, young person, parent or carer who is in need, take them seriously and, when necessary, report abuse. It means those who care for children, teachers, youth leaders and others should be conscious of possible abuses, ready to listen and respond. In my experience adults are generally not ready to respond because of fear, ignorance, lack of care, or finding the subject too difficult. (If it is difficult for you, how hard is it for a child?) Or they sometimes don't know what to do with the information. Some say, 'It doesn't happen here.' 'It doesn't happen in respectable families.'

These difficulties also occur when someone in the Church is arrested, charged or prosecuted. Many tend to believe the alleged perpetrator, rather than the victim. Some of those prosecuted but not convicted may be an ongoing risk – just because beyond reasonable doubt proof was not available or convincing does not mean the child or vulnerable adult was not abused. Most cases hinge on one individual's word against another's. The civil courts are full of cases where criminal prosecutions were not possible but 'findings of fact' were made.

Risk and responsibility

Neither the criminal courts, nor the civil courts are perfect, but an understanding of risk, and a realistic approach to the sinful and corrupt within all communities, would go a long way to addressing the problems. We cannot eliminate risk in society. No system is perfect, that is why we need both an informal and a formal vigilance in order to help prevent deliberate harm or unintentional risk of harm. Indeed, levels of acceptable risk are essential for children to grow and explore the world and to learn both trust and their own boundaries and limits.

Similarly, any legal or monitoring systems put in place have limited value in preventing harm or reducing risk; just as the legal system cannot prevent all harm or reduce all risk. Only those who take seriously their responsibilities for vulnerable people will begin to reduce harm and minimise risk. This involves everyone, without exception; safeguarding *is* everyone's responsibility.

The Church should act responsibly in safeguarding the vulnerable in our communities. The law must be applied comprehensively without fear or favour. Churches should introduce and implement a comprehensive set of guidelines, or good practice, on proper behaviour for safeguarding the vulnerable. These policies and procedures should be underpinned by a theological explanation that makes it clear why churches should insist on the implementation of good practice. It is a way of defining what some would regard as common sense, such as ensuring there are two workers with every group, and an acknowledgement that not everyone behaves responsibly. We know that abuse is always an

abuse of power, so awareness of our personal power and boundaries is essential. We should use every tool in the box (including the monitoring of sex offenders by the police) and every person of goodwill, both within the Church and outside, in order to counter abuse.

Children are trusting, but they are often vulnerable. Even teenagers are vulnerable as they explore the world and push boundaries, widening their experience and developing their minds and emotional landscape. It is up to every adult to recognise his or her own responsibility. It is for every church to support formal and informal procedures that both enable abuses of power to be challenged and encourage the nurture of trusting individuals.

Inadequate or intrusive procedures?

I haven't dealt with the Vetting and Barring Scheme or CRBs. These are simply tools which help reduce risk to some extent. Some measures appear 'over the top' or invasive, but if one harmful, invasive act against a child

the Church should act responsibly in safeguarding the vulnerable in our communities

can be prevented, isn't it worth it?

I haven't dealt with the failings of social care. Social care, like the police, cannot ultimately prevent an adult hurting a child. They may often help prevent further harm, but they are often too overwhelmed with work to build resilience in vulnerable people and encourage safer communities.

These issues may appear to some to be peripheral to the main task of the Church. Yet, isn't the task also to build vigilant safer communities where all may flourish? Safeguarding procedures in society are necessary and they are essential in the Church, but it is also my contention that we are likely to place too much emphasis on rules and procedures, if we are not careful.

Many of the apparently intrusive policies of the new vetting and barring scheme and CRB checks are not nearly as intrusive as people make out. They quickly 'bed in' for those people who really want to do the work and become part of the fabric of the way we organise work with vulnerable groups. Yes there are 'niggles' and annoyances with the system, such as the repeat CRBs. Sometimes it seems disproportionate, but there are those who have taken things to extremes in both directions. Some churches have sought to 'fireproof' themselves by getting choir members or bell-ringers CRB checked. Not only is this inappropriate, even beyond the law, but it can also bring the system into disrepute by making the CRB scheme more intrusive than it needs to be.

Suitability for work

There is some research which shows that having additional checks may stop people volunteering and

Notes

1. This portion is from our theological approach, developed jointly. New policy handbooks for the two churches are being completed currently for publication in the autumn.

other research that it does not. I would rather have fewer people who genuinely want to work with children, rather than those who may decide it is a good way to fill their spare time.

Furthermore, there is some evidence suggested by the CRB's own research, and borne out in my experience, that checks have prevented unsuitable people taking up positions. Surely if it prevents even a few children being abused and the misery and damage caused, it is a positive thing. If, on the other hand, churches and other community groups simply see it as a way of making their work 'bulletproof', then that is dangerous.

The safer recruitment procedures including checks, references, interviews and a probationary period are all essential for ensuring that someone is suitable for this challenging work. Assessing someone's attitude and aptitude for the work is essential. It is a privilege to work with children or vulnerable adults; it is not a right. Those

Many have been affected by violence in the home, living in an environment where domestic abuse from a parent or by a parent's partner brutalises relationships.

As Christians we know the power of love in the gospel of Jesus Christ who epitomised God's love for all. We should be at the forefront of such work in all our communities, but, sadly, the Church often appears churlish about properly relating to children and families, and the work people do with them. This may be evidenced by the widespread reduction of children attending churches. The media often demonises children but doesn't often ask what they need to flourish. Nevertheless, many churches with dedicated staff do valuable work with large numbers of children across the country. They need recognition, support and resources from the wider Church.

Across the Methodist Church alone there are more than 20,000 workers with children and young people doing really valuable work, sometimes on Sundays, but mostly throughout the week. Thousands of workers in every denomination do not have a problem with the safeguarding procedures. So why do we take such notice of the vocal few who do?

sadly, the Church often appears churlish about properly relating to children and families, and the work people do with them

who do not want to take the trouble to go through the safer recruitment procedures are not concerned so much for children, but for themselves.

Listening and responding

In our church policy handbooks we speak of developing a healthy environment and an informed vigilance. But much abuse occurs in the home or by people known to children. We need therefore to build awareness and resilience in children, listen to them and support parents in the increasingly difficult task of bring up children.

The key to preventing abuse lies in really listening to children and responding to them. Ed Balls, the former Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, expressed this at Westminster Central Hall last autumn, following the launch of the Labour government's response to Lord Laming's inquiry concerning the 'Baby Peter' case. Four times in a short speech he mentioned something which cannot be legislated for or enforced: 'we must listen to children.'

Love not negativity

Camila Batmanghelidjh's charity Kids Company wants to raise money to conduct research into evidence for the power of loving care, by raising £5 million in the campaign 'Peace of mind – one neuron at a time'. Kids Company need evidence to lobby for changes in society's approach to vulnerable children. Amen to that! This provokes further questions for us. Why should this research be necessary? It seems obvious that vulnerable children need a stable loving background to flourish. In the past, many vulnerable children have been abused physically, emotionally, sexually or suffered neglect.

Conclusion

My starting point was the focus on the welfare of children and abuse statistics. To finish I want to underline the priority we need to give to children and their welfare, by quoting from the new safeguarding policies for the Church of England and the Methodist Church.¹ It has been a great privilege for me to contribute to these two organisations at this crucial time in the development of our understanding and practice of safeguarding.

In answer to the question, 'What does God require of us?' the need to act justly is set alongside the need to love mercy and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6.8). A Christian approach to safeguarding children and vulnerable adults will therefore expect both individuals and communities to:

- create a safe environment for children, adults and their carers;
- act promptly on any complaints made;
- care for those who have been abused in the past;
- minister appropriately to those who have abused;
- provide opportunities for healing and flourishing.

God's mission is a message of good news of love and welcome for the poor and marginalised. The Church must take seriously human propensities to evil and the God-given resources of goodness, peace, healing and justice; in short we must show his love, his life.