

# Rethinking how we speak about God and the nature of God's Church

ONE of the major news stories last month was the report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) on the Anglican Church. This was one of 15 investigations that the Inquiry comprises; another, as the **Methodist Recorder** (October 16) reported last month, is into "Religious Organisations and Settings" and a report is expected next year. One of those religious organisations is the Methodist Church.

The inquiry into religious organisations and settings is different from some of the other IICSA investigations. It is a "thematic investigation into the nature and adequacy of current child protection policies, practices and procedures in religious organisations and settings within England and Wales".

As such it will not deal (as the report into the Anglican Church did) with particular cases. Nonetheless, in order to do its work, the inquiry has taken evidence from some of those who are survivors of abuse in Methodist Church settings (and the **Methodist Recorder** reported on the evidence offered by one of those survivors last month).

The existence of IICSA shows the extent to which the evil of child sexual abuse has been proliferated in a number of institutions. That three of the 15 investigations are particularly focused on religious organisations is indicative of the fact that some of the worst instances of abuse have been in churches and committed by people in whom the Church placed its trust. The Methodist Church is no exception and we share the damage that has been done to the churches by this evil.

## Necessity

From the beginning we supported the setting up of the inquiry, which began its work in 2015. We saw the necessity of an independent review of our record and practices, we committed ourselves to answer the questions we were asked and we looked forward to its recommendations as being helpful to us.

During the last 30 years we have gradually improved our policies and practices in order (in the late David Gamble's key phrase) to create safer spaces. The Past Cases Review helped us to face up to the extent of that failing and we have apologised where we can to



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Secretary of the Conference

those who suffered harm at the hands of our representatives. We now have an experienced and highly qualified cohort of District Safeguarding officers, a Connexional Safeguarding Team that offers advice and casework supervision and a Safeguarding committee that draws on expertise from a range of areas in relation to this work. We have clear processes around safer recruitment and the work of risk assessors and monitoring groups ensures that we are able to welcome people into the life of our churches while still ensuring the safety of children and vulnerable adults.

## Frustrating

We cannot be complacent and I find it frustrating (and, frankly, bewildering) that there are still those who resist complying with safeguarding policies, be it in seeking DBS checks or undergoing training, but we have done a great

deal to restrict the opportunities abusers have to offend within the Church.

Some 20 or more years ago, the Roman Catholic periodical "The Tablet" used to publish a column by an anonymous priest, "Pastor Ignotus". One of the saddest of those columns I remember reading was when Ignotus told of an encounter in his local supermarket. A mother who spotted his collar had angrily told her children to have "nothing to do with that man". It was not to be a unique event. Used to being viewed as a respected member of his community, Ignotus realised that he had become a figure of suspicion, even of opprobrium, and he knew why. The abuse of children within religious organisations and by priests and other ministers was coming to light and it changed the view that people had of the Church.

As we have participated in the inquiry this year, I've come to understand more

what lies behind this changed view of the Church. It is not simply that we failed to protect children who should have been safe within the life of the Church. A major source of criticism of the Anglican Church in last month's report and something that we hear from survivors in the Methodist Church is that having failed to protect a child the Church too often protected or appeared to protect the perpetrator. There are too many stories of survivors saying that they were not believed or that "the institution closed ranks". The stage of this journey on which we are now embarked is addressing that issue; it is a deep-seated concern.

The Methodist Church will shortly publish a resource entitled "Reflect and Respond" which has been written with the help of survivors and out of their experience. It is offered by survivors to the Methodist people and asks us to engage with Our Calling in the light of their experience. It is one of a number of ways in which the voice of the survivor challenges some of our perceptions about the Church and causes us to ask what

sort of Church we need to be.

That was a question that was posed to the Archbishop of York in responding to the IICSA report on the Anglican Church and he answered that there needed to be a culture change in the Church. This demands rethinking a number of aspects of our life in a radical manner. The experience of survivors indicates that perpetrators were not called to account because of some aspects of faith and practice that are embedded in the life of the Church and shape our responses.

## Compound

The culture that has been created can compound the suffering of the victim by denying her or him justice and by imposing ways of relating that aggravate the pain.

Ironically, for a Church that claims to follow the one who laid aside his majesty and who challenged the religious elite of his day, survivors tell us of a lack of humility on the part of the Church. We have to say that we are sorry for the times when we proclaimed that we knew best how to deal with

offenders whose actions and compulsions we barely understood or when we casually assumed that our discipline processes were fit for purpose without recognising that human error can always derail the best of intentions or when we did not stop to think about how our expectations of reconciliation or policies about confidentiality make those already vulnerable feel doubly disempowered.

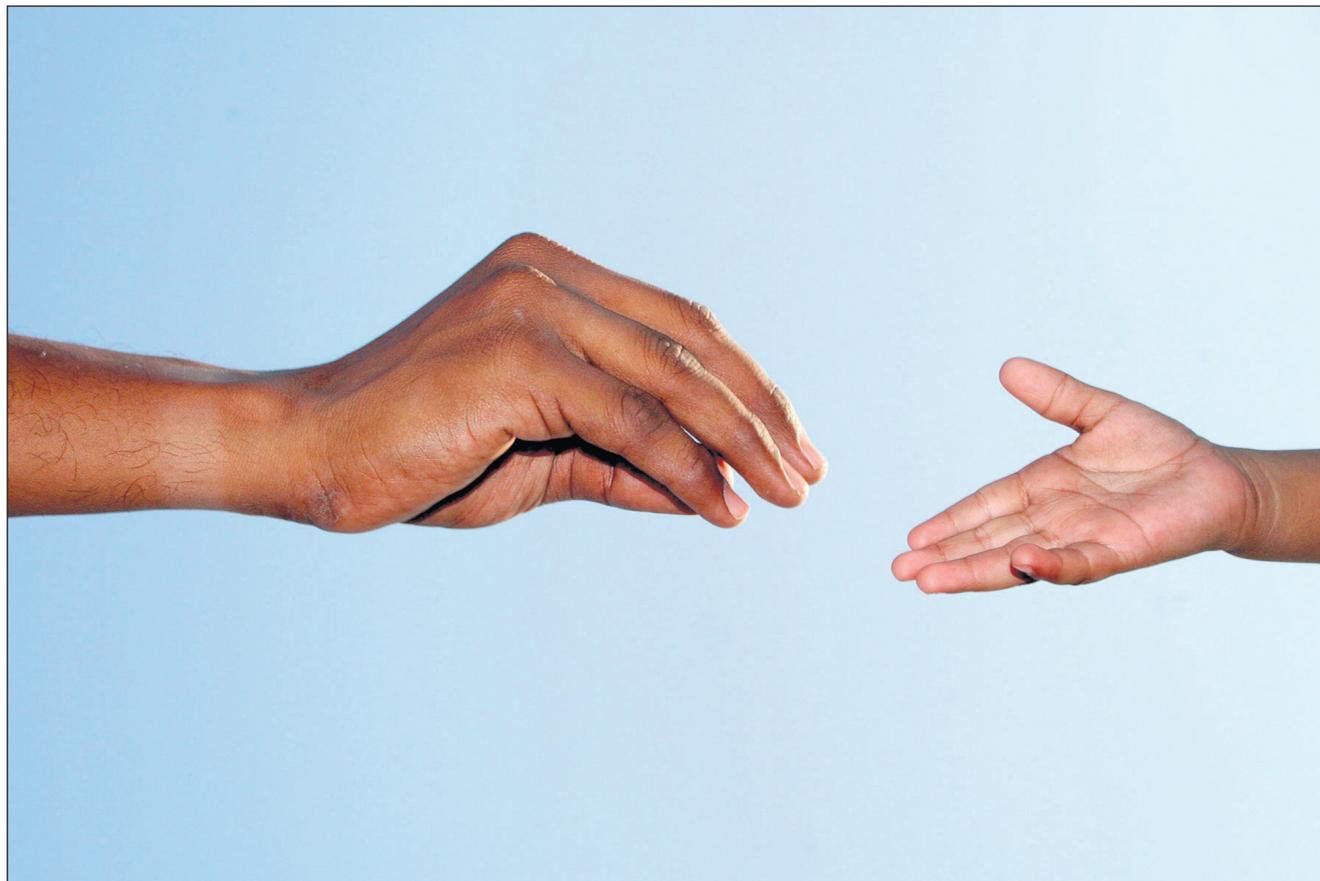
Ironically, for a Church that claims to be open to judgment, survivors tell us of a lack of accountability. We have to say that we are sorry for the times when we have not dealt with those who failed to follow up on concerns that were raised with them or for those who were able to obfuscate in order to attempt to drag out or confound our processes.

We have to admit that we have been hesitant to talk about judgment as a positive response when things have gone wrong and that we have cheapened grace by trying to make forgiveness the first response rather than the costly result of a fearless exploration in which a party owns their responsibility for what has happened.

## Claims

Ironically, for a Church that claims to be made up of disciples, survivors tell us of a reluctance to learn from them and we have to say sorry for the times when we have not listened as they questioned whether our unconscious biases affect our attitudes to offenders. We need to recognise if we have allowed our theological language to perpetrate power dynamics that make abuse more likely or enable perpetrators to evade justice. The journey on which we are embarked will involve us rethinking in many ways how we speak about God and the nature of God's Church.

Attending the IICSA hearing in March was not a comfortable experience and I suspect that the report on religious organisations and settings will not be easy reading. But as I have reflected during the last year on our engagement in the inquiry I have come to realise that its recommendations will not only be necessary but welcome; if we are finally able properly to listen to victims and survivors we might yet emerge from this a better Church.



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