

Guest Editorial

Stephen Pickard¹

Email: s.k.pickard@gmail.com

(Received 2 August 2021; accepted 4 August 2021)

This edition of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* focuses on the development of safe ministry protocols and practices at a number of different levels in the Anglican Communion. The background to this is the emerging stories of long-standing sexual abuse of children, young people and vulnerable adults in public institutions. The Church, generally including the Churches of the Anglican Communion, has not been exempt from this painful and tragic history. In one sense this ought to come as no surprise, for churches are made up of fallen and fallible human beings in solidarity with the rest of humankind and therefore capable of both the best and the worst of human behaviour. In another sense this makes the churches even more culpable given that the values and moral vision espoused by the Body of Christ are the very antithesis of the horrific stories of abuse of children that have come to light in recent decades. In a manner unlike any other public institution, the Church's purpose is directed to the valuing of human and all life, to care, justice and the peaceable kingdom of God. This is so well captured in the words of the Lord's Prayer, 'Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'.

Consequently, the Church's failure to safeguard the little ones it purports to cherish is the greater. The Matthean injunctions are right to the point: 'Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs"' (Mt. 19.14); 'If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea' (Mt. 18.6).

Over recent years, more often through public national inquiries and commissions, light has been shone on some dark places in the life of the churches not only in the documentation of abuses of children, but of a woeful failure of leadership, in particular bishops, in ignoring the cry of victims, covering up the actions of perpetrators whether clerical or lay, marginalizing the voices calling for justice, inadequate processes for reparation and healing, or paying little genuine attention to the needs for ecclesial reform by way of structures, policies and practices that would make for a safer church. We might say the Church's leadership has displayed a

¹The Rt Revd Professor Stephen Pickard is Executive Director, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University, Canberra; and Assistant Anglican Bishop, Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, Australia.

serious failure of nerve and as a result sacrificed its missional integrity on the altar of self-interest. Henceforth the work of the Church in the public space has to reckon with a cloud of disbelief and antipathy to its message that hovers over many areas of its ministry whether it is pastoral, welfare, educational, missional or related settings.

The Welsh poet, R.S. Thomas refers to the priest 'limping through life' over the 'broken glass of their vows'.² It is a poignant image, today perhaps more appropriately applied to the 'limping church' called to fulfil its purpose over 'the broken glass of its vows' to the Lord. This is the Church of Jesus Christ that is called to begin again at ground zero with a renewed humility. As Thomas so rightly says of those in Holy Orders, they 'have a long way to go'. So, too, the Church has a long journey ahead to rebuild integrity through a compassionate and merciful ministry to the broken and needy.

It would be quite incorrect to suggest that such failures apply to all in leadership. There have certainly been those among the churches (leaders and others, clerical and lay) who have stood up in the public domain as advocates for the abused and hurt, and often paid a significant price for their outspoken stand. Over the course of the past decade and a half the churches in various measure (and it does vary) have undertaken a major reassessment of the adequacy of their governance structures, policies, professional standards and practices in order to strengthen the care and protection that children, the young and the vulnerable have a right to expect. This work is ongoing. In some important respects the measures so far adopted by the churches can appear somewhat piecemeal: professional standards for leaders, reparations for victims, attention to processes for healing, greater attention to selection and preparation of future clergy and other leaders, requirements for ongoing supervision. Indeed, the list of matters requiring attention is significant. Moreover, all such matters are interrelated, though this fact can easily be obscured with the result that the coherence of a positive response to abuse can be difficult to discern.

The notion that all such measures and protocols can fall under 'safe church' is not surprisingly a natural overarching theme. However, it does not do justice to the significance of what is being undertaken or what is required. When we appreciate that the problem confronting the Church has to do with its very purpose and what might be necessary to give greater confidence that this purpose can be embedded more concretely in its life, ministry and mission then we begin to see that what we are dealing with in the institutional life of the churches has a systemic character. Piecemeal actions, as important and useful as they are, are just that, piecemeal. If we grasp the systemic nature of the problem that underlies the terrible stories of sexual abuse of children in the Church of God, then we may begin to think on a different level about a longer-term course of action. Specifically, what is required is an integrity system for the Church. The elements of such a system are currently being put in place to a greater and lesser extent throughout the Anglican Communion. However, we do need another level of approach to the significant ecclesial issues that have come to light in recent decades. A kind of meta-narrative of the Church with both theological and sociological dimensions directed to the shape and character of an ecclesial integrity system would give coherence and

²See his poem, *The Priest*.

power to the efforts to achieve a safer church that embodies the marks of the peaceable kingdom of God.

The five articles in this present edition of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* address the question of ‘safe church’ in different and complementary ways. They offer perspectives from international, national, provincial and diocesan levels and include a major analysis of inquiries and commissions across a number of countries. The articles provide evidence of some important efforts and achievements to develop safe ministry structures, protocols and policies at a number of levels in the Anglican Communion. We have far to go but these articles are an encouragement that the journey is worthwhile and important for (a) the safety of the vulnerable under the care of the Church and its agencies, and (b) beyond that the well-being and integrity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The first article by Garth Blake AM, Chair of the Anglican Communion Safe Church Commission, tells the story of initiatives of the Instruments of Communion to enhance the safety of all persons within the Anglican Communion over the past two decades. These initiatives have taken place against the backdrop of the significant evidence that has come to light in recent years of abuse being perpetrated by clergy and lay leaders against children, young people and vulnerable adults in the provinces. It describes the actions of the Lambeth Conference, the Primates’ Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the work of the Anglican Communion Safe Church Commission. The article highlights the way Anglican polity can be effective at the international level in developing appropriate structures and contribute to conscience raising of issues relating to churches being safe places especially for children, the young and the vulnerable. The article shows how the not uncontroversial Instruments of Communion can in fact enable a global church to achieve consensus and encourage the churches of the Communion on a matter critical to its life and integrity. Importantly Blake calls attention to the need for processes for safeguarding ‘to be undergirded by a theology of safe church or safeguarding which prioritizes the safety of children, young people and vulnerable adults in the mission of the church’.

How might what has been achieved at the Communion level be translated to the Provinces? This important question is the subject of the second article reflecting the voices of a range of people from the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. The process of creating a Safe and Inclusive Church (SIC) Commission within the Anglican Church of the Province of Southern Africa (ACSA) is not unique in the Communion. The article, by Rosalie Manning, traces the ACSA’s specific journey to date, with a view to engaging the Communion in a learning partnership. The author notes that while some of the process of establishing this ministry may be unique, there are places of commonality as we jointly grapple with the call of our Lord Jesus to continue to build the Kingdom of God in contemporary times. The author concludes that the experience of the ACSA highlights the need for renewal of the Church in both theological understanding and optimum governance in order to be faithful servants of Jesus Christ in ‘a broken and wounded world’. The South African experience draws attention to the highly contextual nature of the safe and inclusive church project. Incarnating structures, policies and protocols and best practice at the local level is a major task for a Province. Guidelines are good, however they are not blue-prints that guarantee success.

Australian Bishop Alison Taylor, in her article 'Diocesanism versus Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse', examines the contribution of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to the ecclesiology of the Anglican Church of Australia (ACA). The focus is on diocesanism – the strong form of diocesan autonomy that exists in the ACA. The article concludes that the Royal Commission identified diocesanism and the associated dispersed character of ecclesial authority as key factors constraining the ACA's responses to child sexual abuse, and actively sought to modify its impact. The article also points to the significance of the Royal Commission's findings for the ACA's ecclesiological understandings of change. Taylor's diocesan perspective is not about protocols, policies and practices as such but an ecclesial reflection on the nature of dispersed authority as it operates within Anglican polity generally and in particular in the Australian context. The article shows that this approach to governance and authority clearly generated significant challenges for the Royal Commission and of course in developing a coherent response by the ACA to the Royal Commission.

While pressing the ACA into a corporation model of institutional governance was always going to be problematic for the ACA, nonetheless one outcome of the Commission's work was a concerted effort by the ACA to develop a national response to safeguarding and response to victims of child sexual abuse. This was secured at the 2017 General Synod, with respect to three Canons: redress for victims, episcopal standards and safe ministry to children. By mid-2021 all but one or two of these Canons have been accepted in all dioceses of the ACA and all 23 dioceses are participating organizations in Anglican Representative (National Redress Scheme). Taylor remarks that the 2017 General Synod 'represented a high-water mark of ACA diocesan cooperation'.

Taylor's article is an interesting account of how an avowedly secular Royal Commission provided an important critique and insightful commentary on the workings of the ACA. Clearly this highlights the significance and value of good quality dialogue across different sectors of society. Taylor concludes: 'The Royal Commission's critique of the integrity of the ACA's ecclesiology points to the need for a brave scrutiny, as well as a theologizing, of the structural and cultural roots of the ecclesial suppression over decades of the voices of child sexual abuse survivors. This scrutiny and accompanying internal reflection will need to address the vertical dispersion of authority and accountability within dioceses, as well as the geographic dispersion of authority and accountability across dioceses.'

One the key challenges and difficulties identified by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was the issue of culture change. Structural adjustment and change, and new policies and protocols, are all critical. However, the matter of change of culture and attitudes takes the challenge to another level altogether. Certainly, the Commission's work highlighted the need for training and education from the ground up, so to speak. It also called attention to the important and inescapable demand for ongoing professional supervision for those engaged in leadership, whether lay or clerical. Geoff Broughton's article picks this theme up by examining the role of pastoral (professional) supervision in enabling and ensuring that contemporary practice of clergy and church workers fosters a safe church. Broughton notes that 'Pastoral supervision is the regular, planned, safe space where clergy (or, church workers) bring issues related to their

ministry practice to the supervision session with a trained pastoral supervisor'. The article had its genesis in national consultations across the Anglican Church of Australia in 2019. The article develops a particular christological approach underlying culture change in the Church 'through a rigorous grounding of pastoral supervision in the story of Jesus Christ'. A pressing challenge that Broughton's article leaves the Church with, concerns allocation of scarce resources for the purpose of ensuring those in leadership, in particular clergy, are provided with the time and tools for personal assessment and development consonant with a mature and trustworthy character appropriate for those called to the 'cure of souls'.

The final article by Virginia and Seumas Miller, 'Child Sexual Abuse, Integrity Systems and the Anglican Church: Truth, Justice and Love' offers an important analysis and assessment of the nature and extent of child sexual abuse in a number of Anglican Churches across the globe. The article relies on the findings of various commissions of inquiry. It is a searching and sharp examination of the evidence, the methodology and the assumptions (some quite controversial) underlying the Australian and UK inquiries.³

Importantly, the authors introduce the concept of an integrity system defined as 'an assemblage of institutional entities, mechanisms and processes, the fundamental purpose of which is to ensure compliance with minimum moral standards (including those enshrined in the criminal law) and to promote the pursuit of ethical ideals among institutional role occupants'. The authors note the complexity of the task involved in designing such a system for the Church requiring empirical data, ethical analysis and theological input. Moreover, such a task extends beyond the limited domain pertaining to child sexual abuse. The authors note that as far as evidence goes while the problem of child sexual abuse is 'widespread and profoundly disturbing' it is 'largely historical in nature' and they recognize that mechanisms have been put in place over the past couple of decades to address this. To this extent the churches are beginning to develop an integrity system in embryo. Further development requires paying more careful attention to key risk factors and properly redressing wrongs done to victims.

The final paragraph of the article is worth stating in full: 'The Church and its clergy have a critical role to play in the maintenance of moral norms of society, given the Church's mission in the world. When clergy and other church leaders abuse their authority and the Church violates its own stated purposes this not only undermines the Church, but also harms its host society. Hence the importance of designing and implementing an empirically informed integrity system for the Church that is grounded on moral principles consistent with the Christian faith, a task to which this article seeks to make an initial contribution.'

I hope and trust you find the articles in this volume of the *JAS* thought provoking and encouraging to continue your own commitment to creating a safe and joyful Church that bears witness with integrity to the coming Kingdom of God.

³For a recent analysis of inquiries pertaining to the Catholic Church, see Dr Virginia Miller, *Child Sexual Abuse Inquiries and the Catholic Church: Reassessing the Evidence* (Florence: Florence University Press, 2021).