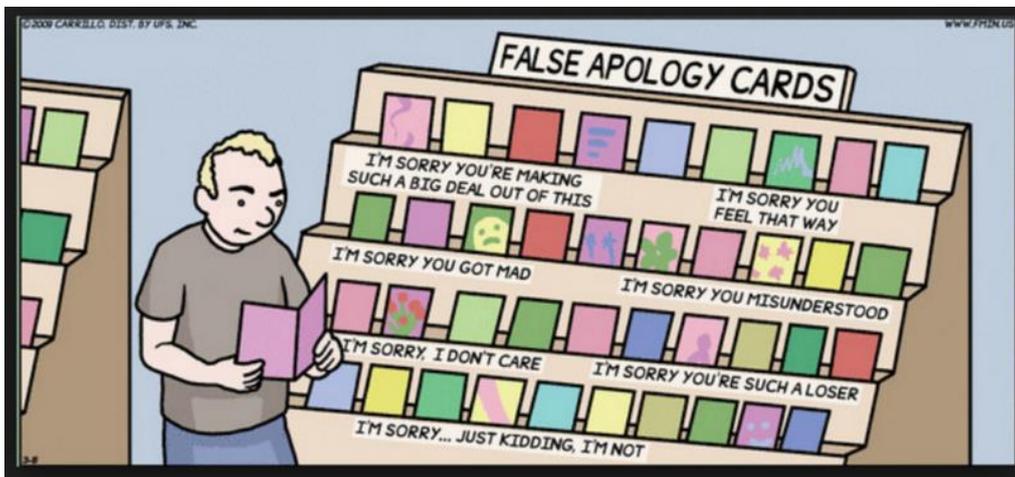


Society for Ecumenical Studies and *The Tablet* Webinar  
*The Prophetic Voice of the Church*

# Beyond Surviving Church: Prophetic-Ecumenical Redress and Redemption for Victims of Abuse

*The Very Revd. Professor Martyn Percy*  
Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford



## ***Introduction:***

As the Civil Rights campaigner John Lewis, “there is never a wrong time to do the right thing”. This booklet grew out of the invitation from the Society of Ecumenical Studies and The Tablet to contribute to their webinar on the prophetic voice of the church today. I cannot claim to be a prophet, but I am advocate and activist for the prophetic voice. By this, I mean the prophet is the person or community that sees, judges and acts. The prophetic gift – it is more of a vocation or cross to bear – is to tell it like it is, so witnesses can see what is before them too, comprehend what could be in there in its place, and understand the consequences for church, culture and society if things are not changed.

All Synods, an opportunity to re-engage with the foundations of the Church, test its stability and flexibility, and if needed, do some re-founding. The closeness and intimacy of the Synod provides a regulated space for what Michel Foucault termed *parrhesia* – meaning ‘free speech’, or speaking candidly, and in so doing, seeking forgiveness and a new way forward. Synods of course confirm the past, but they are also honest about things – and that is why they need this simple voices of courage and conviction to face reality whilst being faithful to tradition. So the words I offer here are in a sense a plea for a fusion of emotional and ecclesial intelligence, in order that the Church can rediscover its prophetic edge, and own a proper place for righteous anger – as needed. I make no apology, therefore, for dwelling on the corruption and collusion we find in our church safeguarding cultures, and for considering this as an ecumenical matter, and a prophetic calling for justice.

Here’s a couple of questions for our time. How do you love and care for a world that mostly enrages you, with all our political failures and social stigmatisation and deep social divisions? And how do you care for and love the church, which far from being that ark of salvation it is called to be, seems to enrage you even more?

John’s account of Jesus cleansing the temple (John 2: 13-22) gives us some clues. Jesus is supposed to be a peaceable and wise teacher. But he creates mayhem in the temple, and upsets all the people going about their lawful trading in dubious “religious tat” and offerings. He goes to the whole hog too, driving them out with a whip that he made himself. That must have taken time, so this is a planned attack.

The story in John’s gospel is a meditation on Jesus’s manifesting wisdom, and also his alleged foolishness. Because Jesus spends much of his ministry being cast not as a hero, but as something of a loose cannon; and possibly even a deranged prophet. His words and works are prejudged by his critics, because even in first century Palestine, the social and theological construction of reality seems to prejudice many people’s perceptions of Jesus.

To casual onlookers, turning out the traders from the Temple is a foolish thing to do: they don't mean any harm, do they? Why pick on merchandisers selling religious "tat", offerings and souvenirs? Or money-changers, who we all have need of? But there is a difference between hot anger and cold, perhaps righteous anger. Jesus actually went away and *made* the whip of cords he used on the hapless traders. This is a cold premeditated attack; not a rush of blood to the head. He has, as the *Epistle of James* puts it, 'been slow to anger' – but he's got there. And now he's meting out some discipline.

As Harvey Cox noted in *On Not Leaving it to the Snake* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1968), the first and original sin is not disobedience. It is, rather, indifference. We can no longer ignore the pain and alienation that others experience from within the church – and especially when this is *because* of the church, and its sins in safeguarding and abuse. Indifference is pitiful, and it is the enemy of compassion. Ecumenism needs to find its prophetic and honest edge, and call this out. Abuse is a shared problem, and we must address this together.

There are three things to say in relation to Jesus' emotional temperament here. First, what is Jesus so upset about in the Temple? It seems to me that it lies in assumptions: about the 'natural order of things'; about status and privilege; about possessions; about prevailing wisdom. This is, in other words, un-examined lives and practices lived in unexamined contexts. Everyone is blind. Jesus' action forces us to confront the futile sight before us. His anger forces us to look again. (On this, see Lytta Bassett's excellent *Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus*, London: Continuum, 2007).

Second, the story chides us all for that most simple of venial sins: overlooking. The trading has been happening for donkey's years. It is simply part of the furniture; it barely merits a look, let alone comment. Jesus, of course, always looks deeper. But the lesson of the story is that, having looked into us with such penetration, his gaze then often shifts – to those who are below us, and unseen. That is, those with less wealth, health, intelligence, conversation and social skills; or just less life.

Third, the besetting sin is that the Temple traders accept the status quo. The story has one thing to say about this: *don't*. Don't accept that a simple small gesture cannot ripple out and begin to change things. Don't accept, wearily, that you can't make a difference. You can. Sometimes the change may be radical; but more often than not, change comes about through small degrees. Reform can be glacial, and adaptationist. We need to stop waiting and start acting. Nigel Biggar writes that,

“True prophets are ones who don't much enjoy playing prophet. They don't enjoy alienating people, as speakers of uncomfortable truths tend to do. They don't enjoy the sound of their own solitary righteousness and they don't enjoy being in a minority of one. True prophets tend to find the whole business

irksome and painful. They want to wriggle out of it, and they only take to it with reluctance. So beware of those who take to prophesy like a duck to water, and who revel in the role. They probably aren't the real thing.” (Nigel Biggar, ‘On Judgment, Repentance and Restoration’, a Sermon preached at Christ Church Cathedral, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2017, and quoted in Martyn Percy (ed.), *Untamed Gospel: Protests, Poems, Prose*, London: Canterbury Press, 2017).

True prophets can be thoughtful, cautious creatures. Caricatures of raging fire-storm preachers should be set aside. True prophets are more emotionally integrated. They are pastoral, contextual and political theologians. They care about people and places. They have virtues such as compassion, care, kindness, self-control, humility and gentleness. But they have passion and energy for change too; often reluctantly expressed, and only occasionally finding voice in anger. Pure compassion can actually be quite ruthless. (Ask any parent who loves their child).

A thorough practical-prophetic-pastoral theology always seeks change. We need an ecclesiology that is soaked in parrhesia, and capable of speaking truth to power – in life, and capable of shaking the foundations of complacency in order to re-found the true Church. Such a vocation requires energetic, mindful and prophetic visionaries, who are unafraid, and yet remain in a relationship with the churches, with constant attentive love for the Church they seek to reform. We need this today in our church, and world. But such theological outlooks need to be rooted not just in frustration, but also in hope. Indeed, in the hope of the Kingdom of God that is to come, and so critical of the institution in the present. That is why we pray, so often, and so much, “thy kingdom come”.

### ***The Ecumenical Endeavor:***

It is a curious feature of the twenty-first century, that the tribal-religious identity conflicts that dogged Christianity for half a millennium now seem to be a thing of the past. Paradoxically, ecumenism

itself can sometimes seem as though it belongs to a bygone era of inter-denominational rivalry – the kind in Great Britain, for example, that can now only be found in Northern Ireland, Liverpool or parts of Glasgow. For most of the developed world, however, religious identity is no longer centred on inheritance, but rather on consumerism. Ecclesial ‘brand loyalty’ is arguably a dying phenomenon.

Once upon a time, denominational names mattered a great deal, although their origin is often forgotten. It remains the case that very few denominations chose their own name – Christened themselves, so to speak. ‘Anglicanism’ is a term that was popularized by James VI of Scotland, and contains a degree of mocking irony. Similarly, ‘Anabaptists’ had their family name bestowed upon them by their

detractors. Likewise, Lutherans and Calvinists. Equally, 'Methodist' is can also be read as a dubious compliment – another mildly derogatory 'nick name'. 'Roman Catholic' is arguably an attempt to meekly particularise the universal.

Yet now, in the twenty-first century, the Ecumenical Movement has not yet sighted a promised land called Unity. If anything many churches seem to be specialising in fragmentation and exacerbating their differences. Arguments over gender, sexuality and other issues seem to mock the prayer of Jesus, 'that they may all be one' (John 17: 21). There are deep pulses that still drive the ecumenical endeavour. These include reception and hospitality, mutuality in learning, the valuing of diversity and difference, and dialogue and discernment. I am well aware that many regard these pulses – or valid, valued ecclesial concepts – as dangerous. For each in their way calls for a degree of openness and vulnerability. But to detractors, it only presumes that our most cherished theological and ecclesial proclivities are about to be watered down, or negotiated away. Correspondingly, there has been an assumption that ecumenism, as an agent or catalyst, has some kind of liberal agenda – a kind of reductively-driven homogenisation and pasteurisation of 'organic-raw' truth.

Of course, ecumenism is no such agent. Moreover, the appeal to mutuality, hospitality, mutual learning and dialogue are well-scripted in the scriptures. I will go further here, and say that we can find Jesus practising a kind of ecumenism in the gospels. Jesus regularly praises the faith of foreigners, gentiles and those outside his own tradition. Jesus is something of an itinerant cross-border trespasser, reaching out beyond, and telling stories about Good Samaritans, ministering in non-Jewish territory, and affirming what he finds beyond his own margins and faith precincts. Here, and in many respects, Jesus is the "body language of God". Simultaneously communicative and receptive; mutual, yet firm; learning, yet teaching. Jesus, moreover, sees the unseen, hears the unheard, and touches the untouchable. His body is richly sensate, and unafraid of receiving as well as giving.

The link between the incarnation and activity of Christ, and of pneumatology and missiology, freckles the pages of the New Testament, and is even rehearsed in the Old Testament. Time and again, the people of Israel are aided and foreign agents who function as instruments of their salvation. Just as the early church had to learn that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on all flesh, and that salvation would not come not only too, but also through gentiles. Ecumenism, then, when it stresses mutuality and reception, hospitality and humility, merely traces the shapes of what the scriptures have already spoken.

To root this in an example, I have only to think of the encounter between Jesus and an un-named woman at Jacob's Well (John 4: 1-42). The well is still in Israel, and in Nablus, on the West Bank (Palestinian). Built over it is a Greek monastery, and it was here, in 1979, that Sophocles Hasapis, the parish priest and guardian of the well,

lost his life. He was viciously killed by fundamentalist Jewish settlers, who resented the presence of the small community of monks there, and the Christian shrine built on and over what they felt was a sacred Jewish site. Then they threw a grenade into the church. The Well could not be more contested: Jewish, Christian, Muslim – ancient and modern, it resides oddly in a sprawling Palestinian town, living with its multiple identities.

Religion is an affair of the heart as much as the head. It inspires great passion – love, and of course, hate. To some extent, the encounter that Jesus has at Jacob’s Well with the unnamed woman is rooted in those same dynamics. Contested space and arguments over what is sacred; hatred and fear of people who see faith differently.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that purity and power are only issues for small and kraal-like religious groups. Purity and power are issues for all Christians and all churches, and fundamentalism and extremism, as a phenomenon or subject to study, is simply a concentration of a ‘problem’ that affects many different faiths, including all forms of Christianity – including those that espouse liberalism or openness. Boundaries of definition can quickly become borders marking territory and, ultimately, evolve into barriers.

And it is into this that Jesus walks. He has started to go back to Galilee, where we are treated to a story about water and wells that never run dry. But before he can get to Galilee from Judea, he must pass through Samaria – he has to cross a region that is, by definition, a place of taint and compromise that is normally to be avoided. But Jesus does not need to pass through Samaria; he could have chosen the route that follows the Jordan Valley, and avoids Samaria. So John, in stating that Jesus ‘had’ to pass through Samaria is not making a cartographical point. Jesus chooses this route in the same way that the Son of Man ‘must’ suffer (Mark 8: 31). The accent is on Jesus’ obligation to a deeper path that remains concealed from most of those who follow him. This is why Jesus arrives at the town of Sychar (John 4: 5-6), taking a seat at Jacob’s Well (thereby linking Jesus with the Patriarchs), with John telling us that Jesus is ‘tired’. It is the sixth hour.

It is here that the Samaritan woman enters the story (John 4: 7). The time of day for entry is critical, as it suggests her marginality. Water is traditionally drawn at dusk or early in the morning, when it is cool. But the sixth hour is noon, when the sun is at its hottest, suggesting that this woman’s company is questionable; she is something of an outsider even within her own community. The woman is also unnamed – possibly a coding her as ‘undesirable’, or as a ‘sinner’. What is startling, therefore, is Jesus’ direct address to her: ‘give me a drink’. Furthermore, notes John, the disciples have all left to buy provisions: there is no mutual hospitality between Jews and Samaritans. This means that Jesus and the woman are alone.

On one level, this request can be read as a gesture of reconciliation. Jesus asks something of a Samaritan, and a woman. Jesus needs her help, and he asks for it. But this gesture is, of course, met with astonishment: ‘how can you ask anything of me, a Samaritan?’ And the response from Jesus only serves to widen her eyes, for Jesus states that if she knew who she was talking to and what God gives, it is she who would be asking for water – ‘living water’. Or more accurately, in the Greek, this is ‘running water’ – an echo of that which *flows* from the rock in the desert from the staff of Moses (Exodus 17: 5; Numbers 20: 11).

John is, in other words, making a contrast between the still, perhaps even stale water of the well, and the water of life that Jesus speaks of. This is a water that, literally, brings life. The conversation, like the depth of the well, goes another stage deeper at this point. The woman’s question becomes laced with rhetorical tropes: are you greater than Jacob? Where do you get this living water from? John turns the woman’s astonishment into curiosity – she wades into the deeper waters of the conversation. And again, the conversation turns on – what to us, must seem like a staged artificiality – to draw the woman in even deeper. Jesus says: ‘anyone who drinks from this well will be thirsty again...but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst again’.

The Well, just as it was violently contested in 1979, was also contested in Jesus’ day. Here we have a sacred site in disputed ownership. But Jesus’ ministry returns the Well to Common Ownership. By reaching out to the woman, and talking about the true water of life, he is asking us to put our differences aside, and focus on the deep unity we share.

A vital key to ecumenism may lie here, and it is one that this volume, the editors and authors, are fully alive to. If one denomination can learn to live in humility and grace with its profound differences – and not allow itself to be destroyed by pride and anger, or by self-righteousness, or by imputing denigration on another denominational path – then there may be hope for deeper cross-party denominational rapport to develop. Ultimately, unity cannot be imposed: it has to be discovered and cultivated, organically.

I am often struck by Jesus’ teaching on purity, and his ecumenical credentials are especially sharp in this respect. “Beware the leaven of the Pharisees” (e.g., Luke 12: 1-3) might appear to many readers to be a clear and hostile warning about a branch of faith. That most bible translations substitute ‘leaven’ for ‘yeast’ does not help us, as yeast is an ingredient that is separate from dough, and added to it to make it rise. But the hearers of Jesus’ original words would have understood him quite differently. Because yeast was a virtually unknown ingredient in bread-making in the ancient world, it is the ‘leaven’ that we should attend to.

Leaven comes from yesterday's bread, and are the naturally occurring sourdough microbes that produce the slight ferment in the dough, causing it to rise. Each batch of bread will be made fresh, daily. But each loaf uses a tiny amount of yesterday's bread, with its natural 'mould', to make the new loaf lighter, and to rise. Paying close attention to Jesus' words, we also note that he does not reject the leaven of the Pharisees – only that we should beware of it.

So Jesus' warning about leaven constitute a far more subtle image than it first appears. We are being inducted into an arresting allegory, for Jesus is inviting us to see that we are composed – in our faith tradition – through the new and the old, and through the fresh and the mouldy. No-one would sit and eat yesterday's moulding dough. But you cannot make new bread without it. There is something in the words of Jesus, therefore, that invite us to contemplate kneading, proportionality and purity. Jesus is arguing against radical purity, and asking us to recognise that even in new expressions of faith, there will be shared ingredients, and a blend.

Jesus' words remind us that just as the fresh bread of his day needed to be baked with a small amount of the moulding dough of the previous day, so our faith needs to be remember that we can never be fully set apart from those (like the Pharisees) that we now regard ourselves as being so utterly unlike. 'Leaven', therefore, is a cipher: it emphasizes the need for charity, reception and discernment. For we are connected. And the hearers of Jesus' words would have understood that the leaven meant that even in a new expression of faith, some of the old would be present, necessary and generative.

In view of the lesson of the leaven, what can we learn from Jacob's Well, Jesus and the Samaritan woman for our own ecumenical endeavour? The story ends as it began – with a tale of an unexpected encounter, with themes of taint, surprise and boundary crossing redolent in the text. A group of Samaritans now come to see Jesus, prompted by the un-named woman. This in turn prompts an excursus from Jesus about the harvest – a cipher for God's abundance, but also judgement. But it is now obvious (if also perhaps puzzling to the disciples) that Jesus, throughout this encounter, is making a profound series of political statements about the nature of the kingdom and the Messiah. We can summarize these briefly.

First, it is God, who in Christ, comes to the Samaritans, and engages with them on their own territory and in their own idiom and dialect. This was not the obvious route for Jesus to take to get to Galilee – he chose to deviate, and allowed himself to be purposefully distracted.

Second, the message to the Samaritans is not 'become a Jew like me', but rather 'there is a time when tribal boundaries will cease to matter', and genuine faith will not be about which party, sect or denomination one belongs to, but instead be about

‘spirit and truth’. Christians – or perhaps we should say, denominations – need to be reminded that the establishment of the Kingdom of God is the main project, and not the maintenance of churches.

Third, this is a story radical inclusiveness. Indeed, in some respects, this is a story about reception and convergence, and commonality. As is so often the case in the gospels, Jesus is fraternising with people that raise questions about his taste, discernment and even purity. But Jesus is not interested in the labels we impute upon each other. This is all about abundant grace. Jesus meets us all on the one, same level.

Jesus’ work with the Samaritans carries an important message for us in ecumenical endeavour. For Jesus, in reaching out to the Samaritans as equals, makes a decisive contribution to that elusive search for true unity – one that respects the dignity of difference. Ecumenism is not driving towards a kind of reductively-driven homogenisation and pasteurisation of ‘raw’ truth, in order to manufacture something that is a compromise for all tastes. Rather, it is a search for the genuine differences between us that will further illuminate our pilgrim journey together, even as we also celebrate our shared commonalities.

All ecumenism needs to comprehend the open nature of learning and mutuality – if we are to discern the pedagogy of the Holy Spirit. In the midst of this, what ecumenical endeavour has taught us is that difference is not a sign of weakness, but rather of strength. The diversity within the wider church has always been one of its most glorious treasures, and a true ‘sign’ that no one denomination can fully reflect or reify the mystery of God. Ecumenism celebrates this, and it has created a variety of dialogical possibilities; of staying within a faith yet changing; and of moving to and from traditions, yet without abandoning our denominations.

Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread. It is bread for the world. And ecumenical endeavour is something of a leaven for churches and denominations as they seek a unity that might feed and nourish the wider world. In this, Christians need pray only one prayer: ‘may we all be one’ (John 17: 20-21). But we still thank God that we have been created as distinct and different, each of us in the image of the one whom fashioned us. Ultimately, the ecumenical endeavour witnesses to that simple truth: we are better together than apart. Unity, not uniformity, remains our truest calling.

### ***The Imperative of Confession and Forgiveness:***

Forgiveness is not about forgetting. It is a fertile, fecund act – one of generative remembering. But nobody can compel another to forgive, and nobody can demand to be reconciled. Forgiveness takes time. It cannot be forced.

The followers and readers of <http://survivingchurch.org> – an excellent website, bravely and pastorally curated by Stephen Parsons, will know the pain of sexual abuse first-hand. Others will have walked alongside victims. Others have had to endure the journey of false accusation, Kafkaesque processes, and the endless carousel of secret committees- the NSP, NSSG, ISB or NST. All will have suffered hideously shocking treatment by their Bishop, the National Safeguarding Team (NST) or some other ecclesiastical body. Or the infamous and unaccountable Core Group. The Spanish Inquisition may yet emerge as a more morally decent exemplar of pastoral integrity and justice compared to the Church of England. Give it time. History will judge.

To err is human; to forgive is divine. But though we may pray “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”, no-one can make you forgive. The hurt caused by harm is a wilderness of pain, and you may spend as long in that place as the Israelites spent in the desert. You may have secured freedom from your oppressor, but the oasis and promised lands may take decades to get to. Nothing anyone can say or write will diminish the pain and suffering of victims. Nor should it. The wounds, hurts, sin and evil need addressing. They are not to be wished away. The gospel is love, but it also conveys tough home truths. Christianity is not a fairy tale with a happy ending.

God’s Easter-work is the greatest act of forgiveness. Good Friday is packed with violence, travesties of justice, betrayal, desertion, humiliation, cruelty and the banality of evil. It is the wanton rejection and destruction of God’s love in Jesus. But Easter – in a springtime garden – is new life, new hope and new starts. All is forgiven. There is no reckoning or retribution. But neither is there forgetting. Jesus is still marked by the violence of Good Friday. He shows those scars to his disciples. Even in his resurrection body. So we can remember.

So how are victims supposed to move forward, marked by Good Friday, yet freed by Easter Sunday? Archbishop Bergoglio of Buenos Aires (1998-2013) – before he became Pope Francis – lived through some of the darkest political times in Argentinian history. The military dictatorships accounted for between 10,000 and 30,000 deaths during the (so-called) Dirty War. Many of the deaths were young men who had been kidnapped, tortured, and then killed by the military or police.

These ‘Disappeared’ remain a national wound, and an irrevocable indictment - a scar on the culture of the time. Bergoglio’s writings from that time made an important distinction between sin and corruption. In distinguishing the two, he suggests sin and corruption call for very different responses. Sins, argued Bergoglio, were more singular acts that need not be self-perpetuating. Corruption on the other hand, though clearly connected to sin, and resulting from sins committed and repeated over time, evolves to become a culture in its own right.

In Peter Drucker's famous maxim, "culture eats strategy for breakfast". Daringly, Bergoglio suggested that while sin could be forgiven, corruption should not be. Bergoglio held that at the root of corruption was the refusal of God's forgiveness. Because the corrupted person, institution or organization denies the need for repentance, and with that, correction. The body that refuses to repent believes it is near-perfect. Or perhaps worse, must maintain the appearance of that perfection. This is why we grind our teeth every time a government minister or Prime Minister refuses to ever say sorry.

Likewise, bishops are exactly the same when they say they will do better with safeguarding, or announce another review, or try and distract and dilute the deep, boiling anger of victims with some other new initiative. Corruption, unless named, acknowledged and corrected, only grows – like a slow cancer. Those who – it must be said, usually unwittingly – become the guardians of such systems of abusive culture have forgotten their shared humanity and Christianity. Far from being earthenware vessels containing the treasure of the gospel, the corrupted become hard of heart; and hardened to the hurt they continue to cause. In protecting their reputations, power, privilege, status or wealth, their hearts and the treasure they guard become entwined.

To conceal this entrapment and enslavement, a culture of corruption will often energetically cultivate an appearance of righteousness and civility. Those caught up in this, justifying themselves, finally become convinced of their own moral superiority. They will never apologise. In contrast, a sinner (even when not ready to repent) will usually have sufficient self-awareness to know they are a sinner. They will know something of the taste of the quality of mercy, and will ask for forgiveness. In so doing, they will be open to grace. The corrupt, by denying their sin, and believing with pride in their own sanctity and superiority, invariably spurn and close down the possibility of grace.

Thus, whilst sin can be forgiven, Bergoglio argued that corruption must be treated and cured. Here, in terms of corruption, churches are at their most dangerous and vulnerable. Those guarding or perpetuating their own cultures of corruption will eventually engage in "dialogue" – on gender, sexuality and safeguarding for example - and may even grant you some concessions. This only serves to feed their sense of worth, and might even help them believe that they are genuinely accommodating, and perhaps even a bit sorry. But in fact they are not. They do not want to lose their power and privilege. They cannot say sorry. They cannot repent. What happens next is even more dangerous for institutions. A kind of cancer-like 'purity spiral' will develop. The drivers of the oppressive culture cannot believe that they are participating in and perpetrating any wickedness or cruelty. They are, after all, not

bad people. But they have become hard-wired into the culture, and they defend it as they might the gospel.

At this point, even the most passive agents in the abusive culture will work harder and harder to disassociate themselves from any suggestion of being impure, wicked or offensive. It is at this point the authority of the Church to preach forgiveness is profoundly compromised by the sexual abuse crisis. The church loses its moral bearings. It cannot tell other people that sins must be forgiven when it cannot see that its own culture remains intact, and will continue to abuse.

Bishops may say they are sorry for another abusive, botched or suppressed lessons learned review”. But without repentance and condemnation, the pattern of abuse and cover-ups continues. If the corrupt culture is not going to be changed, then you can forgive as many sins as you like. It will make no difference to previous, current and future victims.

As Bergoglio observed, Jesus does cure the corrupt. Yet not through acts of mercy, but rather through engineering major trials and the deliberate infliction of disturbing trauma. In Luke 8, Jairus is made to wait for Jesus to heal his daughter. Jesus, running late, and quite deliberately so, does nothing to prevent her untimely death. But in the act of healing the woman with continuous menstrual bleeding, he enables her to participate in synagogue worship once again. She is healed. Her stigmatisation is taken away by Jesus’ touch. No longer impure, she has her status restored.

Jairus, a synagogue ruler, would have been instrumental in excluding this woman from such worship. The healing of the woman, and the raising of Jairus’ daughter, is both a blessing and a trauma for Jairus. It is bitter-sweet. For Jairus must now face the culture of exclusion he was instrumental in upholding. He must face this woman. To get Jairus to this point, he is, arguably, made to lose and grieve for his daughter. She dies. The moral lesson of the miracle lies in the judgment it makes against the culture of exclusion in ritual purity. Only when the culture is exposed to trauma can it change. Jairus may now repent of his participation in decades of structural oppression. But it is only the trauma of his daughter’s loss that got him there.

Such traumas have the potential to pierce the armour of corruption and allow grace to enter. To treat faith as a suit of armour – a means of self-defence – is to deny the possibility of God surprising us with amazing grace, the compassion of the stranger, and the revelation of Christ in the prisoner, hungry, sick and homeless. If we encase ourselves in our own armoured-personal faith, we will only mummify ourselves. But never enough, so our body soon degrades and decomposes. The body that we armour too tightly becomes pallid, compromised, corrupted – and eventually stinks.

Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus *not* forgiving the sins of the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. Their culture is a bellwether indicator of a religion that regards itself as morally self-sufficient and superior to others. Jesus' caustic castigations – straining gnats whilst swallowing camels, or picking out specks in someone else's eye when there is a plank in your own – are *unforgiving*.

Those who are corrupt will always try and justify themselves with comparisons to others. The parable of the Pharisee and sinner in the gospel of Luke (18) comes to mind, with its hints of smug triumphalism. In safeguarding we find this in announcements and speeches at General Synod. "We have set up an Independent Safeguarding Board" recently comes to mind. The gullible are fooled, but victims of abuse and shockingly bad process are not. For the culture is the same, and remains intact and immune to true change.

The Church of England's safeguarding culture ensures that all power differentials remain in place, including secrecy, unsafe and unlawful processes. With the ISB, once again the Church of England's culture of corruption has sired a body that has no accountability, scrutiny, fairness, transparency or external regulation. We find the same fear-driven self-sufficiency baked in with moral superiority. This is corrupt.

Yet in the parable of the Pharisee and sinner, the latter articulates not only their guilt, but also their sense of shame. In contrast, the corrupt will usually be triumphantly, shamelessly and morally smug. Moreover, the agents of this culture of corruption can easily recruit more accomplices, as they are offering them an experience of graduation into moral-spiritual superiority, self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency. This culture eats all nascent initiatives designed to correct it. In the end, it will of course consume itself.

Jesus had to reject the religious elites of his day, because they had taken possession of the law and tradition, its meanings and applications. We have an old saying: "possession is nine-tenths of the law". By claiming ownership of faith, religion and morality, the religious elites of Jesus' time were able to remain aloof.

These religious leaders could issue edicts. They could decide if and when they went into "dialogue", and with whom. Most difficult questions could be left unanswered, and difficult questioners were censured and censored. To most victims of safeguarding processes, that is their ongoing experience too: a daily diet of stones, snakes and scorpions from the NST. There is never any bread.

By purloining religion – in theory to protect it, but in the end to possess it – the religious elites of Jesus' day were able put themselves above others. The elite were not like the people. Leaders could not be weighed, cross-examined, investigated,

inspected or judged. Anyone who joined this elite acquired power and privilege, with immunity from accountability. Here, Bishops, the NST and others in power are the direct descendants of Pharisees and Sadducees.

As Pope Francis noted, Jesus, by walking with the poor and outcast, befriending them as valued equals in the Kingdom of Heaven, simply “smashed the wall that prevented [them] from coming close to God”. So we are back with the necessity of creative rage and constructive destruction. Why? Because the offer of dialogue by those remaining in power can never heal corruption. The only way to deal with corruption is to cause the powerful serious trials, tribulations and traumas, so that grace can finally break through; light pierce the fog of bureaucracy; and the winds of the Spirit scatter the secrets shrouded in darkness.

Lest there be any doubt about this remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 18: 6-7 – “whoever causes one of these little ones...to sin, it is better for them that a heavy millstone be hung around their neck, and that they be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to those through whom they come!”.

On the face of it, this issue is apparently a ‘tripping point’. Romans 14: 13 bears that out: “let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve to not put an obstacle or a stumbling block in the way of a fellow believer”. Yet a millstone around your neck is a pretty heavy block. Yet our term “stumbling block” is not what it seems. It comes from the Greek word *skandalon*, (used 15 times in the New Testament) and is the source of our word *scandal*. The corresponding verb, “to cause to stumble,” is *skandalizō*, (used 30 times in the NT) from which we get our word *scandalize*.

### ***The Scandal of Jesus, and the Church as Scandalous:***

To us moderns, a scandal is just toxic gossip and tabloid-tittle-tattle – and might summon Vardy vs. Rooney, or some other more serious courtroom drama that might involve loss of life, or some failure of government. However, to the ancient Greeks, a scandal was the trigger mechanism for a baited trap. Later, it came to mean the actual trap as a whole, or something that tripped a person up, causing them to stumble and fall. In the Bible, a stumbling block is anything that causes a person to fall – be that into sin, false teaching or unbelief. But there is another side to this. Jesus Christ was a *skandalon*: “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to gentiles, foolishness” (see I Corinthians 1: 23).

It might surprise you to learn that Pope Francis argued that the merciful response to the corrupt is to place a stumbling-block, a *skandalon*, in their path, which is the only way of forcing them to seriously contemplate taking a different road. One

thinks of the rich man who obeys all the law, and excels at good works. What else is he to do? A *skandalon* is placed before him. Jesus tells him, “If you want to be complete, go *and* sell your possessions and give to *the* poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me”. But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he owned much property and had enormous wealth (Matthew 19: 21-22).

The way to deal with the culture of corruption in the Church of England’s safeguarding is to put many *skandalon* in their way. It forces those following these paths to divert and deviate. Eventually it will impede them. Only when they renounce the corruption can they escape and be free. Only then, when there is sorrow, contrition and personal responsibility, can there be confession and forgiveness. Only then, can one welcome them back, and begin to speak of authentic dialogue, reconciliation and healing.

The reality in the Church of England is an ecumenical problem. Can we name any denomination in modern times that has pre-emptively anticipated the claims to be made against them for previous and current abuses, and set up a scheme of redress, well-funded, and rooted in remorse, repentance and restoration? No church does, because no church understand how the scandal of Jesus indicts the church. In her excellent *Queer Virtue* (Beacon Press, 2016), Elizabeth Edman explains the double-bind of scandal we find in the gospels.

Clearly, God manifest in a defenceless infant is a scandal – not the kind of god that the ancient near-East could easily comprehend. The instrument of Jesus’ death and torture – of shame – is another scandal. A community gathered around a common meal for their worship – communion – is another scandal. As a disciple, Peter clearly believes that Jesus should neither be exposed to scandal or become one. Jesus tells Peter “get thee behind me, Satan” (Matthew 16: 23). Jesus’ course is set: that is the scandal of the cross. But Peter is scandalised by the notion that Jesus will be humiliated, falsely accused, put through rigged trials and then killed.

What then unfolds is multiple layers of scandal. Jesus will become a stumbling block. He tells his disciples they will desert him - they will in their actions become a scandal of cowardice and failure. As Edman notes, what Peter and the disciples seek is security, safety and the status quo. Jesus does not offer that, and to participate in the gospel story of salvation exposes us to loss, humiliation, contrition, confession and genuine repentance. All of these are pre-conditions for resurrection and new life. The power of God is going to be witnessed in shame, destruction, weakness and abuse. The scandal of the cross is that Jesus endures it, and is killed by it. The early church struggled to embrace this. As does today’s church.

As I have remarked before, the church too easily slips into a pattern of behaviour in which it imagines itself as Christ alive, yet on the cross, struggling for breath, dignity and life. The way of the cross teaches us that death will come, and that giving up – yielding to what we cannot control – is not wrong, bad or evil. We are crucified with Christ. The churches have nothing to lose, in the end, by giving the victims of abuse what they need for life. But the church does not do this. It fights and gasps for every breath. Here, it is not Christ on the cross at all. These are the urges of the thieves either side of Jesus.

Yet we know that to be fully alive means having hope and being able to forgive. That means being released from our past burdens and being open to the hope of the future. The Eucharist is a *skandalon* too. It expresses a fearless, daring, brave and defiant hope in the midst of gross injustice, cruelty and violence. The Eucharist is an audacious act of generosity and grace in the face of these forces of evil that are bent on destruction and death. “On the night before he died, he had supper with his friends”. Obviously, that is what everyone does before meeting their end in violent cruel torture and a slow lingering death. Supper. With friends. I mean, why not? For tomorrow we die.

The Eucharist is not meant to be a convivial gathering for a meal accompanied with cheerful songs and sentiments. It is the taking of bread, breaking it, and sharing it. It is the taking of the cup, and sharing it. It is this act of remembrance – even in pre-empting the crucifixion – that we may now gather and share, and know the presence and love of God, despite whatever may come next.

Yet the Jesus who is the true *skandalon* is not the usual Christ that first comes into our minds. Sometimes the expression of passionate anger and acting it out is important, and even prophetic. What are we to make of Jesus driving out the money-changers and traders from the temple precincts, recorded in the Gospel of John (2: 13-16)? Jesus creates mayhem in the temple, and upsets all the people going about their lawful trading in dubious religious tat. And he goes to the whole hog too, driving them out with a whip that he made himself. Jesus doesn’t do things by halves. Jesus’ apparent rush of blood to the head in this temple story, where he not only conducts himself like a teenager in-line for an anti-social behaviour order, but also goes on claim the Temple for his own ends. So Jesus’ action in the Temple – reckless, violent and apparently intemperate – contains a strong message.

It is a message of wisdom. Breaking oppressive frames of reference requires dramatic action. This is about smashing a culture of corruption. There is really no point trading up from a pigeon to a dove. Neither sacrifice brings you closer to God; both are a waste of your money. There was no point in going for the “three for two” offer on goats; nor this month’s “buy one get one free” offer on lambs. And this is why

Jesus' 'anger' in the gospel is so interesting. For it seems not to be a hot, quick irrational 'temper-snap'; but rather a cold and calculating anger. There is a difference between hot anger and cold, perhaps righteous anger. The latter is a derivative of passion and virtue. It has a deep ethical intentionality.

John's gospel records that Jesus saw what was going on in the Temple. He then left, went away and *made* the whips of cords. Then he returned. This is a cold premeditated attack; not a rush of blood to the head. He has, as the Epistle to James puts it, 'been slow to anger' – but he's got there. This is how to disrupt a corrupt culture. Dialogue won't do. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger as the robot from the future in *The Terminator*, Jesus has seen the Temple, and says to his puzzled audience, "I'll be back". As noted earlier, the first and original sin is not disobedience. It is indifference. We can no longer ignore the pain and alienation that others in the church experience – and especially when this is *because* of the church. Indifference is pitiful, and it is the enemy of compassion. The stranglehold of a corrupted culture must be broken.

The scandal of safeguarding in the Church of England is one of learned indifference; double-standards; strained gnats, then camels swallowed whole; beams and motes; the amount of money spent on process, but not people; the lies, secrecy, double-speak, "PR and Comms"; the offer of dialogue that leads to no change; picking off victims one-by-one; endless, slow, treacle-like procedures; gross misconduct; even grosser incompetence; the hypocrisy and the hype.

I believe we can get beyond enduring this – beyond surviving church. Yet this can only be done by bringing religious leaders to their knees. Not, initially, for them to be asking for forgiveness. That is for later. Bringing the presiders of safeguarding to their knees is about breaking a corrupt culture with *skandalon*, and these must be financial and reputational.

In Canada, Australia and the USA, denominations with significant histories of abuse only began to repent when the financial consequences became extremely serious. Up until then, it was decades of victims being given the run-around in the search for truth, justice and redress. And the churches (or church schools) going through the gears of NDA's, endless reviews, false promises, blaming the past, blaming the victims, and doing this all so very, very slowly. Something has to give. The victims of cruel, unaccountable and indifferent process came together and litigated. Ultimately, there is always a body liable for such corruption, abuses, harm and cover-ups. Our ecumenism in Great Britain must encourage and facilitate the same.

With the Redress Scheme in the Church of England now delayed, diluted and dispersed across dioceses once again, we are increasingly of the view that all the

survivors, victims and respondents (also often abused by very bad, incompetent or unlawful processes) will not secure any redress or justice until we bring some kind of class action. Films featuring abuse in the Catholic Church ( see ‘Spotlight’ ‘Sins of the Father’; and related films such as ‘Dark Waters’ and ‘Erin Brockovich’) chart the plight of the abused who are made to wait years and years for justice.

But as the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston and the Anglican Churches of Australia and Canada found to their (great, considerable) cost, somewhere in these places, ultimately, there *is* to be found responsibility and liability. This has led to church buildings and church land being sold for redress and compensation. It means victims can finally get the therapeutic care they need, and perhaps investment leading to new work. They can get their legal fees back. And their lives. The falsely accused drummed out of the church without trial or rights can feed and house their families.

To get beyond surviving church, victims of sexual abuse and miscarriages of justice in this corrupted safeguarding culture of the Church of England need to work together. To name those who seek to remain nameless; and to shine a light on the things still hidden in darkness. The offer of forgiveness and reconciliation only comes when the culture of corruption has been completely smashed to smithereens, repented of, rendered utterly obsolete and finally defeated. That day will surely come. There is little to fear, and much to hope for.

It is well-known – especially by those who are suffering with incurable conditions – that sometimes it is the giving up hope leads to unexpected release and joy. The loss of hope, or a deliberate parting with it, is seldom done in an instant. It happens over time, as we struggle for any and all routes to what we hope for. But giving up hope is not necessarily an act of despair. It can be creative and freeing. In giving up hope of a miracle recovery from imminent death (your own, or someone else’s), or of some other amazing cure, we embrace our identity and learn to live with and accept what we have, and what we are.

This is the essence of C. S. Lewis’ *Surprised by Joy*. His acceptance of his own tragic loss and grief allows him to rediscover joy. In so doing, he finds his way back to gratitude and grace. So letting go of hope can be a pathway to joy. But let me also say that hopelessness is a freedom and position few possess. Because it only works if there is a safety net that can save you from utter despair. Those grieving, or living with chronic conditions, or degenerative disabilities, or for that matter, the scars of abuse, need to be loved, supported and held as much as any other person. You can therefore depart in peace from what you had yearned and hoped for. But only if there is enough hope and joy around you to sustain you in your identity, and with the experiences of loss, pain, trauma and trial that you carry.

### ***Principles, Principalities and Powers:***

We are now able to open up some other fronts that we might want to reflect upon. One thinks of the infectious joy and laughter of Desmond Tutu, and his joy in those around him which became a singular and disarming weapon against hatred, bitterness and oppression. One thinks of the joy in church services that carry us forward in our journeys of hope. Come to think of it, where we find a lack of joy, we often find little to hope for.

Here, I think of the extraordinary group of survivors and victims of abuse that I have been privileged – and it is a privilege – to be part of since 2016. They look out for each other. They welcome others into their fold. They hate injustice. They can sometimes despair. They look out for each other, and when one is very, very down, and senses all is hopeless, others in the group will pick that person up. The flame of hope is never extinguished. But more than that, this group knows joy. They take delight in each other's company, milestones, weekend plans, meals out (tweeted), pets, partners and holiday plans.

Preaching at a service of Evensong in May 2020, I acknowledged this group's amazing 'complexion': 15% grit; 15% comedy club; 70% French Resistance. But comedy, in the face of abuse? Yes, even dark comedy is remedial and can be redeeming. It is amazing how sustaining joy is, because its presence is a mark of resilience, and its absence a confirmation of desolation, defeat and despair. But you cannot fake joy. It must be authentic. Because it must be grounded in the lightness of our being, and the utter capacity to delight in others. Humour can be part of this, as much as tears of joy. But note, this is all berthed in the deep-water harbour of kindness. And it is from those depths that, sometimes, the kindest and best thing to do is make Jairus wait, or make a scene in the courts of the Temple with the hawkers and tat-merchants. There is a good kind of anger that flows from love, and wants to see joy, peace and hope for all.

So, what is to be done about the Church of England and its wretched, self-perpetuating litany of excuses for safeguarding? As the saying goes, "don't get mad, get even". These rough places need levelling, and the oppressed raising up. This must mean a different approach to the current impasse. This corrupt culture must be broken. As it must be in all our denominations.

There is no one path that brings about change. Protests, publishing and picketing are important. Not giving up, ever, is vital. Sticking together is essential. But perhaps the biggest difference to be made for change lies in law and litigation. Because God loves righteousness. And God loves the law and the justice and redemption it brings. Law is also the third party in the diatribes and disputes about responsibility and

liability. This is the lesson of King Solomon and his wisdom. A third party making the decisions, judgments and issuing a definitive ruling is the place where disputes can end, and the litigants let go, and be free to find joy.

As long as the Church of England evades its lawful responsibilities in safeguarding, the joy will continue to drain away from the office of bishop. At the same time, the hope in that office will evaporate. But the settlement must be significant, and of a proportion that signals a genuine act of deep, permanent repentance. The settlement cannot leave the perpetrators in power. Nor can it leave the structures in place. To repent, these must be set aside. Forever.

The sums of money that will work for comprehensive redress will be in the nine-figure range. But when all is said and done £1.1 billion is less than 10% of the wealth of the Church Commissioners. If the Church of England is serious about redress, those who pave the way in a class action on behalf of others should probably argue for that final number to be a whole tithe of the Church Commissioners' wealth (calculated as over £10 billion). Furthermore, the Church of England could also take out another loan. Just as there was a recent £550 million "Sustainability Bond" for the Church of England, so there must now be a "Redress and Reconciliation Bond". This would therefore raise the Redress Fund to £1.6 billion.

Why would this sum be needed? The answer lies in the other numbers. In 2019, the Church of England estimated that there were at least 3,300 victims of sexual abuse (see: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/19/church-of-england-reveals-50-rise-in-abuse-claims-and-concerns>). On any decent guestimate there are comfortably several hundred clergy victims of false and vexatious allegations, or of poor process, who have been unable to work again as a result of mercurial episcopal decisions, opaque investigations and the like. IICSA have demanded action.

Yet the Church of England has continued to dither, deny and delay (see: <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/redress-scheme>). The Church of England had thought that £200 million might resolve the issues for the claimants (see: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7985367/Church-England-faces-possible-200million-compensation-payout-survivors-child-sex-abuse.html>). That seems a very, very low estimate of what is needed, and the time for a Class Action to secure proper compensation, redress and futures for victims is fast approaching.

Many clergy and their families have suffered breakdowns, and lost their home, vocation and faith. Marriages have ended, and once-valued clergy turned into pariahs. Victim-blaming has also been extensive, and visited upon those traumatized by the sexual abuse they have endured. Some have waited over a decade for a

“review”, “findings” and justice. Compensation has been withheld, or if given, meagre and begrudging, and often capped or covered by NDA’s.

A Redress Scheme would need sufficient funds to compensate between 4,000 to 5,000 persons. On average, that would mean awards of £350,000 per person. Clearly, some awards may be much higher, and some considerably lower. However, the Redress Scheme would need to have the kinds of funds within it that could pay for the therapy, support, resettlement and compensation for victims. The comparative examples from across the Anglican Communion (e.g., Australia) show that a £1.6 billion fund is a reasonable and proportionate sum. Furthermore, the access to and control of this fund, and its pay-outs, must be independent of the Church of England, with claimants only subject to a bar of civil proof.

I have only commented on the Church of England here, but all denominations could pay into a scheme that aided, compensated and supported victims of abuse, and those abused by the processes of the church (e.g., false accusations, botched investigations, etc). If this were ecumenical, and shaped by prescient-prophetic initiative, then the churches might – just might – survive as communities of character, virtue and formation into the next century. My fear is that without proactive remedial action and redress, nobody will want to know the church in the future. It will be a scandal to belong to and support it. But not in the way the gospels envisaged Christ being a stumbling block. The church will be a millstone.

Victims will still be coming forward for the first time in the decades ahead. This means taking on the body that is ultimately responsible for the gross negligence, indifference, obfuscation, misconduct, corruption and other failings we see all the time in safeguarding. The fund will need to be very, very large, carefully set up, completely out of the hands of the Church, and able to compensate, support and help other victims in the future, yet to emerge. That is a major work, and it will require major funding (see <https://www.cityam.com/exclusive-uk-becomes-europes-leading-jurisdiction-for-class-action-lawsuits/>). However, the precedents and templates already exist in English law (see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group\\_litigation\\_order](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_litigation_order)). Clearly, achieving the goal of establishing a well-funded and completely Independent Redress Scheme could take years. But there are already beacons to guide us, and to aim for (<https://anglican.org.au/our-work/professional-standards-commission/national-redress-scheme/>). There are other examples too for the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. This may not take years to achieve, especially if this is a prophetic-ecumenical action brought by victims, with support from within the churches and worshipping communities of Great Britain.

My reasoning is as follows:

1. No denomination in the world facing a group claim/class action or its equivalent has won, or come out on top... In a Court, collusion, cover-ups and incompetence are exposed.
2. Bishops and Archbishops have not and never will warm to being "defendants", especially if they are not the actual perpetrators of direct abuse. But they don't want to carry the reputational can for others, and defend the abuses of others, and their consequences.
3. Missional damage – as defendants, bishops, church leaders and denominations cannot really get their messages of growth, loyalty and evangelism out there. Eventually a penny drops: pay out or lose more. Even the little you have will be taken away from you.
4. History - there are just about enough intelligent people left in the Church of England who will realise that their losses will be of a colossal nature to fight a group of organised victims in a class action or group litigation order. Other denominations also have intelligent realists.
5. Vanity – bishops and church leaders like to be liked. Currently, the churches are extremely fragile, and at present the leadership have little air left to breathe financially and fight on in litigation they cannot win.
6. Church leadership could and should conclude that fighting is going to be cheaper than settling. The problem they will have as being defendants, and the negative PR-missional impact, is not worth it.
7. The political and constitutional damage to the Church of England will be unwelcome, and bring the Bishops into the spotlight for scrutiny and governance. It is hard to see an established church surviving intact – charitable status and other privileges – if it continues to spurn victims.
8. Never underestimate how vain and Machiavellian some church leaders and bishops are. We may reach a significant settlement sum in a Redress Scheme in exchange for them taking the credit!

At present, victims of abuse and abusive safeguarding processes are all picked off one by one; and always at the mercy of endless delays, false promises and silences. This needs to change, and by making the Bishops and Archbishops

defendants, it becomes harder for them to live with such strains. Currently, it is far too easy for them to express apparent empathy, sympathy and pastoral concern for victims in public, whilst privately working against them. The bishops are not accountable. No bishop is.

An important step forward for the Church of England will be the complete adoption of the Human Rights Act 1998, the Equality Act 2010, standard employment law, full compliance with Freedom of Information requests and legislation on data (GDPR), and underpinned by the seven 'Nolan Principles' for conduct in public life. The Seven Principles of Public Life provide a framework of integrity for institutions. Universities, schools, hospitals, county councils, government and other public bodies have adopted them. These seven principles are:

1. Selflessness.
2. Integrity.
3. Objectivity.
4. Accountability.
5. Openness.
6. Honesty.
7. Leadership.

The Seven Principles of Public Life provide a framework of integrity for institutions. Universities, schools, hospitals, county councils, government and other public bodies have adopted them. The ethical standards set out in the Nolan Principles were a response to various scandals in public and parliamentary life under the government of John Major. This included misconduct that might not have been technically illegal, but was nonetheless regarded as corrupt and self-serving. Those working in the public sector are expected to adhere to these standards. They were first set out by Lord Nolan in 1995 in the first report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and they are now standard in a range of codes relating to proper conduct across public life, and beyond.

Yet these are nowhere to be found in the Church of England, where secrecy, conflicts of interest, favoritism, obfuscated processes and self-protection reign untrammelled. Without any external regulation – the Church of England is virtually “a law unto itself” – human rights, basic employment rights and other protections for clergy and laity are simply not present. True, many of the examples of misconduct are innocent mistakes that then get covered up, and unaddressed. For example, complaints procedures and investigations in which the complainant is not interviewed or consulted, but told (eventually) “there is nothing to see here”.

If the Church of England seeks to be a public body in the present and future, then it will have to model a level of fairness, justice, equality, accountability, transparency and integrity that at present, it shows no sign of wishing on itself. Bishops and their staff can do as they please to whomsoever they please (within reason), and there are few, if any, internal mechanisms within the Church of England to bring them to account. This only fosters a culture resistant to openness, honesty and objectivity. Their mercurial and monarchic decisions can rarely be challenged. Perhaps the only way forward will be to regulate the Church of England in order to prevent abuses of power and authority. The alternative is to not regard it as a public body, and allow it to slowly deflate into becoming a members-based sect.

More personally, I recall – several years’ ago – being very surprised to receive a call, out of the blue, from a non-English Diocese thanking me for my interest in the vacant See, and inviting me to interview. They had received my paperwork from Lambeth Palace, and were keen to progress this. But nobody at Lambeth Palace had asked [a] can they forward my data; [b] was I willing to explore this See, and [c] did I feel called to this place? The subsequent ‘phone call with the Appointments Secretary did not improve the emerging picture. Apparently, I could toddle off to this other Diocese and come back to the Church of England in a few years’ time (again, no sense of calling or vocation). Had Lambeth Palace thought about my wife’s work, our children, our life in general, or current vocation? No. Furthermore, any attempt on my part to try and explain the dynamics of prayerful vocation to some ecclesiocrat manager only fluent in management-speak were simply hopeless.

For sure, when it comes to the church, our struggle is not against flesh and blood. It is against Principalities and Powers (Ephesians 6: 12). The orbit in which the demonic forces of denial, abuse, cover ups and continued concealment flourish is the scandal that defines our denominations. Our cultures – all different, yet so similar – need to be exorcised, dismantled, banished, expelled, refuted and cast out. Alas, our ecumenical endeavor – prophetic change to bring redress, reform, redemption, renewal and restoration – will be stifled by the churches, so long as they want to survive without owning up to their shame. It is vital, therefore, that the churches are broken by the law and the prophets in this case. It is only when the churches lose their reputations – and with it, their moral, social, spiritual and pastoral capital – that we will see change. To repent, the churches need to be confronted with the genuine prospect of annihilation. Until then, our churches are in search of principles, and remain governed by the Principalities and Powers of this present darkness. That is a darkness that seeks to conceal abuse, hide perpetrators, and cover up incompetence, malfeasance and gross misconduct. Whilst such forces remain in the church, it is a scandal – a stumbling block for us all.

### ***Prophetic Challenge and Change:***

If we want to be the children of God, we can be adopted in Christ, and learn and wean from him. But we cannot pass this on through inheritance. Deep down we know that to resist the work of God – the endless reconstruction of ourselves in the *Imago Dei* – is something we cannot contribute much towards, save our assent (“yes”) and suppleness (“let it be to me according to your word”). Without yielding to God, we will not experience true grace, illumination and transformation. We will, instead, invest our energies in being what God has *not* called us to be: self-sufficient, self-reliant and self-perpetuating. Sometimes accepting God’s demolition of us, and the possibility of a complete reconstruction, is better than preservation, conservation, repair and resistance to God’s work. Our besetting sin in the church – with us for well over two centuries and more – is our buy-in to endless models, visions and programmes of self-help and self-improvement. But first and foremost, God wants us with as little baggage as possible.

The less there is, the more God can do with it. Loaves and fish are just one illustration. Likewise, the first disciples. Oh, and the early church. Christian faith is partly about casting aside all the binds us and beginning to follow the light to the distant glow of a stable in an otherwise forgettable rural village in some far-flung occupied territory. A completely pointless place of pilgrimage: a waste of time being there. Such is God; his work of renewal and redemption begins in the wasteland of a vast mighty empire. Our besetting sins recall the first sin. And our attempts to cover it up should make us wince.

Adam and Eve give us a familiar paradigm for individuals and institutions. Thinking that they might know more than God, they succumbed to temptation. Blame and denial is passed around, and no one takes responsibility. In an otiose effort to cover their shame, they sew fig leaves together to cover their sense of disgrace and nakedness. If you ever want to run a Bible study on the early chapters of Genesis, a compelling exercise for attendees is to give them a needle and thread and some fig leaves, and see what they come up with. It is futile and very funny. For this is midrash – a kind of espresso shot of dark humour. Only when Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden do they get to wear proper clothes – and even these are made and tailored by God from animal skins. The fig leaves are not mentioned again.

The first sin was indifference, but it was also a kind of contempt. That God need not be relied upon, or even trusted. That we could do better if we helped ourselves a bit more and depended upon God a little less. That God might think our self-motivated attempts at self-improvement would not amount to a breach of covenant. That we could blame a third party (a serpent) for our hubris or blame each other

(s/he made me do it). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. When we lose that humility, foolishness finds a home. A ready one too, with vacant possession – for wisdom has been evicted.

In Malcolm Gladwell's compelling sociological monograph, *Tipping Point* (Boston, 2000), he remarks that ultimately it is contempt that finally destroys an institution. When we cease to respect the leaders, symbols or very foundations of any institution – its purpose and values – the ensuing lack of trust is deeply corrosive for all future relationships. (This is what topples regimes, leads to revolutions and revolts, or simmering socio-political resentment and rebellion). Hannah Arendt made similar remarks in her Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen in 1975. What was so striking about those on trial for the holocaust was not so much their collusion or agency, but their sheer thoughtlessness. They never thought about the victims. They had shut down as thinking-feeling humans, so they could just “obey orders”.

When the people sense their government or leaders are choosing to regard and treat their fellow citizens with contempt, the seeds of uprising are planted deep. When Bishops and church leaders treat the laity as mere pew-fodder, as mere numbers in pi and flow charts flush with potential, then perhaps as malleable consumers to merchandise and experiment on with new products and ideas, or just another round of disappointing statistics, you can begin to scent rebellion. When clergy are treated as though they don't matter, and as merely expendable employees who need to be kept in line, then the very womb of the church begins to groan with insurgency.

The institution – whether it be a government, parliament, the police, a university, school, health or social service, church, or indeed a marriage – can survive most crises. It can usually cope with competing convictions and can even flourish with them if each party stays faithful and true to one another, their greater good, and the future and integrity of that institution. But it cannot survive the contempt it breeds. That is, contempt for its public and the people it serves. It cannot survive if it shows contempt or duplicity towards its core values, or mainstay people, companions, colleagues or partners. It cannot explain away its hypocrisy, or blame others for its own failures, as that only adds to the sense of an institution serving itself. Reputation management is as futile as clothes made out of fig leaves.

Yes, contempt is a step towards self-destruction, and institutions that have the contagion are mostly destroyed from the inside out. The tipping point will just be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back; the one extra snowflake that made the roof cave in. So if the first sin was contempt, what are asked recall? Several things come to mind, but here are three brief propositions.

First, there is a very real difference between contempt and dissent. Indeed, loyal dissent is important for institutions, and is to be encouraged and valued. Institutions – whether it is a marriage, church, school, hospital or university – deal in established norms, patterns and paradigms for behavioural relations that express good values and practices. Dissent is how we learn from difference and diversity. Good and honest disagreement – *adiaphora* – has a role in preventing bad argument and fracture on non-essential issues. Unity does not mean uniformity. In being united, we can also confess our differences within a framework of mutuality and peace.

Second, institutions are, for the most part, free (or very heavily subsidised at their point of delivery (though some are paid-for and private, and universities and colleges vary hugely). As services, they also rest on largely voluntary and free associations that bond us by shared values and commitments, and do not oblige us by contract. Institutions can rarely compel and will be limited in what they can enforce. Yet they are essential in a civil society, and they primarily lead by example. As such, they cannot afford to be held in contempt by those they serve; nor do they treat those that they serve with contempt.

Third, and in that memorable sociological phrase “structure is an expression of value” (see Stewart Clegg, *The Theory of Power and Organizations*, 1979; Luther Gerlach, *People, Power and Change: Moments of Social Transformation*, 1970; and see also Martyn Percy, *Words, Wonders and Powers*, 1996, pp. 116–119), our institutions sometimes need to look at themselves carefully in the mirror, and reflect on how their very structured-ness and thoughtlessness sends out signals and signposts as to what is valued and cherished. It is perhaps for this reason that the birth of Jesus is – according to tradition, at least – in a rickety town, in a rickety stable and in a rickety crib. There is something here about permanence, reliability and stability, that God seems to have bypassed. Quite deliberately.

The Church of England’s safeguarding work represents a doomed project that aspires to self-sufficiency, and magpie-like, misappropriates other language for self-comfort. The field is littered with terms – ‘Core Groups’, ‘independent’ and the like – that are immediately devalued inside the Church. The long-running Independent Public Statutory Inquiry examining the circumstances in which men, women and children treated by NHS in the UK were given infected blood and infected blood products, is now nearing its end. The Hillsborough victims took years to get the justice that they sought for those who lost their lives. That is the journey we are now on with victims of abuse and safeguarding processes in the Church of England. Only when the journey ends can there ever be closure. When we arrive at that terminus, there will be peace and joy. And new hope.

## ***An Anatomy of Authentic Remorse and Redress:***

As Wade Mullen notes in his prescient *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from its Power* (Tyndale, 2020), those who need freeing from abuse need the very threads that bind them to be undone, or to be cut. Prophetic ecumenism has a vital role here. As Mullen notes, too often the words “we are sorry” are casually offered and easily accepted as if they possess a supernatural power to resolve every grievance and heal any wound. Yet, in his own experience working with abuses in organizations, this short statement, offered as a bridge of reconciliation, is often surrounded by other messages that serve a very different purpose. Above, underneath, and all around this single bridge are numerous walls of defence. These walls are established to repel the shame that threatens from without and to protect the legitimacy hoarded within, ensuring that the bridge of apology allows no shame to enter and no legitimacy to exit.

Many public statements of apology quickly pitches for why organizations and leaders are still worthy of support from the followers, and the wider public. Far too often. Churches only appear to apologise in order to survive the scandal. There is never any hint of genuine repentance and the making of true amends. The church thinks that “the show must go on”. In truth, it is now unwatchable, as the hypocrisy, scandals and abuse have ruined the rest of the acts on the programme. Worse still, the institution in the wrong might ask their victims to carry their shame so they can retain legitimacy in the eyes of their followers, unwilling to fully acknowledge that the shameful behaviour belongs to them and the legitimacy belongs to the ones speaking the truth about their behaviour.

Why are authentic apologies so feared? Perhaps because the shame would expose their illegitimacy, and they would lose what is no longer their right to have: following, influence, power, status, (and what is often most important to them): money. And so they fearfully run from public shame, like thieves anxiously running down the street with bags of money clutched over their shoulders, knowing the fabric of those bags are tearing apart and their money might soon be scattered by the wind.

The simple truth is that many organizations will not apologize as they ought because their leaders fear being seen as unqualified (an identity crisis), and because they fear costly lawsuits or loss of a following (a monetary crisis). Wade Mullen argues that out of that fear emerges the following kinds of non-apology:

1. *The apology that condemns.*

The apology offered in anger or frustration will often condemn the other person. The classic example of this is the apology that says, “I’m sorry you feel that way.” This is not an apology, but a condemnation. It is a subtle suggestion that the other

person's feelings are not based in reality. The apologizer is unwilling to concede he/she did anything wrong and instead argues that the fault lies in the person who is feeling wrong. People who condemn the person they are saying "I'm sorry" to likely believe they are being misrepresented and are being forced into an apology.

## 2. *The apology that appeases.*

There are times when a person apologizes simply to appease the demands of others. They determine an apology will be in their best interest because it will disarm a threat. For example, a subordinate might apologize simply because an authority figure is requiring it. When organizations and their leaders apologize in this manner, it is often after an outcry from their constituents or receiving pressure from external forces. An institutional apology that appeases might have the same effect as waving a white flag in hopes that an approaching enemy will stop firing. It is self-protective and leads to zero change because it is not an attempt to do all that is necessary to right wrongs, but an attempt to offer only what is needed to quell the outcry.

## 3. *The apology that excuses.*

Mullen refers to this kind of apology (i.e., an excuse) as an "apologscuse." The apologizer knows an apology is needed, but fears the consequences, and so attaches excuses. Excuses can take various forms, but here are some of the most common.

- a. "It was never our intention to . . ." This is perhaps the most common excuse and is typically driven by a desire to reduce penalty knowing people tend to excuse innocent mistakes. Words like "mistake, blunder, and mishap" are used when the institution is seeking to deny ill-intent.
- b. "Mistakes were made . . ." In its most basic form, and perhaps most subtle, this excuse removes an actor from the language of the apology. "Mistakes were made" becomes a passive and weak substitute for the more forceful, "I or We . . ." The institution might also shift ownership to someone else by suggesting another is partly to blame, or shift ownership off of themselves by highlighting reasons why it would be unreasonable to hold them fully responsible ("This was before the current leadership" or "The wrong did not occur on our property" or "The wrongdoer was just a volunteer."). Each of these deny some ownership. (Safeguarding is riddled with this)
- c. "This is not in accordance with our values . . ." Apologies often include attempts to dissociate the behaviour from the apologizer's typical conduct. For example, institutions have defended their exposed by leader by drawing attention to how he/she was under stress, medicated, or impaired in some way and could not function normally.

- d. “Had we known then what we know now we would have made a different decision.” This excuse denies foresight. Often the organization or leader claiming they didn’t have any knowledge of the harm fails to acknowledge whether or not they should have known or had opportunity to know but chose to look the other way.
- e. “It was outside of our control.” The organization or its leaders could claim that they did not have the authority to prevent injury to another, or that they were acting under the direction of another authority. Organizations sometimes use this excuse to argue why certain injuries were outside of their ability to prevent.

#### 4. *The apology that justifies.*

Sometimes the wrong behaviour is clearly exposed and undeniable. If that is the case, then the institution might attempt to justify the behaviour. There is a fine line between excuses and justifications as both serve a similar purpose, but one way to distinguish them is to think of excuses as attempts to shape your perception of the wrongdoer while justifications are attempts to shape your perception of the wrongs. Some common examples of justification include:

- a. “The wounded are complicit.” This is one of the most egregious and damaging attempts at justification. I’ve seen numerous ways in which this particular type of justification has been used by individuals in organizations receiving complaints from injured individuals, including, “You should have known to not be alone with him,” or “Why didn’t you come forward sooner,” or “You were in the wrong place at the wrong time,” or “You aren’t an innocent party either,” or “You didn’t resist.” These painful lies only serve to justify the injury.
- b. “No real harm was done.” The gravity of trauma caused by institutional abuse is often minimized by uninformed or callous individuals who do not see “what the big deal is.” They might even argue that both the injured and the organization will be made stronger by the adversity, thereby asking people to view the abuse in a positive light.

#### 5. *The apology that self-promotes.*

Even if an organization is willing to bear the shame of their wrong without excuses or justifications, they often cannot finish the apology without laying claim to their legitimacy. Many public statements of apology put out by organizations or leaders quickly become pitches for why they are still worthy of continued support and engagement from their followers. A statement of apology should never double as a medal. An institutional apology should not include assurances that the institution

and their leaders are on the same side as the victims, especially if the actions of the institution have demonstrated the opposite. The victims should be the ones to decide whether or not the organization is “on their side,” and be given the space necessary for that change to be demonstrated.

6. *The apology that asks for sympathy.*

It is amazing how often we read or hear “we’re hurting too”, as though somehow the ones who have caused the wrong will displace the pain of the wounded with the pain of the wounder. Such messages cause the recipients to misplace compassion and reveals an inability on the part of organizational leaders to get outside of themselves. The churches are expert in such pleadings.

Mullen proposes in place of this ‘An Apology S.C.O.R.E. Card’. He argues that if the institution has the moral courage to give an authentic apology, then this S.C.O.R.E. card might provide a helpful test. It is in no way comprehensive. Relationships are complex. We can’t create blueprints that tell us precisely what to do and how to do it. Relationships don’t work that way, and neither do the apologies that are inevitably needed within them. They are acts that ought to be highly contextualized to meet the needs of the situation.

1. ***Surrender:*** The hardest step in the process of apologizing is to give up your desire to defend yourself using any of the non-apologies. You have to surrender your legitimacy and exchange it for what will undoubtedly feel like shame. When we analyse statements of institutional apologies, we often observe what remains when every blame, excuse, justification, and self-promotion is crossed out. Sometimes nothing remains. Most times, one or two sentences of acknowledgement and remorse are all that is left. Many are just not willing to surrender their defences and promotions.
2. ***Confession:*** Surrender paves the way for a confession. Each wrong must be rightly named. “We were wrong when . . .” A good confession serves as a mirror that reflects back to the wounded all the actions that produced hurt, a mirror that too often victims have to hold up for the organization. In fact, it sometimes needs to become more than just a mirror that reflects what is known to be wrong, but a spotlight that acknowledges both known and unknown wrongs. When confronted or exposed, surrendered people are likely to voice a number of confessions that match or exceed the number of truths presented in the exposure.
3. ***Ownership:*** The organization in the wrong must acknowledge their active role. Passive apologies like, “mistakes were made,” seek to avoid

shame by avoiding ownership. Therefore, the institution should take ownership by saying something like, “We take complete and full responsibility for . . .” Another way an organization demonstrates ownership is by inviting penalty. For example, a person who commits a crime might turn themselves into the police as if to say, “I am willing to accept any and all consequences.” Similarly, an organization’s board or leadership will often make necessary changes in leadership once they “own up.”

4. **Recognition:** Out of ownership should flow recognition. Just as specific wrongs were named, specific harms should also be identified. “We recognize that our actions resulted in . . .” If confession and ownership says, “We acknowledge the illegitimacy of our actions,” recognition says, “And we will take upon ourselves all the shame that our actions produced.” Here, all the walls of defence are now removed and the wrongs of the organization are laid bare. The wounded and their wounds are faced and no longer shunned or shamed. Remaining is a solitary bridge across which the organization must walk to meet the wounded and with vulnerability say, in effect, “We will claim the shame we’ve asked you to carry but was always ours to begin with, and we will surrender the legitimacy we tried to claim but was always yours to begin with.” Few churches have the courage or conviction to make this journey, and prophetic-ecumenism must take steps to ensure that churches now find their way to building such bridges, and then walking across them.
5. **Empathy:** It is at this point that the organization has finally absorbed the truth of their wrongdoing and the gravity of their wrongs. They feel the weight of the hurt and the shame, and know they are defenceless, at the mercy of others, and must begin the difficult work of restitution and restoration. They feel it. And out of that broken place of surrender, confession, ownership, recognition, and empathy might emerge the words, “We are so sorry.”

### ***Conclusions:***

If a Core Group fails you or if a Bishop abuses you through the safeguarding process there is currently no process for seeking redress. Remember what a Coroner said about what it described as the “preventable death” of Fr. Alan Griffin (who committed suicide in 2020), having been subject to multiple un-founded and baseless allegations that he posed a safeguarding danger? The Archbishops have opted to forget. Not one of the incompetent people or processes in this and other cases has been brought to account. Not one. That is corrupt. There is no other word for it.

Anybody can be abused by NST processes, so it is worth reminding readers of what they can expect if ever falsely accused. Or, for that matter, you have actually been abused, and are intending to report this to your bishop.

1. Nobody working in Church of England safeguarding at any level is ever subject to any kind of oversight by an external regulator, minimum standards or professional code of compliance. This is a Wild West.
2. Each Core Group in the Church of England can set its own terms of reference, and is not bound by any good practice from previous Core Groups. No member of any Core Group has to be trained in any relevant professional skill. It is all pretty ad hoc.
3. No person working in the Church safeguarding is required to complete mandatory training in unconscious bias. Core Groups largely comprise untrained, unregulated, unaccountable and unlicensed individuals. Conflicts of interests are not identified or sanctioned.
4. Good news. You can complain about your Core Group. Bad news. You can only complain to the Core Group you are complaining about. They are unlikely to respond to you at all. They don't have to.
5. In other news, your Core Group may let you see the minutes of its meetings. Or it may not. It may meet as often as it likes, and not tell you. It can change its membership – but as you often won't know who is on it in the first place, this can hardly concern you. It might meet frequently. Or seldom. There are no minimum moral, legal or professional standards to which Church of England Core Groups work. They can make it up as they go along. And they do this all the time.
6. Your Core Group will make important decisions that may have serious personal, legal, financial and reputational consequences for you. You can be sure that no independent legal expertise will be present in these discussions. Nor will there be an independent person able to advice on such issues as mental health, your vulnerability and the like. (See earlier discussion of Fr. Alan Griffin, and how to complain in 4 and 5, above).
7. Your Bishop – omniscient – is likely to know what your Core Group have discussed and decided before you do. You cannot complain about your Core Group. Or your Bishop. Incidentally, even if your Core Group make a statement, the Bishop and his Communications Director have the total and absolute right to interpret the decision as they wish, and if needs be, alter the plain meaning of sentences, or just ignore it.

8. You can write to anyone you like in the NST or Archbishops' Council about this, and they will tell you there is nothing they can do. They are only following process. They are only obeying orders. Nobody is ever responsible, as the Bishop of London can confirm (c.f. Griffin case).

Because the Church of England exempted itself from the 1998 Human Rights Act there is no access to the Civil Courts for remedy even if there have been fundamental breaches to the principles of Natural Justice or the Right to a Fair Trial. The Church documents may pay lip service to the HRA 1998, but that is all it is. The Church will ruthlessly plead its immunity as and when it suits. It does the same with the 2012 Equality Act and data laws, The Church of England has its own legal system and the Bishops are judges, jury, prosecutor, pastor and friend to you, all at the same time. There is no conflicts of interest policy.

Would you expect to meet any sane person who, looking at the menu above, might take a chance on a process that has more in common with mediaeval witch trial than a system of open justice? But if you try and protest or complain, the bad news has one more twist. It is this. Nobody is actually running safeguarding. Everybody has plausible deniability for responsibility.

Senior leaders in the Church of England like to pretend they are on the side of the victims of abuse and miscarriages of process and injustice. They groom victims accordingly. But all the leadership of the Church of England wants to ensure is that they never, ever, have to face scrutiny, a courtroom or justice such as befell Cardinal Law. Because they'd end up in the dock on the defence team, explaining why they did nothing about the clergy they were all protecting and their hapless victims. Likewise, the Church of England senior leadership don't really want to be in the dock defending incompetent, corrupt and vindictive processes.

Reform will take a long time to arrive. It takes moral courage and compassion to do the right thing, and this seems to be absent among our church leaders. Victims of abuse will only secure justice when the Church of England accepts that it will always have an inherent conflict of interest in trying to self-correct its failings, corruptions and abuses whilst simultaneously preserving its reputation. It needs to hand over all responsibility for safeguarding cases to a proper professional regulator with the teeth, clout, resources and fearless courage to speak truth to power, and bring the Church of England to heel. There is no other way.

When transparency, honesty and integrity are absent, all that is left to victims is legal action. Repentance and redress must precede any attempt at reconciliation. At present, we have victims of abuse waiting many, many years for investigations to start or conclude. These investigations are often half-baked, and lack the resources, expertise and regulatory framework to compel subjects to engage with them.

We live in an age that has been weaned on stability, predictability and reliability. Covid-19 and its variants have probably knocked our self-assurance forever. That is no bad thing. Our self-directed teleology has been tampered with, and we no longer quite know how this will all end. Our confidence has been quietly shattered by the turmoil and lack of trust in politics and international relations, the trials and tribulations of our migrants and refugees, and the uncertainty of climate change and other ecological disasters. It is in such uncertain and unstable times that churches need to remember that they too, rightly, are subject to such forces.

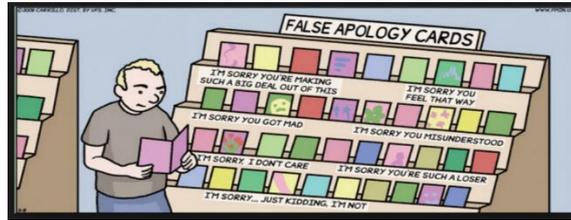
Churches are not meant to exist in order to withstand such challenges and remain aloof from them. Rather, we are to be the field hospitals of every age, pitching our tents where they are most needed for those with the most needs. Only to be great for those who are least. Our common Christian and ecumenical calling is one of risk and responsibility for those who have nothing. The Kingdom of God was first practised and proclaimed by a bunch of ragamuffin disciples and their itinerant rabbi-leader. It was a precarious venture, that went where the needs of others took them. There was little sign of a plan, strategy or campaign. The task was to be the love of God wherever they found themselves.

Our calling begins with a roughshod prophet in the wilderness, proclaiming the coming of one who is greater than he. It continues with a young woman, chosen to bear a child, who is yet to be part of stable and committed relationship. All in a village, with few prospects, and little in the way of support on offer to an unmarried mother. These are the precarious beginnings for Jesus.

The scandal of our churches is that we prefer to survive rather than be true; we choose optics over justice; we pride our reputation over honesty and integrity. To Jesus, this is a scandal. To the world, it is a scandal. To the emerging generations, it means a long sojourn in the wilderness of worldly indifference. Few will care for a church that refuses care for others. We are in exile of our own accord. It is time to repent, and only when we have can we return to the public square. Until then, we have all the shame we deserve. Do not let you bishops or church leaders kid you otherwise. This is on them, and on us all.

So let us cast aside these works of darkness, deception and denial and that are baked into our denominations, and prevent us from embracing that precarious incarnational risk – the calling of Jesus we were called take-up, inhabit and embody. Sometimes less is so much more. It is where Jesus begins his life and will later continue in his ministry; the where, with whom and in what Jesus abides. Be there.

POEM  
**We are Sorry (Please Be Patient): A New Litany for the Church**



We are sorry  
It is very hard  
I do understand  
It is all very difficult and we must do better  
I was shocked by what I read  
It was awful and we were saddened by it  
We are ashamed of what has happened  
We cannot go on like this  
But some things have already improved  
No, I am not able to comment on individual cases  
We are on a journey (please be patient)  
We are full of regret.

We are heading in the right direction  
This will take time  
We are listening and always have been  
Bear with me, we are on a steep learning curve  
Obviously, I am concerned for you  
We are taking steps (please be patient)  
And we are setting up proper processes  
We are putting some money aside  
I can't say how much, or when, but hopefully soon  
We need increased resources  
I cannot answer that question now  
I can't say any more at this stage.  
We really are extremely sorry

I only have words  
Yes, we know that words are not enough  
That they do not compensate  
But words are all we have at the moment - sorry  
I understand your pain – I really do  
We will be putting new structures in place  
It is hard to say exactly where the responsibility for this lies  
We know that this must be very frustrating for you  
Believe me – no-one is more frustrated than I am  
Of course we care, which is why I am talking now  
I am committed to change (please be patient)  
We are sorry. Believe me.

Yes, that suicide was unfortunate  
Poor chap, such a gifted priest  
But I am not sure that it was our fault  
We were only following our due process  
We have a duty to safeguard everyone  
We will be feeding in your concerns to our Lessons Learned review  
What's that you say? "What has been learnt from the previous ones?"  
Well, strictly speaking, these are lessons to be noted for the moment  
We cannot formally conduct a review and learn new lessons  
Well, not until our process is completed  
And the Core Group has concluded  
No, we can't say when that will be.

We support all accused clergy during this stressful time  
No, not legal aid, obviously. Nor advocacy  
Nor any kind of representation on the Core Group now you ask  
Nor a paid counsellor (but the Bishop might offer you a small grant)  
Pastoral care should cover all your needs  
Except for areas it isn't appropriate to help you with, like legal advice  
Yes, I am sorry that seems a bit thin  
But we are currently reviewing our provision  
We hope to report back to Synod by the agreed date  
(Note to Bishop: from now, add twenty months explaining this is tentative)  
Suicide. Such a shame. Despair is awful, isn't it? But we are not responsible  
If we were, he would have asked for pastoral support and cried for help  
We didn't hear anything, so you can hardly blame us.

We are sorry  
Yes, I know we have said so before  
You must understand how hard this is for me too  
Instead of complaining and crying, think how badly I feel  
You are taking up so much of our time and resources  
If you are this unhappy with the church, why don't you just leave?  
We can't make this alright overnight. It is not going to change  
This will take a long time to sort out  
It is better for your own health and wellbeing to move on  
You are too unrealistic and impatient  
The church is not perfect and you should have known that (all along)  
You are making difficult demands on us and we cannot meet these  
You have made us feel guilty and ashamed and that is your fault

We are sorry  
But on reflection, *not that sorry*  
As it is clear your expectations were deeply unfair  
You have made us feel bad about ourselves  
It is as though we have been weighed and found wanting  
We never asked to be measured and assessed by you or anyone else  
Who do you think you are to do this to us?  
Our staff are now stressed and unhappy  
This is your fault, and you should never have spoken out in the first place

You should never raise your voice again  
Nor ever shout any concern in protest  
You should be sorry, very sorry  
For what you have done to us.  
Shame on you.

**About the Author:**

The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy was the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford from 2014-2022. From 2004-14 Martyn was the Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, one of the largest Anglican ordination training centres in the world. He has also undertaken a number of roles with charities and in public life, including being a Director of the Advertising Standards Authority and an Advisor to the British Board of Film Classification. Martyn writes on religion in contemporary culture and modern ecclesiology. He teaches for the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, and tutors in the Social Sciences Division and at the Saïd Business School. Martyn is currently an Honorary Fellow at Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford.

