27. The Theology of Safeguarding

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Resolutions	27/1. The Conference adopts the Report and commends it for study and reflection throughout the Connexion. 27/2. The Conference directs Church Councils, Local Preachers' Meetings, Circuit Meetings and District Policy Committees to consider the implications of the report for their work and practice. 27/3. The Conference directs the Methodist Council in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee to produce the resources described in paragraph 9.3, consider what other resources might be needed, and develop the theological content of the Advanced safeguarding training in the light of this report. 27/4. The Conference directs the Ministries Committee to ensure that appropriate engagement with this report is included in the training pathways for presbyters, deacons, local preachers, and worship leaders.

Summary of content

Subject and aims	Exploration of the theology of safeguarding.
Main points	• Introduction • Theological roots • Abuse and the human condition • Theological thinking and how it is used • Failure to challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour and maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries • Welcoming people who have experienced abuse • Grappling with power • Forgiveness and change • Concluding comments

Background documents	*Time For Action,* 2002 *The Church and Sex Offenders,* 2002 *Response to Time For Action*, 2003 *Domestic Abuse*, 2005 *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, 2006 *Courage, Cost and Hope (The Past Cases Review)*, 2015
Consultations	The Survivors' Reference Group, the Safeguarding Committee, the Director of Safeguarding, District Safeguarding Officers and individuals who have read and commented on drafts of this report.

Theology of Safeguarding

1. Introduction

1.1. The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.[1] Its witness is in the sort of community that it is, including the welcome that it offers to others. It is the Methodist Church's intention to value every human being as part of God's creation and to be a place where the transformational love of God is embodied. As part of this, it seeks to be a safer place for those who are less powerful, amongst whom are children, young people and any who are vulnerable (which, at some point in our lives, includes all of us). The Methodist Church is therefore committed to safeguarding as an integral part of its life and ministry.

1.2. Safeguarding is about the action the Church takes to promote a safer culture. In common with many other churches and organisations, the Methodist Church has undertaken to embody best practice in safeguarding. Since the early 1990s it has been developing and increasing its safeguarding policies and structures, seeking especially to learn from the experiences of those who have been hurt and abused in Christian communities. The Methodist Church affirms that this is a shared responsibility. Safeguarding policies and procedures concern how Methodists order their life together as the Body of Christ. Everyone associated with the Methodist Church has a role to play in promoting the welfare of children, young people and adults, in working to prevent abuse from occurring, and in seeking to protect and respond well to those who have been abused. Compliance with safeguarding procedures and policies is part of faithful discipleship.

1 The Methodist Conference, 2000, *Our Calling*

1.3. Safeguarding is integral to the mission of the Methodist Church and a part of its response and witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. This report seeks to explore the theology and practices that undergird and support the safeguarding work of the Methodist Church, and that help the Methodist people to create safer spaces for human flourishing. It is also written in the context of the results and recommendations of the Methodist Church's Past Cases Review and the British Government's Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. It is hoped that this report will be a helpful resource for the Methodist people and further resources to help support reflection on the contents of this report can be found on the Methodist website.

1.4. In formulating this report, particular attention has been given to the experiences and insights of those who have experienced abuse. In the past, the Methodist Church has given significant time and resource within its safeguarding work to exploring how those who have abused might be able to participate in church communities in ways that are safe.[2] It has not, however, given similar time and resource to exploring the nature of the welcome and care offered to those who have experienced abuse. The commitments that the Methodist Church has made and the reflections that emerge from its work through listening to those who have been abused have not yet become part of the fabric of church life[3]. It is hoped that this report will play a significant part in helping this to be addressed.

1.5. There are two further points that it is important to make at the outset. The first is that the report predominantly refers to the abuse of females by males. This is because it reflects the pattern of the majority of abuse. It is essential to note, however, that males also have experienced abuse, and that perpetrators (of abuse of males and females) can be female.

1.6. The second is to draw attention to the language used in this report as it employs the terms 'people who have experienced abuse' and 'people who abuse'. This was the preferred terminology in *Time For Action*, an ecumenical report which marked a significant point in many churches' responses to those who have experienced abuse.[4] In contrast, many Methodist reports and documents use the term 'survivor'. For many, the term 'survivor' is helpful in so far as it indicates a major move forward from being a 'victim'. Others use these two words

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2 The report to the 2000 Methodist Conference, *The Church and Sex Offenders,* was and continues to be a key report with respect to safeguarding and this has shaped how safeguarding work in the Methodist Church has developed.

3 The Methodist Conference, 2003, *Response to Time For Action;* and 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*

4 CTBI, 2002, Time for Action

interchangeably. Others still prefer to use the term 'thriver' which they feel better represents how they understand themselves in relation to their past experience of abuse. The *Time for Action* report recognises that different people understand the terms in different ways, emphasising that people are more than any label they may be given or may take for themselves. This report therefore follows the precedent of *Time For Action* in using descriptive terminology, and it uses the terms 'people who have experienced abuse' and 'people who abuse'.

1.7. It is not possible in a report such as this to reflect theologically on all of the many different aspects of safeguarding, but some important themes are highlighted. Section two of the report sets out some of the theological themes which underpin the Methodist Church's work in safeguarding. Section three examines the nature and impact of abuse and offers some reflections on the human condition. In section four attention is given to the ways in which theology shapes contexts, both contexts which enable abuse to happen and contexts which enable human flourishing. This is explored through consideration of the use of the Bible, language about God, the cross and suffering, the dynamics of worship, and through noting some of the theological resources which have been helpful to some people who have experienced abuse. The failure to challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour and to maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries is explored in section five, and section six gives attention to the welcoming of those who have experienced abuse, including examining what is meant by 'all are welcome'. Finally the report looks at issues of power (section seven) and forgiveness (section eight).

2. Theological roots

2.1. Safeguarding is a fundamental part of the Church's response to God and sharing in God's mission in the world. God's outgoing all-embracing love for the whole of creation (God's mission) began with the act of creation itself.[5] As part of this, God created humanity in God's image to be in a loving relationship with God, others and the whole of creation. The mission of God is focused in a new way in Jesus, through and in whom God's kingdom is established (although it is still to come in all its fullness), and through and in whom God offers hope, transforming love and new life.[6] In a broken world God calls the whole of humanity to become God's people, living in communion with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

2.2. The Church is a community called into being by God to participate in God's mission, witness to divine grace, and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. It

5 The Methodist Conference, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise; Ministry in the Methodist Church* (2018), Part B draft Conference Statement 2.1.1

6 The Methodist Conference, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*

is a sign, foretaste and instrument of God's kingdom, called to love and praise God. The Church's witness to God through Jesus Christ involves its seeking to be a community marked by love and care for one another and for all whom it encounters. Christians believe that God wants human beings to flourish and grow in loving relationship with one another and with God. John's Gospel uses the image of abundant life for this: "I am come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The ways in which Christians relate to one another and others are therefore vital for both human flourishing and the witness of the Church. Church communities are thus called to witness to the God who offers healing, hope and life in all its fullness. In this imperfect human community the presence of the Holy Spirit makes such witness possible. The Methodist Church seeks to embody its affirmation of the dignity and worth of all people in its structures, processes and patterns of relating. Safeguarding is one aspect of this.

2.3. Safeguarding is about the action the Church takes to promote a safer culture. It includes: promoting the welfare of children, young people and adults; working to prevent abuse from occurring; and seeking to protect and respond well to those who have been abused. Abuse is the mistreatment of a person which harms or injures them. It can vary from treating someone with disrespect in a way which significantly affects their quality of life to causing physical and emotional suffering. It involves control and manipulation and exercising power over another, and often the people who commit abuse take advantage of a relationship of trust. Abuse can take many forms including physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse[7]. It can be seen in different forms of discrimination, and in the determination of some to dominate over others and determine their lives.[8] There is an increasing awareness of the insidious nature of many forms of online abuse. Anyone can become a victim of abuse, but people with care and support needs (such as children, young people and vulnerable adults[9]) are more likely to be abused. They may be less likely to identify abuse themselves, or report it. Some

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7 For a fuller description of abuse see the *Safeguarding Policy, Procedures and Guidance for the Methodist Church.* The July 2020 version of the policy listed the following as forms of abuse recognised by the Methodist Church: physical, emotional, sexual, domestic, institutional and spiritual abuse, neglect, sexual exploitation, abuse using social media, child trafficking, discriminatory abuse, controlling behaviour, coercive control, modern slavery and self-neglect. Section 7.1, pp.116-126.

8 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain,* p.24

9 Section 7.1.2.1 of the July 2020 version of the *Safeguarding Policy, Procedures and Guidance for the Methodist Church* notes that: "The term "vulnerable adult" has been used for some years and has had a number of different definitions but is now being used far less by statutory bodies following legislative changes introduced by the Care Act 2014. Instead the term adults at risk of abuse or neglect is used by local authorities when defining the group of people who are eligible for their services… the term, 'Adult at Risk', may be less appropriate when referring to people within a church context. Therefore, the Methodist Church will continue to use the term 'Vulnerable Adult'.

adults are vulnerable because they have care and support needs, but many adults may be vulnerable at some points in their lives due to ill health, emotional trauma or impoverishment. Safeguarding is about working together to prevent and reduce both the risks and experience of abuse and neglect (which is a form of abuse), seeking to protect the health, dignity and well-being of everyone.

2.4. The Church's recognition of God's desire for human flourishing is accompanied by a recognition of the reality of the human condition, the depths of what people are capable of and the potential of all to cause damage and to abuse trust and power (see section 3 below). Alongside the offer of welcome to the Body of Christ comes the costly challenge of Christian discipleship, part of which is taking responsibility for past and present behaviour and being accountable to brothers and sisters in Christ. From its beginnings, the Methodist Church has encouraged and expected its members to be accountable to each other as part of their discipleship; supporting, encouraging and challenging one another as they reflect on how they live out their faith in their daily lives. Safeguarding procedures form an important part of establishing healthy relationships within the Body of Christ, particularly prompting us to pay attention to issues around interpersonal boundaries and power. This is the work and responsibility of all members of the Church. There is also a corporate responsibility to establish and uphold appropriate boundaries of behaviour so that all, especially people who have particular vulnerabilities, are valued and treated as people of worth. God does not intend people to suffer from abuse and God works with us to end the damage and trauma it causes[10]. Safeguarding is therefore an intrinsic part of the Church's participation in God's mission, and one way in which members of the Church demonstrate their care for each other and all whom they encounter.

2.5. The Church also responds to the call through Christ for justice, and it does so in various ways. *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain,* a report to the 2006 Methodist Conference, urged all Methodist communities to aspire to be safer communities:

> "We may not necessarily know whether our community contains survivors or perpetrators of abuse, but we can do things that will make our community more welcoming and 'safe' whilst limiting the possibility of abuse occurring. And in doing this, … our church communities will become more safe in a wider sense. There are many people who need a safe place to explore difficult questions and things that really matter. A community that has taken time to consider how to become safer for survivors is likely to be safer for everyone."[11]

10 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse,* 2.3
11 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain,* p.2

2.6. In its structures and ways of relating the Methodist Church seeks to demonstrate its concern to protect everyone, giving priority to the welfare and well-being of children, young people and vulnerable adults, and remembering its commitment to survivors of abuse.[12] Safeguarding training, procedures and policies help the Church to ensure that it takes appropriate responsibility for selecting, resourcing and supporting those who work with children, young people and vulnerable adults on its behalf. They also help the whole church community to reflect on its ways of relating and to pay attention to issues that help to establish and maintain healthy relationships.

2.7. Between 2013 and 2015 the Methodist Church carried out a review of past safeguarding cases (the *Past Cases Review*[13]), and one of the objectives was "to learn lessons about any necessary changes or developments in order to ensure that safeguarding work within the Methodist Church is of the highest possible standard."[14] Substantial progress has been made in implementing the resulting twenty-three recommendations. The Methodist Church continues to be committed to making the Church a safer space and is taking steps to bring about the cultural change that is needed to understand what safeguarding means in every part of its life.[15] Establishing structures and resources for pastoral supervision of ministers is one example of this.

3. Abuse and The Human Condition

3.1. During the past quarter of a century there has been an increasing awareness and acknowledgement of the existence and effects of abuse within both the Church and wider society, including recognition of the deep damage, trauma and shattering of self that it causes. The harm can be physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual, causing deep fractures which leave permanent scars and vulnerabilities. In 1999 the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland published *The Courage To Tell,* in which some Christians who have experienced sexual abuse tell their stories "of pain and hope".[16] One contributor says:

> "I lived with fear, pain, self-loathing at the feeling of being somehow to blame, of being totally unacceptable. The loneliness was overwhelming."[17]

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12 The Methodist Conference, 2003, *Response to Time For Action;* and 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*
13 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope (The Past Cases Review)*
14 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope (The Past Cases Review*), p.7
15 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope (The Past Cases Review)*
16 Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 1991, *The Courage to Tell.* CTBI: London
17 CTBI, 1991, *The Courage to Tell,* p.14

3.2. Abuse of any kind, "tears at the fabric of one's soul"[18]. For many, particularly those who have experienced abuse in childhood, the impact and consequences are life-long: "The effects seem unending, you deal with one lot and something else comes up."[19] Experiences of abuse affect self-esteem and many aspects of relationships, including trust and attitudes and responses to touch. Accounts of abuse submitted to the *Past Cases Review* show that, whilst the effects vary from person to person and from day to day for the same person, the impact of abuse is profound and long term. For example, one respondent said:

> "I have learnt that it is impossible to recover from sexual abuse when no-one recognises the seriousness of it. My church did not want a scandal, my parents did not want a scandal. I was left to feel worthless and devalued, while the man was left to get on with his life and for all I know repeat the crime with someone else … I was emotionally and physically devastated."[20]

3.3. Abuse, by its nature, inflicts trauma on the personhood of the victim, violently challenging and destabilising their physical, sexual, cultural and/or spiritual identity and often causing lifelong struggles with issues of identify and value[21]. A person who experienced adult sexual abuse writes:

> "Even now, I find myself squirming internally as I reveal this information. I still feel responsible. I still fear reprisals and blame. I still experience shame. I was an adult and not without resources, yet these experiences shook me up profoundly and my mental health was, at times, compromised. How it must feel to someone who endured clergy abuse in childhood or adolescence, I can only imagine."[22]

3.4. The damage of abuse also impacts more widely, having far-reaching consequences not only for those who are abused but also for the wider community. Abuse sends shockwaves of harm throughout communities, as noted in a report from the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland in 2002:

> "Under a thin veneer of normality, the sheer scale and extent of sexual abuse creates a climate of vulnerability and fear, which shapes the daily experience

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18 Dr Wess Stafford, survivor of abuse, quoted in the foreward of Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures,* SPCK: London
19 CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell*, p.26
20 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope (The Past Cases Review)*, p.29
21 Graystone, A., 2019, 'An Entirely Different Approach: The Church of England and Survivors of Abuse' in Fife and Gilo, 2019, *Letters to a Broken Church,* Ekklesia: London, p.60
22 Miryam Clough, 2019, 'Keeping Secrets' in Fife and Gilo, 2019, Letters to a Broken Church, Ekklesia: London, p.11

> and relationships of us all. Each time a woman is afraid to go out at night; or a man is wary about showing affection to his daughter; or a woman squirms in silent embarrassment at her colleague's offensive comments; or an abused child is too frightened to tell what is happening, witness is borne to the deep distortions at the very heart of our corporate life."[23]

3.5. The trauma of abuse is bound up with abuse of power and betrayal of trust, severely impairing an abused person's ability to trust and form healthy relationships. Most people who have experienced abuse know the person who abused them, and the abuse of trust undermines their sense of self. A person who experienced childhood abuse says:

> "It leaves you with angry feelings, because it robs you of your self confidence even at this young age… And there's a big word – *trust.* This is something you lose and … can never quite get back the same way you remember it. Even now I'm very defensive, and yet I would dearly love to be loved without sounding so aggressive, something which I'm still working on."[24]

The Church of England's Faith and Order Commission notes that the ability to trust "is integral to intimacy, love and the experience of acceptance … It may become radically pervasive, touching all the relationships that the abused person has, insofar as those relationships imply an invitation to trust another person with power and have confidence in their truthfulness and care."[25] That can include their relationship with God.

3.6. Although problems of coercion and control in the Church have existed for centuries[26], only in more recent years has there been a more general recognition of, and reflection on, the complex and difficult area of spiritual abuse which damages the abused at multiple levels. In spiritual abuse the abuser deploys spiritual language, symbolism and concepts as part of their coercion of the abused and justification for their actions.[27] It is a topic which is particularly hard for many Christians to consider because it cuts at the heart of the gospel message of love and grace. As one person who experienced abuse reflects:

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23 CTBI, 2002, *Time for Action*, p.9
24 CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell,* p.27
25 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2017, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse,* Church House Publishing: London, p.46
26 Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures, SPCK: London, p.5
27 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2017, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse,* Church House Publishing: London, p.20

> "… the difficult reality is that spiritual abuse, often subtle and hidden, exists in the Church more widely than we want to believe. When it gains a foothold, people who are looking for love, acceptance, joy and healing instead gradually become entrapped by a deeply damaging climate of control, coercion and condemnation."[28]

3.7. Spiritual abuse has been difficult to define because of the different and complex aspects of such experiences, but a helpful definition has been offered by Lisa Oakley:

> "Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism."[29]

3.8. Oakley identifies the spiritual aspects of abuse in a Christian context as the use of Scripture, 'divine calling' or of God's name or suggested will to coerce and control; and threats of spiritual consequences. It can lead to mistrust of the self, Church and God, shattering faith and relationships, distorting understandings of God and impairing the gospel message. Even those who "make it out with their faith alive" can be very wary of church or Christian organizations.[30]

3.9. The Methodist Church has named abuse as sin in all its forms.[31] Sin is "our alienation from God which is also our alienation from one another and the whole of the created order, embodied in all the ways in which people and the earth fail to flourish as God intends."[32] Sin can be both individual choice, action and inaction, and structural or corporate action or omission. It can be expressed in social systems and social expectations which trap individuals.

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28 Dr Wess Stafford, survivor of abuse, quoted in the foreward of Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures, SPCK: London
29 Oakley, 2018, quoted in Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures, SPCK: London, p.31
30 Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures, SPCK: London, pp.77-78
31 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.25
32 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse,* 2005, 2.26

3.10. As part of its understanding of sin, Christian theology acknowledges the depth of harm which human beings can cause. Human beings are capable of horrific and appalling acts, as well as being capable of acts of inspirational grace and love. Yet it can be hard to face the reality of human brokenness and evil, thereby failing to acknowledge the potential that we all have to do harm, and failing to acknowledge and grapple with the chaos, darkness, trauma and horror that some experience. In Christian communities we can tend to 'see the best' in people at the expense of seeing 'the worst'. Taking seriously the reality of human sin and capacity for evil is part of understanding the human condition.

3.11. From its beginnings Methodism had a robust theology of sin. In one of his sermons, John Wesley describes its power and insidious nature and the futility of struggling against sin in one's own strength.[33] Every human being is in need of grace and the Methodist Church proclaims the grace of God which is freely given to all people through Jesus Christ. The Methodist Church defines grace as "God's sovereign love and favour, freely given to undeserving and hostile people",[34] recognising humanity's need for love, forgiveness and acceptance, and thus helping us to be honest about the human condition.

3.12. The Methodist Church remembers that it, too, has cause to repent, seek forgiveness and take responsibility for past actions. The findings of the Methodist Church's *Past Cases Review* highlight issues around institutional abuse, where the Church has been complicit in, or perpetuated abuse, including through the actions (or inaction) of those in positions of authority and through a lack of awareness of the signs, impact and dynamics of abuse. The Church, created and called by God, is a continuing community of followers of the risen Christ but also a flawed human organisation. It has not always protected the vulnerable in its charge from harm, nor has it responded adequately to those who have experienced abuse. The *Past Cases Review* found that it was evident that "the culture is made unsafe, not only by the actions of the perpetrators, but also by the subsequent actions of those in authority or in colleague relationships who have failed to respond in a way that recognises the reality of the abuse that has taken place."[35] The Methodist Church itself needs to recognise how it has, at times, contributed to the abuse and exploitation of vulnerable people, not least through its use of power, and to seek to change its patterns of behaviour accordingly. This is a demanding task and it requires the participation and commitment of the whole church community. As noted in the *Past Cases Review*:

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33 John Wesley: Sermon IX, *The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,* para 6
34 The Methodist Conference, 1986, *A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists,* 10
35 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope (The Past Cases Review),* p.20

> "Local churches will not become really safe place places until the understanding of safeguarding, and abuse of power in relationships is understood by the whole congregation. Unfortunately too many church people see safeguarding as synonymous with DBS[36] checks which can lead to dangerous complacency."[37]

3.13. Safeguarding work prompts us to consider how well we challenge and hold one another to account when boundaries are broken, behaviour is inappropriate and power misused; how well we listen and respond well to the deep pain and horror of the experiences of people who have experienced abuse; and how we might change and challenge our culture. As part of its response to abuse and work on safeguarding, the Methodist Church has engaged in self-reflection and self-examination. There are three particular areas where ongoing critical reflection throughout the Methodist Church is needed if it is committed to a change of culture that will make it a safer place: a critique of how theology is used (section 4), reflection on the failure to challenge unacceptable behaviour and maintain appropriate boundaries (section 5), and welcoming those who have experienced abuse (section 6).

4. Theological thinking and how it is used

4.1. The ways in which God is understood and spoken of impacts on human relationships. Previous Methodist reports have indicated ways in which particular theological concepts have shaped the aspects of Methodist culture and theology that have contributed to unhealthy patterns of relating and thus caused harm.[38] Through listening to those who have experienced abuse, the Methodist Church has acknowledged that many people who abuse within church contexts have also used distorted interpretations of biblical texts and theological themes to justify their behaviour.

4.2. The relationship between theology, cultural context, and individual and community experience has been the subject of much exploration since the middle of the twentieth century. Within wider theological conversations, liberation, feminist, queer, post-colonial and other contemporary theologians have encouraged critical reflection on the process and context of theological thinking, highlighting how experience and theology shape each other. There is now greater awareness and acceptance of how theology can shape contexts which enable abuse to happen and abusive patterns of behaviour to form, as well as contexts which enable

36 A DBS check is an official record stating a person's criminal convictions
37 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope (The Past Cases Review)*, p.34
38 See *Time for Action, Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain* and *Domestic Abuse* for example

human flourishing and patterns of healthy relating. This section gives examples of this including use of the Bible (4.3), language about God (4.4), redemptive suffering (4.5) and the dynamics of worship (4.6). Before doing so, however, some comment on theological method is needed.

4.3. Theological Method

4.3.1. Theological reflection and the exploration of the nature of God do not occur in a vacuum or begin from a neutral point. It is now widely recognised that theological thinking is shaped by the experiences, knowledge, cultures and bodily specificity of those undertaking it. For example, for much of its history, the Church's theology has been developed, decided and informed by the experiences of men, and thus reflects men's experiences and knowledge of God and ways of being in the world. Feminist theologians such a Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Pamela Sue Anderson made this explicit as they explored and recovered the neglected contributions of women in the church, paid attention to women's experiences and ways of knowing, and sought to promote the full humanity of women; thus critiquing and seeking to transform the theology of the Church[39]. Since the mid-twentieth century many other theologians (such as black, queer, post-colonial and liberation theologians) have explicitly developed theological reflection from their often marginalised cultural, embodied, socio-economic locations and experiences (including their experiences of God), seeking to enrich, critique and transform theological understanding and Christian practices.

4.3.2. Paying attention to experience is something which the Methodist Church has always embraced in its theological method,[40] although what 'experience' has referred to and how it has been used has changed across the years. For doctrinal decisions John Wesley most frequently drew upon the category of experience when he was uncertain about his interpretation of scripture or when it was being challenged. He looked for any theological claim to 'prove true' in his life and the lives of mature Christians, valuing the wisdom acquired through living, not immediate spiritual sensations.[41] It was usually where Wesley felt that Scripture was silent that experience took on a more constructive role.

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39 Radford Ruether, R, 1983, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Beacon Press; Schussler Fiorenza, E 1983, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Crossroad: New York; Anderson, P S, 1998, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The rationality and myths of religious belief*. Blackwell

40 Albert Outler argued that Wesley added the category of Experience to the Anglican triad of Scripture, Tradition and Reason, comprising the Methodist quadrilateral (Outler, 1964, *John Wesley*. Oxford: Oxford University Press).

41 Maddox, R, 1994, 1994. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, Nashville: Kingswood Books, p.46

4.3.3. In Wesley's writings experience most frequently plays a confirming and illuminating role, but within subsequent Methodist theology the notion of experience has been, and is, differently regarded and employed, and the numerous ways in which it is relied on is often unacknowledged. When experience is now referred to it is more usually taken as a starting point or conversation partner for theological reflection. Whilst the category has been broadened to embrace all human and not just Christian experience, there is often an indiscriminate emphasis on individual personal experience as an interpretative tool. Questions of whose experience is being given attention, or how it is being understood and used, are rarely addressed. 'Experience' as a theological category is more than a weight of feeling or the sum of opinion, but something to be corporately interrogated, robustly reflected on, and brought into critical conversation with scripture and tradition, as part of the process of theological inquiry. There are now many resources, not least from those theologies referred to in paragraph 4.1 above, to help the Church in its reflection on experience. These resources teach us to pay attention to the variety of experiences and ways of knowing God (particularly of those who are marginalised), to ask whose experience is privileged, how it is critiqued, what assumptions are made, who has the interpretive power, and how and on whom the theological thinking impacts.

4.3.4. The Methodist Church has already begun to pay attention to the experience and theological thinking of those who have experienced abuse. A report to the 2005 Methodist Conference about domestic abuse drew upon "the resources of Christian theology for the sake of women and men caught up in domestic abuse", noting that theology reflecting on the experience of particular people "doesn't mean that theology is just about human beings. Theology is in part the reflection we are able to do as human beings on what God is doing with us; what purposes God has for us".[42] Locating theological reflection in the experiences of those who have experienced abuse may deepen and transform our understanding of God by challenging and reimagining theological thinking. The questions asked in 2005 continue to be pertinent:[43]

- What does Christian theology look like to those who are caught up in situations that involve …abuse?
- Which parts of the theological agenda are highlighted? Which theological themes come up most often?
- What kind of theology or what theological statements contribute to the nourishing and supporting and healing of survivors?

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42 *Domestic Abuse,* 2005, 2.2
43 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse,* 2.4, adapted for the wider context of all abuse

- What kind of theology challenges the perpetrators of abuse?
- What kind of theology seems to damage and degrade those who experience abuse and uphold or support those who abuse?

4.3.5. The rest of this section examines how theology has contributed to contexts which have enabled abuse to happen and silenced those who have experienced abuse. The effects of deeply listening to those who have experienced abuse will not only impact on the Church's procedures and practices but also on its theology. The examples below contain some reflections from those who have been abused, demonstrating how theological thought has been used to, or had the effect of, compounding the abuse experienced, and also indicating life-giving theological reflection that has emerged from that same context.

4.4. Use of the Bible

4.4.1. For Christians, the Bible is a crucial theological resource. The Methodist Church bases its doctrines on the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures, which it acknowledges as "the supreme rule of faith and practice".[44] The Bible contains stories of liberation, transformation and hope, and resources which offer alternative ways of living in caring healthy relationships. Yet Christians must also wrestle with the accounts of abuse within the Bible and those passages which seem to support discrimination, particularly against women, and have been used to justify abuse.

4.4.2. The Bible always requires some degree of interpretation, not least in working out how it relates to life today.[45] The interpretation of scripture is a dynamic process. Within the Bible itself, for example, some later texts comment on how some of the earlier texts are to be understood. As already acknowledged,[46] how Christians interpret scripture is affected by their culture, theological tradition and life experiences, and they can differ greatly in what they believe can be deduced from the Bible on many subjects, including issues of abuse. Within the Methodist Church it is acknowledged that there are different approaches to Scripture and various models of biblical interpretation.[47] It is important for Christians to give attention to how the Bible is being used and interpreted in prayers and worship, customs and practices, and patterns of relating. As noted in the *Domestic Abuse*

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44 Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union*
45 Issues of biblical interpretation and scriptural authority are discussed in The Methodist Conference, 1998, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path: the Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible in the Methodist Church*
46 See 3.2.1 above.
47 The Methodist Conference, 1998, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path*

report: "Christians need to reflect continually on how they draw conclusions from the Bible and how they appropriate life-giving meaning from it. It is not Christian reflection, Christian theology or Christian Bible study to take everything in the Bible at face value without such interpretative work."[48]

4.4.3. Drawing on previous work, particularly within the 2005 report on *Domestic Abuse*, this section offers some examples to indicate how the Bible has been used by people who abuse in contexts of male-on-female abuse to justify abuse, or to keep people trapped in abusive situations.

4.4.4. A first example is found in the creation story. Chapters 1-3 of the book of Genesis have often been used when exploring the purposes of God for the relationship between men and women. Although in Genesis 1:26-28 the creation of man and woman is referred to in the same instant and in the same way, the differentiation between the creation of man and woman in Genesis 2:18-25 has sometimes been interpreted as expressing a secondary, 'helping' role for women. This is apparently confirmed in Genesis 3:16 ("Your desire will be for your husband and he shall rule over you") and understood, by some, to mean that this is how things ought to be ordered. Alternative interpretations repudiate any idea that the Genesis texts enshrine the subordination of women.[49] When interpreted alongside the Song of Songs, for example:

> "they can offer an image of the mutuality of desire, deep personal bond and a relation of sameness and difference as the picture of the kinds of relationship God intends. And that is the key issue: the kinds of relationship which God intends. Christian interpretation of particular texts is surely governed by an understanding taken from the proclamation of the Christian gospel as a whole that God wants people to be loved, nourished and growing, not damaged and destroyed. The most intimate human relationships should be a part of that nourishing and growing: where partners support each other to fulfil the potential of each; where love enables transformation. If some biblical texts are used to justify abuse, then they are not being interpreted in the context of biblical truth as a whole."[50]

4.4.5. A second example is found in how some interpretations of particular passages in the New Testament have led to distorted ideas of male 'headship.' These have influenced patterns and understandings of leadership and have been used to

48 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse,* 2.5
49 See, for example, the exploration of Genesis 1-3 in the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, 2003, *Being Human,* Church House Publishing: London
50 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.10

justify the subordination of women by men. When the Bible has been misused in this way it is usually through a particular gendered interpretation, without recognising the cultural assumptions and societal norms inherent in the particular texts. The example of the 'household codes' in Ephesians 5:22 - 6:9, Colossians 3:18 - 4:1 and 1 Peter 3:1-7 is explored in the *Domestic Abuse* report. Like other material in the New Testament these closely resemble codes for social behaviour from philosophies of the period when these texts were written:

> "To that extent the kinds of standards referred to are part of the culture in which the New Testament writers lived. It can be argued, however, that the codes as used in the New Testament enshrine a standard that demands more, in terms of responsibility for care by the powerful in society, than would have been demanded outside the Church. So how might these texts be appropriated in very different cultural settings? One interpretation argues that 21st-century Christians should take on these codes just as they stand, because they transcend cultural circumstances and are entirely appropriate to all times and places. Another interpretation argues that Christians are to appropriate the pattern which says that more is demanded of Christians in terms of love and respect, responsibility and care, than is expected by the society in which they live. That interpretation might take the 'best' of a Western, 21st-century society's understanding of the mutuality of responsibility in relationships, of each individual in a partnership being treated as equally valuable and equally responsible, and argue that there is still more love and care that Christians can express."[51]

4.4.6. As illustrated by these two examples, such reflections underline the importance of interpreting biblical passages in the context of proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ:

> "God wants people to be loved, nourished and growing, not damaged and destroyed… If some biblical texts are used to justify abuse, then they are not being interpreted in the context of biblical truth as a whole."[52]

4.5. Language about God

4.5.1. The theological themes of being made in the image of God and the language of God as Trinity means that what Christians believe about God and how God acts says something about the nature of human relationships and affects Christian belief about how human beings should relate to one another. If some of God's

51 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.12
52 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.10

attributes are emphasised at the expense of others, then it results in a distorted picture of God which can lead, even if indirectly, to distorted human relationships. It is therefore important to pay attention to the language and images that are used when referring to God.

4.5.2. In 1989 Brian Wren undertook a rigorous examination of the language used in worship.[53] Although initially sceptical, he found that:

> "the systematic and almost exclusive use of male God-language, in a faith in which God is revealed as incarnate in a male human being, gives a distorted vision of God and supports male dominance in church and in society. The distortion goes deep, in liturgies, creeds, hymns, and the language of the Bible."[54]

4.5.3. Christianity has always maintained that God is beyond gender, but the traditional image of God as 'Father' is deeply embedded. Many Christians have explored and reflected on its effect and impact. Theological reflection on the ways in which gender is understood, for example, highlights the prevalence of binary language about God and its impact on Christian spirituality and practices.[55] There are also many examples of work which explores how a theology which has thought of God in terms of paradigm and central images that are male has reinforced the subordination of women. For example, in 1992 the *Inclusive Language* report to the Methodist Conference highlighted how the dominant use of male words and imagery when addressing or speaking of God reinforces the idea that the male is normative and the female in some way or other inferior, distorting our thinking of both God and humanity.[56] The report noted that much "traditional God-talk can easily be seen as legitimizing and perpetuating the power and privilege of males. It is after all the case that the church which has used male language about God has also been, and still largely is, patriarchal (i.e. male centred) in its structures and practice."[57]

4.5.4. Theology that has emphasised hierarchical images of the relations between God and human beings has implicitly supported the idea of hierarchical models as

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53 Wren, B, 1989, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology,* Wipf and Stock: Eugene, OR

54 Wren, B, 1989, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology,* Wipf and Stock: Eugene, OR, p.4

55 Guest, D, Goss, R E, West, M, and Bohache, T, 2011, *The Queer Bible Commentary.* SCM Press: London; Slee, N, 2014, "God-language in Public and Private Prayer: A Place for Integrating Gender, Sexuality and Faith" in *Theology and Sexuality,* Volume 20 – Issue 3

56 The Methodist Conference, 1992, *Inclusive Language*, 3

57 The Methodist Conference, 1992, *Inclusive Language,* 52

appropriate for all relationships (ie where all relationships have some 'over' or responsible for others, the 'others' being in some sense 'subordinate'), thus shaping contexts in which patterns of grooming and abuse flourish.[58] The God who behaves like the patriarchal male "relating to creation by command and decree and demanding a response of servile obedience … is uncomfortably close to how God has sometimes been represented in the Christian tradition,"[59] even if this is a misunderstanding of how associated imagery is used in the Bible. Over employing language and images of God as all powerful, separate and above the world, holy and majestic and radically different from human beings may also "glorify" those people who are perceived to be powerful or are in positions of authority, resulting in a failure to always recognise where power lies and when it is being used to dominate others or manipulate them.[60] Where the dominant image of God is as 'high and mighty King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes' who beholds us from a divine 'throne'[61] then it engenders a distorted understanding of the divine, as one person who has experienced abuse describes:

> "When I was younger I used to pray to God to stop the abuse from happening. Nobody could have prayed harder than me, and nobody could have believed that God would stop the abuse more than I did! The abuse continued. I waited for God on high to save me from what was happening; and prayed every day that my dad would die. I was led to believe in a kind of power-ranger God. Understanding incarnation as God sharing our humanity has helped me to see that my expectations were not real; and that the absence of the zapping from heaven did not mean the absence of God in my life. Rather I learned that God in Christ shared my suffering; that good could overcome evil and there was hope. I learned that I was involved in my own salvation."[62]

4.5.5. All language about God is metaphorical, using and referencing things within this world to describe and point in the direction of truth about God. Our human words are images, models, metaphors and analogies, speaking of the richness of God but never capturing God's fullness. Care is required in the language we use when talking about God because it moulds as well as expresses our thinking and feeling. Thoughtless and badly chosen language may both express and encourage attitudes which are unworthy or beliefs which are inadequate, impoverished or false. The way in which language is used is therefore important, and consideration

58 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.17
59 The Methodist Conference, 1992, *Inclusive Language*, 40
60 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.16
61 The Methodist Conference, 1992, *Inclusive Language*, 14
62 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.14

of its potential meaning and impact on people who have experienced abuse is required. Inevitably particular words and images will not have the same impact on all people who have experienced abuse because their experiences and contexts will be different, but the wider church community needs to be aware "that words and phrases we may take for granted may affect different people in different ways and our commonly held assumptions may leave some people feeling marginalized, unheard and rejected".[63]

4.6. The Cross and Suffering

4.6.1. Faith in Jesus Christ who was crucified and raised again is central to Christian belief. Interpreting Jesus' death on the cross and proclaiming its significance has been a Christian priority from the beginnings of the Church. What was a scandal and defeat in the eyes of the world is understood and proclaimed by Christians as the death, not of a criminal, but of the Saviour. Yet out of reflection on the cross from contexts of injustice and abuse, controversial arguments have been made about its complex meanings.

4.6.2. The Methodist Church believes that Jesus Christ suffered death and was raised again for us, so that we might live for him[64]. It acknowledges that the Bible uses various expressions for this, including: that he gave his life to redeem all people; comparing him with the Passover Lamb, sacrificed as a sign of God's freeing of God's people; comparing him with the lamb sacrificed on the Day of Atonement to atone for or cover the sins of the people; being joined to Christ is described as a new creation; and that by his death and resurrection, Christ has defeated the powers of evil. None of these is complete by itself: together they point to the fact that through the cross God acted decisively on behalf of the world God had created.[65]

4.6.3. The Methodist Church has been challenged to examine the language which is used about the cross and to further explore what might be inferred from it about suffering, violence and patterns of Christian discipleship.[66] People who have experienced abuse have found language which emphasises our complicity in Jesus' death to be especially problematic. Such language may be heard in a particularly damaging way by someone who is already feeling the shame and false guilt often associated with abuse or who is being told by the abuser that the hurt they are suffering is all their own fault. The way in which Jesus' suffering on the

63 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.2
64 The Methodist Conference, 1986, *A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists,* 14.
65 The Methodist Conference, 1986, *A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists*, 14
66 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.31

cross is described and interpreted profoundly impacts on Christian relationships and patterns of relating.

4.6.4. The idea of bearing suffering as Jesus did, even to death on the cross, is deeply embedded in Christian thinking and patterns of discipleship. Many of those who have experienced abuse in Christian contexts have found that particular notions of obedience and the place of suffering in relation to redemption have contributed to abusive behaviour and the contexts which perpetuate it. In many such accounts of abuse there are examples of how Christian teaching has been used to convey the idea that suffering is necessary for faithful discipleship, and that it is part of God's will and redemptive in itself. Mis-interpretations of the concepts of suffering, obedience and redemption in the light of the gospel have contributed to abusive contexts, and, when invoked by people who abuse, have compounded the trauma of abuse. Some people who have experienced abuse have been told by Christians, and often Church leaders, that they should live with continued abuse or silently bear its consequences as part of their bearing the cross in imitation of Jesus Christ.

4.6.5. Distorted theologies of obedience and submission have also led to the language of obedience to God being projected onto leaders or representatives of the Church so that they are perceived by some as having implicit divine authority, expanding their power and their potential effect on the lives of other members of the community. It therefore is vital to continue to examine how Jesus' death on the cross is interpreted and the meaning that is attached to suffering.

4.6.6. Some theologians have challenged some of the language used in relation to the cross and atonement because they fear it glorifies and justifies violence and suffering. For example, Joanne Brown and Rebecca Parker argue that traditional theories of atonement may encourage martyrdom and victimisation, glorify suffering and violence and support teaching that it is right for people to endure suffering and to stay in their suffering. [67] Instead, they argue for greater emphasis on teaching which enables people to challenge all kinds of suffering.

4.6.7. Other theologians have found that explanations about the cross which appear to separate Father from Son, and which use language about God 'causing' or 'demanding' the suffering of his Son, create an image of God who demands suffering, or who makes people suffer. Although this can be countered to some extent by ensuring that language of the cross is located in the context of the

67 Brown, C and Parker, R, 1989, "For God So Loved the World?" in Brown, J, and Bohn, C, eds, *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, New York: Pilgrim Press. pp.1-30

Trinity in which the three persons of the Godhead are one, some still perceive particular theories of the atonement as deeply problematic. One person who experienced abuse says::

> "I find the whole classical understanding of atonement, that God knowingly sent his Son Jesus to be abused on earth, very difficult to deal with… In understanding the atonement as God's love for humanity shown through God's willingness to sacrifice his own son it seems that the needs of the child come secondary to the purpose of God, which I believe is contrary to what the Bible, reason, tradition and experience teach us."[68]

4.6.8. In describing some deeply destructive interpretations of the cross Steve Chalke coined the term 'cosmic child abuse'. The context in which he used it, however, is important. He said:

> "The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement 'God is love'. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil."[69]

4.6.9. The cross of Christ is inextricably linked to suffering, but suffering in itself is not redemptive. It is not healthy or life-giving Christian theology to say that people must suffer because Jesus suffered, or to imply that suffering is good *per se*. Particular care is required when talking about the cross in the context of discipleship because Jesus' suffering and human suffering are radically different.[70] From the beginnings of Christianity, the language of 'taking up the cross' has been an image of discipleship to illustrate the cost of following Jesus. Yet even in the gospels that language is being used in a different way from the way it is used of Jesus' experience. It metaphorically describes the commitment of discipleship with the possibility of rejection and hurt and danger as part of the experience of following Jesus, but it is vital that the distinction between Jesus' suffering and what his disciples might face is maintained.

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68 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.9
69 Chalke, S and Mann, A, 2003, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, pp.182-183
70 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*

4.6.10. Where women (particularly) have been encouraged to see suffering as spiritually formative or a 'cross to bear' and are not resourced to challenge violence and injustice or make other choices, the cycles of abuse can be perpetuated. In contexts of abuse, coercion and control, neither sacrifice nor suffering can ever be understood as redemptive. Any language of self-denial can only properly be used if there is self-affirmation, self-esteem and the possibility of alternative choices. Implications that suffering must be borne places a further burden on those who are experiencing harm. There are, furthermore, important distinctions to be made between suffering which is freely endured (endured rather than chosen) and that which is imposed by others. References to Jesus' suffering should never be used to maintain suffering and injustice when people need to be resourced and encouraged to resist it.

4.7. The use of symbols in the context of worship

4.7.1. Church life, Christian worship and theological thinking are rich in symbolism. Much of the language Christians use and the symbols they employ to talk to and of God are second nature. There is often little time to stop to think about how these might be understood and used by others, even those within the same congregations. Symbols are, by nature, representative, but people bring their own experiences and understandings when interpreting them. Many symbols and images within Christianity derive from the Bible, a collection of texts from a diversity of cultures from very different times in history and very different places. Their use, therefore, requires awareness and sensitivity.

4.7.2. Language, images and concepts arise, develop, and have been transmitted within particular contexts, but it is often not acknowledged that the context in which they are experienced may be very different. Alternative and sometimes damaging meanings and interpretations are possible. Particular care is required in worship, where there are corporate and spiritual dimensions. There is a difference between the language of theology and the language of worship and devotion, as described in the report on *Inclusive Language*:

> "Some who are willing to use female imagery when doing theology are nonetheless reluctant to use such images in prayer and worship. They may balk even more at referring to God as 'She' or addressing God as 'Mother'. Metaphors, after all, often appear stronger than similes. It is one thing to say God is 'like' a mother, but another to address God as 'Mother' ... The difficulty may be in part intellectual, but also in part emotional."

Christian hymns, prayers and rituals send out implicit messages, and these impact on relational dynamics and people's understandings of God, self and others.

4.7.3. It is helpful to acknowledge that symbols convey meaning and provoke reactions, but sometimes these reactions may be ones of pain or distress. Those who have experienced abuse have described how some symbols may, for some people, trigger negative responses as a consequence of, flashback to, or association with a painful past experience.[71] Words and phrases that may be taken for granted may leave some people feeling marginalized, unheard and rejected. One example is when the language of love (particularly for Jesus) is translated into language of 'lover', especially when associated with ideas of obedience, submission, or when associated with touch. Whilst the wider community might not understand the cause of distress, it can respond with pastoral sensitivity and reflect on potential interpretations of the symbolism it uses.

4.7.4. Careful consideration of the words and concepts used in worship is important, including awareness of the different meanings which they might convey and the impact they may have, particularly on those who have experienced abuse and on wider patterns of relating. For example, one person who experienced abuse describes the effect of the language of 'Father' for God:

> "Sexually abused by my father for many years, I notice how many of our songs reflect the church's traditional teaching of God as father. Whilst I cannot deny the biblical precedent for calling God 'father' (e.g. Matthew: 6:6), as a survivor of sexual abuse by my father I do not find it helpful. Though at times I re-vision God as the father I never had, or the father I know my friends to be to their children, I do not find it helpful to find myself once again in the dependent role of the father-child relationship. Thus a song like *Father I place into your hands* only reminds me of the abuse I suffered; I have to consciously remind myself that this is God we're singing about. This is compounded when later in the song we sing 'Father I place into your hands my friends and family'. As a survivor, and even as a child, I sought to protect my sisters and other young family friends from my father's abusive power; the thought of placing them in my father's hands is abhorrent to me. Of course as a child I was powerless to stop my father; his abuse has left its legacy on many lives."[72]

4.7.5. In 2020 the Methodist Church published a study guide, *Reflect and Respond,* to help in reflection on the calling of the Methodist Church and written from the perspectives of a number of people who have experienced abuse, one of whom comments:

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71 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.18
72 The Methodist Conference, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, pp.607

> "Survivors need space and freedom to explore language in worship, so it's important to have variety of language, metaphor and imagery. Fear and mistrust can cause survivors to be defensive; fear and complacency can cause traditional churches to be stuck in their ways. Everything in every service doesn't have to change, but it's not fair to not include people's real and lived experiences, or not be sensitive to struggles, or to just have everything comfortable and unreal."[73]

4.7.6. Christian practices in worship also warrant examination and a greater degree of awareness, especially when touch is involved. Kneeling to receive communion, receiving the laying on of hands or sharing the peace may cause particular anxiety for some survivors, particularly as it is often very hard to 'opt out'.[74]

> "How do I go to church to public worship when I don't get any warning before someone there wants to touch me? Every time I go, there is shaking hands, sharing the peace, unsolicited hugs, being asked to hold hands, being kissed, being anointed with oil, foot washing, arms around the shoulders, hands lingering when bread is offered, and people wanting to look deep into my eyes. Why is the Church so convinced it can touch me without my permission or make it so hard to avoid such unwanted touch without having that avoidance pointed out for all to see and comment on?"[75]

4.7.7. In any practice which involves touch a greater consideration of personal boundaries and preferences is required. Safeguarding practices encourage church members to embed the practice of requesting permission to touch somebody and to create a context in which it is acceptable (and will not cause offence) to say no. The practice of sharing the peace has been particularly identified as an aspect of worship which warrants more open theological discussion in order to re-establish its liturgical meaning and discover alternative ways in which the core meaning might be expressed. People who have experienced abuse have observed that in many places it is seen as a moment to be "chummy" for some and a cause of anxiety for others.

4.7.8. The ability of any church community to engage in such reflections and discuss their different feelings, understandings, and reactions in an open, honest and safe way depends upon whether it has a culture of care and mutual accountability where difficult feelings are acknowledged and disagreement and challenge are seen as a part of Christian living. Safeguarding procedures and practices help to engender such cultures, particularly in helping Christians to

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73 The Methodist Church, 2020, *Reflect and Respond: Study Guide*, p.10
74 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.9
75 The Methodist Church, 2020, *Reflect and Respond: Study Guide*, p.10

challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour and to maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries (see section 5 below).

4.8. Life-giving resources for theological reflection

4.8.1. Theological reflection by those who have experienced abuse has not only brought to light the way that the Bible and theological thinking have been used to enable abusive contexts and legitimise or perpetuate abusive behaviour, but has also highlighted themes and resources from the Christian tradition that have been found to be life-giving. A few examples are offered here.

4.8.2. The Bible has been a liberating resource for some survivors of abuse.[76] Many have found the biblical themes of release, healing and exodus especially important, particularly in the stories told about Jesus by the gospel writers.[77] The stories in which he challenges injustice, pays attention to the marginalised and vulnerable, and brings healing and hope have often been important for Christians who have experienced abuse. Emphasising Jesus's challenging of injustice and his naming of harmful ways of being points to the God who wants something better for humanity and indicates that part of the mission and witness of the Church is to seek an end to suffering. Biblical language about discipleship which speaks of hope, joy, new life and potential has also been found to be life-giving.

4.8.3. Passages which draw attention to Jesus as a guide, "companion and supporter" [78] and which reflect the unconditional love of God are often referred to, for example:

> "[A parish sister who is a trained counsellor] was very supportive and I saw her for a year and a half. Then one day she called me into her office to say she was going on sabbatical for a year. Panic set in. How was I going to cope without her? Before she left she gave me a picture of a child in God's hand, and quoted Isaiah 49:15 'See I will not forget you. I have carried you on the palm of my hand.' I cried because I thought for the first time it was possible God really loved me. Mess and all."[79]

Similarly, stories which show God being alongside those who have been harmed or who are in pain have been a source of particular strength. In such passages some people who have been abused have found assurance that God is with them too, for example:

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76 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.24
77 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.14
78 CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell,* p.11
79 CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell,* p.32

> "… I just want to share this verse that has meant a lot to me in my recovering, to encourage other survivors: The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still. (Exodus 14.14.)"

4.8.4. The Bible itself also contains many stories of abuse, and increasing attention has been given to questions about how they are handled. Often, the response has been to ignore the difficult passages; a mirror, perhaps, of the way in which accounts of abuse are difficult to hear. The *Domestic Abuse* report, however, noted: "Stories, though, demand judgement. In many biblical stories, women are victims of violence simply because they are women, regarded as the property of men, for men to control and determine, and that is a reflection of the life of the times."[80]

4.8.5. Phyllis Trible[81] has been significant in encouraging Christians to pay attention to the horrific stories of the abuse of women in the Bible in order to rage at the abuse, name what is wrong, and focus the anger felt on hearing accounts of abuse today. For some who have experienced abuse, these stories are important because they have enabled them to find their experiences reflected in the Bible. It is therefore important that they are told in worship and other Christian contexts. Such stories can be a "springboard for attention to abuse and exploitation of women in all its forms in our world".[82] By interpreting these stories of trauma, violence and suffering on behalf of the victims, they may inspire new beginnings and energise Christians to work to challenge and change the thinking, dynamics, contexts and patterns of behaviour which continue to allow abuse to happen today.

4.8.6. Acknowledging the horror of the cross is also important as it reveals a God who enters and endures the horror and pain of sin and suffering for the sake of all people. It also offers a picture of the God who resists all that diminishes life, bringing transformation, new possibilities and hope:

> "It is not a shrine to violence that calls for torn flesh and bleeding bodies, but an eternal statement that humans should not be abused."[83]

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80 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.9

81 Trible, P, 1984, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives,* Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis. Trible focuses on four women: Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21:9-21), the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:29-40), and Tamar, raped by her brother (2 Samuel 13:1-22).

82 The Methodist Conference, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.9

83 Crawford, A E, Womanist Christology and the Wesleyan Tradition. In: *Black Theology: An International Journal*, 2.2, 2004, p.219

4.8.7. Reflection on the cross of Christ can also help Christians to take seriously the sorrow and anger of God at the awfulness of abuse:

> "Struggling with the notion that God is always in control I find no need to explain the cross in such a way that what happened to Jesus was God's deliberate will. Rather I understand Jesus as a victim of violence, whose death holds up a mirror to reflect to us all our inhumanity to each other. Innocence and goodness are always open to abuse and exploitation by those who choose to misuse power. In Christ we find the vulnerable, suffering God; the suffering servant of Isaiah 53."[84]

4.8.8. The risen Christ who bears the wounds of suffering can be an important sign of hope. The risen body is both the same and different from the one that was broken on the cross, pointing to and bringing about transformation and new life. A person who has experienced abuse says:

> "Of course the story of the cross does not end with crucifixion but resurrection. I believe it is not the violent death of Christ, but God's love which overcomes evil which is the central message of the cross. *The law of Christ alone can make us free* speaks of the freedom we find in God's love. As a survivor I found the second verse particularly helpful.
>
> *There is no promise that we shall not suffer,*
> *No promise that we shall not need to fight;*
> *Only the word that love is our redemption,*
> *And freedom comes by turning to the light.*
>
> A second way in which I can make sense of what happened on the cross is that hope overcomes despair; because those who despaired most on the day of crucifixion were those who first found the tomb empty and looked hopefully for Christ."[85]

5. Failure to challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour and maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries

5.1. The *Past Cases Review* (PCR) noted that the culture of an organisation "is a critical factor in ensuring that it is a safe organisation."[86] Whilst the Methodist

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84 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.9
85 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.9
86 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope: The report on the past cases review 2013-2015*, p.19

Church has produced some "excellent" reports and documents highlighting what underpins safe practice these have not affected practice to the same degree:

> "What is evident from many of the cases reported to the PCR is that the culture is made unsafe, not only by the actions of the perpetrators, but also by the subsequent actions of those in authority or in colleague relationships who have failed to respond in a way that recognises the reality of the abuse that has taken place. Examples of this can be seen in numerous personal accounts in response forms and also from the outcome decisions in some Complaints and Discipline cases."[87]

5.2. Various aspects of Christian theology and practice contribute to this and the *Past Cases Review* noted that many within the church have difficulty reconciling the theology of forgiveness and redemption with safeguarding, which is critical to the issue of culture.[88] The theme of forgiveness is explored in greater detail in section 8 below and this section examines two other key aspects of Christian culture which contribute to creating the conditions in which abuse happens, namely the reluctance within congregations to challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour, and the failure to establish and maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries. A convicted sex offender has said:

> "Churches are a soft touch: they are so trusting. You just have to say I have taken Jesus into my heart, and they believe you."[89]

5.3. Aspects of church life such as the community 'family' dynamics, how prayers are said, the hymns and songs that are sung, and the ways in which people are chosen for particular tasks, all convey subtle messages about acceptable and expected behaviour and instil particular ways of being. There are unspoken and profoundly damaging assumptions that Christians should be nice and 'good' and compliant. (Many Christians, for example, have sung from early childhood that "Christian children all should be, mild, obedient, good as he…".[90]) Similarly, a naïve adoption of the narratives of reconciliation, unity and discipleship as living

87 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope: The report on the past cases review 2013-2015,* p.20

88 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope: The report on the past cases review 2013-2015,* p.20

89 Gary, a convicted sex offender quoted in The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2016, *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church: A Theological Resource for the Local Church,* Church House Publishing: London, p.24

90 The words are found in *Once in Royal David's City* by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895), printed in *Hymns and Psalms,* 1983, Methodist Publishing House, 114. The particular verse was removed when the hymn was reproduced in *Singing the Faith,* 2011, Hymns Ancient and Modern

a life of love, kindness, grace and self-sacrifice, particularly in the context of the discourse of obedience and submission and hierarchical patterns of relating (explored in section 4.4), can lead to a culture of 'niceness' where people are not to be upset, the status quo of community relationships are not to be disturbed and bad behaviour is to understood and excused. These warrant critical reflection and open discussion as such dynamics can create conditions which make it more likely for grooming and abuse to occur.

5.4. Impaired theological thinking contributes to this. Misunderstandings of what it means to be holy are equated, often subconsciously, as meeting cultural expectations and fitting a particular picture of Christian life and what a 'good' Christian should be. Portrayals of faithful discipleship as being meek within a context of hierarchical patterns of relating and a dominant narrative of love as self-sacrificing obedience, can produce silence, submission and conformity as desired characteristics.

5.5. The Church has not always been a good place for acknowledging difficult and disturbing emotions, doubts and fears, or admitting that one's own life does not keep up to the standards set by Christian vision and values. Many have therefore found Christian communities to be unsafe places in which to 'be real' and honest about themselves and their relationships with others. The Methodist Conference has noted that:

> "Some situations of need are more often acceptable than others in the Church. So grief (at least for the first few months) is generally understood better than anger; physical illness is more acceptable than mental illness; anything short-term is more easily dealt with than long-term dis-ease of mind, body or spirit."[91]
>
> In the *Reflect and Respond Study Guide* a person who has experienced abuse says:
> "I belong to my local Methodist church, despite the temptation to give up on it. It is a very inwardly focused church and it is hard, at times, to encourage people either to be honest and real about what they are feeling and facing in their lives apart from the Church, or to think beyond the walls of the church to the community we are part of, the city we belong to, to the wider global community, or to consider the reality of many people's lives. No wonder my children think church is irrelevant; they would never find important what this church has decided is important. So, because there is little honest

91 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.50

> conversation, they do not know I am a survivor of abuse. They do not know that the perpetrator of my abuse was a Methodist minister. They do not know what happened to me. They just do not know."[92]

5.6. Those who have experienced abuse have often experienced a community which not only does not want to hear their pain and hurt, but also silences them:

> "This is so when the Church appears not to want to face the harshness of the experience of abuse, inside or outside the Church. This is the Church which hides from the horror and therefore appears to condone what is going on because it will not face the issues enough to seek change. This is the Church so concerned with unity that it hides anything that might cause dissension. 'Unity' is defined as keeping everyone together; it is so-called peace at the expense of justice. This use of power - which may be on the part of leaders or on the part of 'the majority' - does a huge disservice to victims and perpetrators alike."[93]

5.7. Challenging harmful behaviour and different forms of abuse and injustice, whether it emerges within individual behaviour or within the structures and patterns of Church life, is part of discipleship. Holiness, and an expectation of growth in grace and holiness as part of Christian life has always been a key emphasis in Methodist theology. It is about "the work of God in each life, moving people on towards wholeness in a way which will be unique to each one, held within the community of Christ's followers".[94] God "who intends good for all creation calls and invites human beings to develop and grow, to take responsibility, to become more and more deeply the people God wants them to be, both given and shaped by experience and abilities."[95] Methodist theology affirms the necessity of personal responsibility alongside the possibility of growth and change. From its beginnings, Methodism has understood mutual accountability and care to both be central aspects of discipleship, relating robust accountability for personal discipleship to spiritual growth. This understanding is embedded in different aspects of Methodist polity and practice today.

5.8. Christians have a responsibility to reflect on their own behaviour and ways of relating to others, and to challenge others when their behaviour is harmful, manipulative and undermining of others. Ministers and those in positions of authority also must recognise the boundaries of their own authority, power

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92 The Methodist Church, 2020, *Reflect and Respond: Study Guide*, p.8
93 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.49
94 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.50
95 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.20

and responsibility. Safeguarding practices make clear, though, that it is the responsibility of the whole community to be aware of the potential for all kinds of abuse, including spiritual abuse.

> "Church communities cannot afford to be naïve about the levels of intelligence, determination and duplicity that can be shown by abusers … They must be vigilant for any signs that grooming may be happening, and ready to respond when made aware of actual or potential abusive behaviour."[96]

5.9. There are many reasons why inappropriate behaviour is not challenged, and some of these are identified below. It is important that Local Churches, Circuits and Districts further reflect on the reasons as to why this seems to be difficult because this is an important step in cultural change. Some of the reasons are explored in more detail elsewhere in this report, for example failure to face the depths of evil that human beings are capable of (see section 3 above) and misunderstandings of forgiveness (see section 8 below), but others include:

- Fear of rejection, difficulty in dealing with 'difficult' emotions (such as anger), or low self-esteem and self-image which all lead to the fear of conflict and the inability to challenge and question others. Also feeding into this are misapplied notions of unity which do not allow for disagreement and difference.

- The recognition that it is not always clear what constitutes appropriate boundaries and acceptable behaviour. It is often where these are hard to define (ie the grey areas) that it is problematic. Not only are there individual differences but different cultures have different cultural norms. Attitudes to touch is one such example. A gesture which one person finds deeply uncomfortable may not even be noticed by someone else. Giving collective attention to how we discern and decide what is appropriate, and what is unacceptable, enables these differences to be acknowledged, understood and respected. In contexts where these issues are discussed there is greater clarity about what kind of behaviour is inappropriate, for whom and why, and members of the community are better able to establish and maintain appropriate and healthy interpersonal boundaries.

- It is often profoundly difficult to accept that an individual known to a community is capable of abusive acts. ("It can't be true. This is Fred! He's

96 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2016, *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church: A Theological Resource for the Local Church,* Church House Publishing: London, p.32

not like that!") Accepting that someone you know well is capable of such acts and of causing profound harm to another person raises questions about personal judgement and past relationships and is deeply unsettling. Often there may be subconscious feelings of shame and guilt. One of the themes for safeguarding training in the Methodist Church that was identified after the *Past Cases Review* was that people find it difficult to put respectful uncertainty into practice:

"There is a lack of skill in dealing with potentially contradictory views of people, so people find it difficult to recognise that those who are their colleagues and friends – and have done good things – can also do harm."[97]

As churches have had to face with horror the ways in which they have not been safe places, they have also had to face the fact that some perpetrators are members of church communities or ordained church leaders.

- Inaction and inertia are also common factors. Action can sometimes be thought to imply judgement. Some people, therefore, can be reluctant to challenge behaviour or take the first steps in a safeguarding or complaints process because they are unsure who to believe or because they fear that they will be seen to be making a judgment. A lack of trust in the processes to reveal truth or bring about justice can also be a significant factor. Alongside this, it can be easier for a perpetrator to be believed than a victim of abuse because if the abuse is recognised then it demands that action is taken. Doing nothing, however, is not a neutral act. Doing nothing has consequences, and often results in perpetuating cultures of abuse or silencing those who have experienced it.

- There are particular issues involved in challenging those who have power in the church community who may or may not be in positions of leadership. Challenging and holding to account those who have the power is likely to have negative personal consequences and therefore carries a high degree of risk of harm in some form; often to position, reputation and wellbeing within the community and sometimes in physical, emotional and material ways. This underlines the importance of seeing the holding of each other to account as a corporate responsibility, and of embedding robust mechanisms of accountability in church structures, processes and practices.

5.10. Building a community of love and grace is transforming, hard work. It can also

97 https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/4407/learning-for-trainers-pcr.pdf, accessed November 2020

be deeply disruptive as it involves honesty, transparency, accountability and taking personal responsibility for one's own feelings, reactions and behaviour. In such communities healthy and appropriate interpersonal boundaries can be maintained, and inappropriate, harmful and abusive behaviour is challenged; accounts of abuse are taken seriously, and the deeply painful and traumatic experiences of survivors are acknowledged and held. A church which is a place where the complexity and messiness of human experience can be shared, where doubts and anger can be expressed, and where people are challenged and held to account when their behaviour is inappropriate and harmful can not only welcome survivors and offer deep listening and care (see section 6 below), but may also be a prophetic voice in wider society. In demonstrating particular care for those who have experienced abuse, modelling safer relationships in which people honour one another[98] and acting so as to make the church a safer place where abuse is less likely to occur, it can point to the values of the kingdom of God with their emphasis on inclusive love, healing and justice.

5.11. Reflecting on the experiences of CASAI,[99] one person who has experienced abuse comments:

> "We are always looking at creative ways to make sense of the gospel messages for those who have different measures of hope as well as ways to involve all those called to be Church and highlight their need to belong and to find ways to be freed from their past abuse. In CASAI, we talk about being in the tomb as a process for healing, a time of recovery, an endless stuckness or being dead to anything life giving, or claustrophobic depression. Jesus died and his dead body was placed in a tomb. Jesus experienced assault, betrayal, abandonment, murder, theft, loss, embarrassment and removal of dignity. These are all things that people feel when they have been abused. The tomb would have been dark, humid, sweaty, dusty and unclean. It is understandable that at times the Christian narrative is told in a way that cleans and neatens it just as supporters, friends and families often want survivors to be in recovery and sorted out. Justice comes after survivors are believed, are accepted, and are truly welcomed and not until."[100]

5.12. Safeguarding is a vital aspect of discipleship: it encourages reflection on the reasons for reluctance to challenge harmful behaviour and it encourages action to establish a culture in which inappropriate behaviour is challenged; it helps to

98 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.52
99 CASAI is an organisation in the Liverpool District working alongside female survivors of sexual abuse.
100 The Methodist Church, 2020, *Reflect and Respond: Study Guide*, p.19

define the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and it helps to create safer communities as part of the church's care for all people including children, young people and vulnerable adults; and it helps communities to identify where changes are needed in order to create safer communities and healthier patterns of relating which enable human flourishing. It further encourages reflection on how conversations about all of these issues can happen in ways which are honest and appropriate to a range of people including children (who have often been invisible in processes that purport to relate to their wellbeing).[101] A community which is able to discuss difficult issues in appropriate ways is more able to be a place of welcome for those who are vulnerable and have been marginalised, including people who have experienced sexual abuse.

6. Welcoming people who have experienced abuse

6.1. The Methodist emphasis on the limitless grace of God often prompts Methodists to declare that "all are welcome". This, however, is a complex concept (see section 6.3 below). Desiring to demonstrate that all are indeed welcome and that no one is beyond God's grace the Methodist Church has given significant time to enabling those who have abused to participate in the life of the Church (subject to constraints and close monitoring that are intended to ensure that the church is a safer space). A commitment to welcoming a person who has abused is costly, time consuming and emotionally demanding work, which requires significant resources (not least from people) which are then unavailable for other activities and work. Similar time, energy and resources have not been given to enabling people who have experienced abuse to participate in the life of the Church. The Methodist Church is therefore challenged to reflect on how it gives resources and energy to interpersonal and structural changes which enable the inclusion and care of people who have experienced abuse. As aspects of this, this section considers how the Church responds well to and welcomes survivors (6.2), explores the idea that 'all are welcome' (6.3) and examines the need to reconsider our understanding of pastoral care (6.4).

6.2. Responding to and welcoming people who have experienced abuse

6.2.1. The Methodist Church has emphasised the importance of listening and paying attention to the experience of people who have experienced abuse, recognising that each experience is different and that there is both commonality and diversity in responses and needs. Accounts of abuse are difficult to hear and the Church

101 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope: The report on the past cases review 2013-2015,* p.30

has not always listened or responded well. Yet a continuing commitment to listen to those who have experienced abuse, and to reflect on what their experiences reveal about the life and purpose of the Church, is vital for human flourishing. The profound and long term trauma of abuse distorts the image of God and causes deep pain and suffering. The group who prepared the 2006 *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain* report found helpful a particular image from one person who has experienced abuse of how the experience of abuse continues to impact upon daily life:

> "One of the ships bombed and sunk in Pearl Harbour was left as a war grave. From the surface, you cannot see it is there. But from time to time oil from the ship 'bubbles to the surface' as a haunting reminder of pain, devastation and death experienced over half a century before. The group reflected on how sexual abuse can cause devastating damage in the life of a survivor. Some live with the ongoing pain daily. For others the pain remains hidden deep inside but bubbles to the surface from time to time. No one who suffers abuse can predict or prevent the 'bubbles'. Dealing with them can be very hard – for the survivor and for those around them. But they can't forever be ignored or denied if healing is to come."[102]

6.2.2. Accounts of abuse are disturbing and difficult to hear because of the depth of harm, betrayal and trauma involved. This is compounded when the Church has been the context in which the abuse has happened, or when it has responded in ways which have reinforced damaging dynamics. Reflecting on what the Church might have to offer in this context, the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England said:

> "What is the good news that the church has to offer in this context? It is not that it has the ability to dispense some kind of miracle cure that can short-circuit the normal, painful, slow process of healing. This is not to deny the power of God to do things that exceed our understanding, but Christian leaders and groups that think they can deliver people from the effects of being abused may well end up compounding them, not least by blaming the victim who fails to respond to their misguided treatment. Yet the church does have confidence that in Christ, evil is overcome, light shines in the darkness and death has been robbed of the final word."[103]

It is confidence in the salvific love and actions of God in Jesus Christ which gives Christians the strength, courage and patience to be alongside people who have

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102 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*

103 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2016, *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church: A Theological Resource for the Local Church,* Church House Publishing: London, p.21

experienced abuse and which empowers them to work at enabling churches to be safer places where people who have experienced abuse can truly feel welcomed.

6.2.3. Safeguarding work not only seeks to embed practices which help the church to be safer places for those who are at risk, but also to encourage all members of the Methodist Church to have a greater understanding of the nature of abuse itself, to reflect on their own responses to those who have experienced abuse, and to pay attention to the words and concepts they employ and the attitudes they display when responding to people who have experienced abuse.

6.2.4. Although language generally has shifted from identifying those who have experienced abuse as 'victims', characteristics associated with victimhood persist in unhelpful ways. Choice of language, for example associating people who have experienced abuse with terms such as 'broken, damaged and vulnerable' can replicate stereotypes and pre-defined roles as well as reflecting something of the reality of experience. It has proved vital in responding well to people who have experienced abuse to try not to make assumptions about any particular person's experience of abuse and its impact on them. Every person's experience and their response to abuse will be different, and people who have experienced abuse will have different needs, expectations and hopes.

6.2.5. The concept of victimhood can position the person who has experienced abuse in the role of the one who is 'innocent'. This can, often subconsciously, carry distorted notions of purity and 'goodness'. Instead, people who have experienced abuse are, like all people, complex and flawed human beings. Pastoral responses can be impaired when the person who has experienced abuse fails to live up to the idealised image of an innocent victim and the Church fails to respond well to the actual, complex and broken, person in profound pain. Accepting people who have experienced abuse as they are is vital. This is linked to the question of how well the Church responds to the messiness, contradictions, paradoxes, challenges and joys of all human life (see 5 above). A high degree of self-awareness is required if people who have experienced abuse are to be deeply listened to and truly welcomed in the Church, particularly an awareness of the tendency to judge the someone according to particular expectations or to project onto them one's own difficult or uncomfortable feelings which might arise.

6.2.6. Since the churches were challenged, nearly two decades ago, to respond to people who have experienced abuse with compassion and courage,[104] much work has been done, not least through the way in which safeguarding has been

104 CTBI, 2002, *Time for Action*

implemented, to make churches not only safer places for people who have experienced abuse but also ones where they are welcome. Sadly, there is still a long way to go. In 2002, the churches were encouraged to act:

> "If sexual abuse is not new, neither is the desolation of those who have experienced their abuse in a church context, or sought help from a church, which has failed them. Too often, abuse has not been clearly and unequivocally named as sinful betrayal. We cannot begin to imagine the burden of pain and suffering which has shamed unnumbered victims into silence. But in our time, there are survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse who want to claim their right to justice. They are coming out of the shadows of isolation and despair, and are speaking with righteous anger while looking for a new dawn. Their voices challenge the Church, as the body of Christ in the world, to respond with compassion and courage. Now is the time for action."[105]

This continues to be the case today.

6.3. All Are Welcome

6.3.1. The idea that 'all are welcome' warrants some examination, not least because some have not experienced the Church in this way and the ways in which they have felt unwelcome or been marginalised have themselves been abusive. Whilst 'all are welcome' makes for an aspirational idea, it requires commitment and hard work if it is to become even a partial reality. Responding to accounts of sexual abuse reveals some of the challenges in seeking to make that vision a reality, even in part. A community without boundaries can be unsafe, particularly for children, young people and vulnerable adults.

6.3.2. 'All are welcome' encapsulates something of the concept of an eternal invitation to respond to the never ending grace of God which runs through Methodism. This has often been expressed in the 'four alls':

All people need to be saved.
All people can be saved.
All people can know they are saved.
All people can be saved to the uttermost

Unfortunately the phrase 'all are welcome' can be used in ways which fail to

105 CTBI, 2002, *Time For Action,* p.9

recognise that it is a statement about God's love and grace. The experience of abuse raises questions about whether everyone has a right to go anywhere or to belong to any community they choose, and about whether it is possible for one Local Church to be able to offer hospitality to everyone. Some Local Churches have found that in order to be a safe place of welcome for some people, they have needed to have boundaries which exclude others. Boundaries help to ensure that people are safe, which sometimes means restricting those who enter a particular space. A realistic recognition of what one church community is able to offer in terms of welcome must not be confused with the need to ensure that practices, attitudes and customs which exclude particular groups of people are challenged and addressed. For example, a particular Christian community might commit itself to building community through working with people who have experienced abuse, and in doing so recognises not only that it does not have the resources required to welcome people who have abused as well, but also that it can be deeply destructive for people who have experienced abuse to be in the same space as people who have abused. This is different from a Christian community failing to pay attention to the ways in which its customs, practices and ways of being lead people of particular ethnicities, sexualities or socio-economic groups to feel unwelcome or marginalised.

6.3.3. It is important to recognise that welcome for all does not mean that there are no boundaries to the Church's inclusivity and hospitality. A theology of hospitality involves establishing the boundaries to this hospitality for the prevention of harm as the Church seeks to be a safe space for those who participate in its communal life, and in order to enable the Church to remain faithful to its identity as the Body of Christ. It acknowledges the need for discipline for those who damage the integrity of the Church and obstruct human flourishing, holding in tension the desire for safer spaces in our churches and the Church's mission to welcome those who may pose a risk but have expressed a commitment to change. Those belong to the Body of Christ do not choose how they belong, nor do they have a right to go anywhere they choose. Belonging to a community means that we are part of a people with different needs and vulnerabilities, and it is important to recognise where the activities of some people are appropriately limited for the sake of the well-being of others.

6.3.4. The inclusion of those with proven and alleged sex and safeguarding offences in the life of the Church, or those who are otherwise deemed to be a safeguarding risk, may put children and vulnerable adults at risk, and may also cause further pain and offence to those who have experienced abuse and continue to live with physical, spiritual and emotional pain. This is a particular example of the challenge of how the Body of Christ might include all when the presence of some in any community may make others feel less safe, fearful, not understood, or

themselves unwelcome. Yet part of the Church's witness to the God who through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus reconciles all things to Godself is its offer of hospitality to both those who have experienced abuse and those who have abused. This is a powerful, costly and difficult witness, demanding prayerful discernment. All church communities have limited resources and choices about how to use them. This includes discerning who it is able to make a commitment to in terms of welcome and care.

6.3.5. Some members of the Methodist Church continue to find its position that some offenders cannot hold particular offices in the Church challenging, especially when not all of those offices involve contact with children, young people or vulnerable adults. It is, however, important to note that no one has a 'right' to hold office in the Church and that there are always other ways for gifts to be exercised and developed. It is unhelpful to think of offices in the Church in this way or to link understandings of membership of the Methodist Church with the idea of eligibility for office. Rights language is inappropriate for roles within the Church and undermines the understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God. Whether someone is called to a particular ministry or office in the life of the Church is always a matter of discernment, not only for the individual but also for the wider Church. The welfare and well-being of any individual cannot be dependent on them holding a particular office within the Church, and any individual's ministry can be expressed in different ways.

6.4. Reconsideration of Pastoral Care

6.4.1. The final aspect of welcoming people who have experienced abuse which warrants some attention is the concept of pastoral care. The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England have identified that the church's primary pastoral task "is to listen with care and sensitivity to those who have been abused, supporting them on the road towards healing and in taking steps towards the achievement of temporal justice."[106] There is no doubt that deep listening to people who have experienced abuse is a fundamental part of the Church's pastoral response:

> "Perhaps the most important thing that, as Christians, we can do – perhaps what we most hope for as a consequence of this Report – is to listen, so that the voice of survivors will be heard. As we listen so we give value, worth and respect to the one who speaks, to the one for whom the abuse has denied each of these things and so much more."[107]

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106 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2017, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse,* Church House Publishing: London, p.13

107 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*

Listening and being willing to accompany a person who has experienced abuse as they deal with its profound effects is invaluable. Further damage has often been experienced if they have been inappropriately encouraged to move through a process of healing or reach a place of acceptance, often because of the needs or discomfort of those who are hearing shocking accounts of trauma and betrayal. Any healing takes time, and for some it is only ever partial.

6.4.2. There is a difference, though, between not seeking to 'solve' everything or move someone towards some kind of healing or resolution, and recognising that some action by the wider church community is needed if justice is also to be part of our response. As one person who experienced childhood abuse comments:

> "I told the bishop about the priest who sexually abused me when I was an altar boy. The bishop offered me counselling: what I wanted him to do was something about the priest who still has altar boys."[108]

6.4.3. The dominant and inherited model of pastoral care in the Methodist Church is that of visiting the sick and looking after those in need. Yet, the way in which the Church has often failed to respond well to people who have experienced abuse indicates that some examination of its understanding of pastoral care and how it is exercised is required. It has already been acknowledged that holding one another to account and challenging harmful behaviour (to the self or others) is part of what it means to watch over one another in love, yet the idea of challenging someone for the sake of the well-being of everyone is not yet embedded in Methodist practice and it can make many feel uncomfortable. Sometimes being pastoral involves being prepared to challenge people, structures or patterns of relating, and being willing to disrupt the status quo in order to explore difficult issues. This includes being willing to look at how power is exercised when pastoral care is undertaken and whose voices and experiences are given priority.

6.4.4. Taking on a role in pastoral care is demanding, not least in the degree of self-awareness and self-examination that is required. Included in this is consideration of where and how power is exercised when undertaking the role. For example, it can be in deciding whom to visit or whom not to visit, or to whom we make ourselves available; in the way in which we hear things and react (or not); by the way we cope with unusual pastoral disclosures (or not); by what we choose to reveal of ourselves; and by how we exercise confidentiality. As has been noted:

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108 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2016, *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church: A Theological Resource for the Local Church,* Church House Publishing: London, p.24

> "So whom we choose to listen to and how we listen to people is important to how church is. It is also important to how church should be and how we can shape the ministry of the church consciously. Ministry in the church may then look somewhat different if we took survivors issues seriously."[109]

6.4.5. Examination of the model of pastoral care being used in the Methodist Church raises questions about how ministers, particularly, are equipped to challenge inappropriate behaviour and ensure that appropriate boundaries are maintained. This may require skills different from those needed to listen well to difficult experiences, but both are necessary. Furthermore, the *Past Cases Review* highlighted that:

> "The core of safeguarding relies on an understanding and awareness of the dynamics between power and vulnerability in relationships. This is not a specialist activity that is only undertaken by those with qualifications or experience in the safeguarding field. Pastoral relationships which are core to the mission of the church will always include these dynamics. To practise safely ministers and others engaged in pastoral work, community work or counselling need to reflect on these issues and their boundaries in these relationships. There is a spectrum of risk and unless this is understood, patterns and early signs of unsafe practice will not be picked up in the person themselves or in others. It is evident from many responses that this perspective has not been the dominant one. There are far more signs that indicate that many ministers view safeguarding as an activity that should be passed on to specialist workers and/or is about ticking the boxes to make sure processes such as employment checks have been completed."[110]

6.4.6. A greater awareness of abuse and its devastating impact is vital if the Methodist Church is to be a place of where those who have experienced abuse feel welcome, as illustrated by a person who experienced abuse in childhood:

> "I feel frustrated by the Church's general lack of knowledge and understanding about the general subject of abuse. I want to see our Christian children made aware of how to protect themselves and how to shout for help if they are abused. I believe this should be addressed through the Church – if we really do care about our children."[111]

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109 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.21
110 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope: The report on the past cases review 2013-2015*, p.21
111 CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell,* p.29.

The *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain* report asks how our pastoral care responses would be different if there was a greater acknowledgment of the existence of abuse within church communities and if the experience of people who have experienced abuse was taken seriously. It suggests that:

- we would not be frightened or embarrassed to discuss sexual abuse;
- we would have a model of caring for each other in which any emotional/ spiritual issues could be freely shared, where someone could express their vulnerabilities, without feeling judged in the process;
- when a person who has experienced abuse chooses to speak about their experience within the church community, they would receive a response that enables rather than disables and whichhelps them to feel 'heard' and accepted;
- we would foster awareness of wider resources available to support survivors, both in the local community and nationally, and be concerned to make such information visible and accessible to all.[112]

It is suggested that the following could also be added to this list:

- we would take opportunities to point to how good pastoral carers know the limits of their competence and expertise and learn when to refer someone;
- we would pray for people who have experienced abuse and preach about the misuse of power

6.4.7. The relationship of pastoral care to justice is a further area for greater attention. Although they are intrinsically linked, the relationship between care and justice is not always embedded in Church structures. The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England describes the relationship between care and justice by drawing on the image of the whole world rejoicing found in Psalm 96:13:

> "God's judgement is good news because it promises the restoration of justice in human relations, without which there can be no peace. Seeking justice is not the opposite of love: it means striving for the right relationships within which human beings can flourish. … the church should never separate the ministry of God's word of mercy and judgement from striving for justice in human relationships."[113]

112 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.20
113 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2016, *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church: A Theological Resource for the Local Church,* Church House Publishing: London, pp.27-28

Actively working for justice in human relationships, which may involve challenging behaviour, disrupting established patterns of relating, and changing customs and practices, is an essential part of pastoral care.

6.5. The way in which a Church responds to those who have experienced abuse testifies to the nature of the community and conveys something about God. Whilst acknowledging the flawed nature of the church as a human community, it is appropriate for local churches to reflect on whether their common life witnesses to the love and transforming grace of God and enables human flourishing. Through the presence of God's Spirit and hope in Jesus Christ, healing, transformation, and new patterns of relating are possible. Christians are enabled to face the darkness and desolation of human experience and human brokenness, including their own, knowing that God is with us. As part of its response to God and participation in God's mission, the Methodist Church is committed to embracing safeguarding as part of its pastoral care. Local Churches are encouraged to examine their customs and practices regarding pastoral care and to reflect on whether any changes are needed so that they better enable the flourishing of all members of the Local Church and its wider community and particularly those who have experienced abuse.

7. Grappling with power

7.1. The abuse of power is a principal dimension of any kind of abuse. All abuse relies on the misuse of imbalances of power and churches can be communities where such imbalances are evident and also, paradoxically, hard to define. It is a common misunderstanding that power *per se* is harmful, resulting in a mistrust of those in positions of leadership and authority even if they are exercising power responsibly. Human life and human community depend on the responsible exercise of power by those entrusted with it. Power and authority are not destructive in themselves (ie they are not intrinsically 'bad'), so it does not mean that those with power and authority should not be listened to, but awareness of where power resides and how it is exercised is essential in any healthy community. Within the Methodist Church there is a reluctance to invest too much power in one individual (evident through its continual preference for a short term presidency and the 'six year rule' for example), meaning that how power is used in decision making is sometimes less easy to identify.

7.2. The Church as a human organisation and the Body of Christ has means by which it organises itself and enables the community to live and work together. It therefore has structures of oversight, care and governance which involve the use of power. Power is not fixed or static or something that some possess and others are without. The distribution of power constantly changes, and it is important to

regularly identify actual and potential imbalances in power dynamics and be aware of the different kinds of power that we (and others) have. Too often people either take up too much power and ignore institutional power and policies, or they lay it down too quickly or fail to acknowledge when have it; thus making choices about not using it, to the detriment of all.

7.3. People may have power because of their role, personality, expertise, age, gender, socio-economic status and many other factors. Power can be given, expressed and conferred through many different means, for example: through what is said from the pulpit, in how meetings are constituted and conducted, in how decisions are taken, or when people are trusted with intimate secrets. Power can be used to enable or to destroy (such as when those who have experienced its misuse have been harmed or silenced), through action or failure to recognise the power that one has. The Methodist Conference has noted that churches need to talk about "difficult issues" of who has power:

> "All within the Church have power, in the sense of being able to affect each other. The effects which some people's actions have, can, however, be more significant than those of others. This can be related to their status within the community, the office they hold, the length of time they have been associated with the Church, or because of individual charisma. Power can be expressed and embodied in particular words and actions, or it can be exercised 'non-actively', through an atmosphere which supports, or which silences or stifles. There is the power of the 'majority' in shaping the ongoing life of the Church. There may be the power of the 'minority' when particular strong voices persuade a number of others to undertake a course of action."[114]

The key question is whether power is being exercised responsibly, wisely and lovingly.

7.4. Honesty is required about how power is used and misused within the Church. When power is held and deployed without awareness of its temptations and potential misuse then it is dangerous. Similarly, when people do not recognise the power that they have then they may be unaware of the impact of their behaviour on others. All members of the Methodist Church are encouraged to reflect on the different kinds of power they may hold in different situations, groups and contexts. It has been acknowledged that the Church is often reluctant to discuss power, but when abuse occurs it is often questions about power which need to

114 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.48

be asked.[115] The *Past Cases Review* noted that Local Churches will not become really safe places until "the understanding of safeguarding, and abuse of power in relationships, is understood by the whole congregation."[116]

7.5. In the Methodist Church, much decision-making power is carried through the councils of the Church, comprising of lay and ordained, with a particular leadership role given structurally (but not exclusively) to presbyters. Many individuals also hold specific positions of responsibility, bringing with them the power of leadership and influence. It is important to recognise the power given to the ordained, both structurally and because of their representative role, but this also needs to be examined alongside other spheres of power. In all of these places, power can be used to energise and enable, or to dominate and overrule. Through giving more attention to the dynamics of power present in their particular context, Local Churches can better ensure that power is used to create a safer community in which the love and grace of God may be seen and experienced by people who have experienced abuse. This includes paying attention to the complexities of different cultures' distribution of, assumptions about and attitudes to power. For example, assumptions about the role, behaviour, and authority of the ordained may different in different cultural communities.

7.6. Questions about the use of power particularly apply to all who hold any office in the Church and the safeguarding procedures form part of the process of discernment before an office is conferred. When the Church confers office it confers power, authority and responsibility: both actual power in a specific area and the symbolic and representative power that accompanies any office. The holding of an office within the Church signals that a person is trustworthy and will exercise power responsibly. In conferring an office the Church is understood as indicating that this is a person to be trusted thus giving a particular kind of power. This is the case for any office, regardless of the nature of the work involved. All offices within the Church have a public profile, convey a level of authority and have some representative aspect. This is not just about what the particular office is for but how people are seen, for example the giver of notices might be perceived as the person having power because they stand at the front of the church and address the congregation.

7.7. There is an inherent power in being ordained. Ministers of the Church have a representative role, not just within the Church but in relation to God. Their words and actions carry a different kind of authority within and beyond a particular

115 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.47
116 The Methodist Conference, 2015, *Courage, Cost and Hope: The report on the past cases review 2013-2015*, p.34

Church community, and they are often perceived to have spiritual meaning. The spiritual authority which ministers are given, as well as the other forms of power they have, increases the potential for all forms of abuse and especially for spiritual abuse. It is therefore essential for all ministers to have opportunities (for example through supervision) to consider the power and potential power they have in different contexts and to engage in robust reflection on how such power is exercised.

7.8. This also applies to all who speak or act (or are perceived as speaking or acting) in the name of the Church, and particularly to local preachers and worship leaders. All Christians are encouraged to consider the issues of power involved in their engagement in church life and participation in the Church's witness, and especially to reflect on how they speak about and represent the power of God. As described in section 4.4, the language and images we use of God are linked to our understanding of the kind of power that God has. This is further reflected in the actions of Christians and the ways of relating within Christian communities. The kind of power represented in the Church's words, symbols and relationships is therefore vital as it reveals what the Church thinks about God. The images of power which are used in preaching, prayer, worship and the exercise of pastoral care, for example, may unintentionally encourage or radically challenge abuse:

> "If we use language of God as all powerful, as radically different from human beings and separate, as holy and majestic and above the world, without saying anything about God as intimate, involved, waiting for creation, and inviting human beings into relationship, we may also glorify those people who claim to be powerful, who then understand power in a limited way and use it to dominate others or manipulate them. The way we are to understand God's power is through the costly self-giving love shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This, then, will also be the model of power properly exercised by human beings. God's power cannot be conceived as coercive domination."[117]

7.9. A person who has experienced abuse notes that:

> "How power is reflected in the songs and hymns of the church is therefore very important to survivors of sexual abuse. One of my favourite hymns is *Tell out my soul* which is based on Mary's song, *The Magnificat*. It is a powerful song, sung by Mary, a powerless woman. Believing that God's purposes could be achieved through her she became a woman of power. I believe

117 See also the Report *The Nature of Oversight (Conference Agenda 2005),* paragraphs 1.14.6 and section 4.

> God still calls women from the margins and empowers them to be agents of transformation in today's world. In the same way God calls and empowers survivors…".[118]

8. Forgiveness and change

8.1. Forgiveness, repentance and new life in Jesus Christ are central to the gospel. Christianity proclaims that God can transform people's lives. It proclaims a new start, with confidence in Christ, inviting participation in the Christian community where all contribute to its witness through seeking to serve God alongside other disciples. God's unceasing offer of new life and the assurance that, by God's grace, we are justified, set in right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, is at the heart of Christian faith and discipleship.

8.2. The subject of forgiveness has become a complex and contentious area of theology in the light of the experience of many people who have experienced abuse who have been told to forgive their abusers. That, in itself, has been found to be coercive and abusive, compounded when people who have experienced abuse have been told to do so for their own well-being.[119] A demand to forgive, including when it comes from within themselves, can seem to be a test of their Christian faith and discipleship. People who have experienced abuse have often also been told to forgive, or expect themselves to be able to forgive, as if forgiveness was an instant event. When it is not possible to do this, then guilt and shame are created or reinforced. For a person who has experienced abuse, reflection on the meaning of forgiveness can only be part of a process of healing which is about their letting go of what has been done to them so that the abuser no longer has power over them. For some, the point of healing and restoration never comes at all, or, if it does, it seems precarious:

> "Deep, vicious damage done to people, physical or psychological, often the two bound together as in torture as well as sexual or domestic abuse, has a very long timescale for recovery. Indeed, one of the amazing things is that recovery does, in many cases happen: human beings have an astonishing capacity for resilience in the face of the most terrible trauma."[120]

8.3. There are many differences within the Church as to what forgiveness means, and churches continue to wrestle with how they should speak of forgiveness and how

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118 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, p.8
119 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, pp.24-25
120 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2016, *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church: A Theological Resource for the Local Church,* Church House Publishing: London, p.20

forgiveness should be demonstrated within their structures and processes. There is work to be done in exploring what forgiveness means as experienced by those who have been abused as some simplistic understandings, or misunderstandings, of forgiveness have prompted actions or statements that have caused them further harm and damage, as well as providing an unrealistic view of human relationships and Christian discipleship. [121] Even though these were identified and explored in a Conference report twenty years ago,[122] these misunderstandings persist. They tend "to be simplistic concerning the ongoing mystery of sin, to neglect the social character of our sinning (which is against our neighbour as well as against God) and to be romantic about actual Christian discipleship and its struggles".[123]

8.4. Thus there are three common misunderstandings that should be avoided:

- Firstly, that forgiveness involves forgetting behaviour that has caused harm so that past sin and behaviour is blotted out and the forgiven sinner can start again with a blank sheet of paper.[124] Language of renewal, or a new start, or of being washed clean, is problematic if it implies that the past has been dismissed. Forgiveness does not negate the consequences of the past: the risen Christ still bears the scars of the cross; in the Hebrew Scriptures Israel's sins are constantly rehearsed for all to remember. Forgiveness does not change what has happened as if it never happened, but it does enable people to live in a new relationship to the consequences of the past.

- Secondly, that forgiveness means the cancelling of debts and obligations. Paradoxically, forgiveness may well mean that the person who has abused has a greater sense of obligation than before.[125] Thus forgiveness should encourage the person who has abused to take responsibility for the damage caused, not least by recognising the profound harm and betrayal of trust involved, as well as by seeking to change their behaviour to ensure that it never happens again. Repentance includes accepting responsibility for past actions and making oneself accountable to others, which includes behaving in ways which enable others to be safe. It is always the responsibility of those who abuse to change their behaviour; and changed behaviour, not just intention, is important. This includes the acceptance that there may need to

121 The Methodist Conference, 2000, *The Church and Sex Offenders,* p.13 (section 4a).
122 The Methodist Conference, 2000, *The Church and Sex Offenders*
123 The Methodist Conference, 2000, *The Church and Sex Offenders*, section 4a
124 The Methodist Conference, 2000, *The Church and Sex Offenders*, section 4a
125 As with Zaccheus who, after encountering Christ, offered to repay four times those he had swindled, even though the law only required it to be twofold.

be ongoing boundaries around the ways in which they participate in church life. This is about more than risk assessment, vital though that is, but also about what particular ways of engagement might represent, and the ways in which they might impede the creation of safer space and the witness of the church.

- Thirdly, that a person who has abused should be treated as wholly reformed and good. This notion may cause significant further harm to those who have suffered the abuse and provides an unrealistic view of human relationships and Christian discipleship. Forgiveness does not mean that previous patterns of behaviour have been left behind, nor does it remove any risk of reoffending. For some people particular behaviours are pathological. Conversion does not stop people sinning, nor 'cure' abusive behaviour or the temptation to offend.[126] God's forgiveness, which involves acceptance and the hope of new life through the Holy Spirit, is also a call to a new life, radically different from the old. For those who have abused, a sanctified life includes understanding the ongoing impact of the abuse on the lives of others and a preparedness to limit the ways in which they participate in the life of the Church in order to enable others to feel safer and grow. The one forgiven takes responsibility for ensuring that life will be different, not least by avoiding situations which put themselves and others at risk.

8.5. Within church communities theological thinking about people changing has not always been robust or realistic enough. An over-emphasis on new life has often caused Churches to fail to give proper attention to how repentance is understood. Time and again patterns of abuse are repeated, despite hopes and assurances of change. Change is often gradual, hard, and bumpy, and it does not mean that weaknesses and vulnerabilities disappear. Repentance involves ownership of past actions, acknowledgement and understanding of the harm caused and its ongoing effect on others, and the recognition that there are consequences to all actions which have to be faced. The sign that repentance and forgiveness have happened is then seen in the fruit of change, which can include accepting the kind of disciplined framework that supports change.

8.6. Christians believe that God can change lives, but cannot always know or judge if that has happened. Statistics suggest that victims suffer multiple attacks before ever seeking help and that time and again patterns of abuse are repeated, despite hopes and assurances of change.[127] Change in the context of abuse has

126 The Methodist Conference, 2000, *The Church and Sex Offenders,* section 4b
127 The Methodist Conference, 2005, *Domestic Abuse*, 2.22

been defined as change in behaviour in a community context which emphasised discipline and accountability.[128] At the same time, the message has been reinforced that churches and Christians should seek to protect the vulnerable as if not expecting change in those who would hurt them.

8.7. Whilst it is for God to forgive, the Church must discern how healthy relationships within the Church may best be enabled for the sake of its witness and for the flourishing of all. Trust is a key element in healthy relationships. When trust has been broken (which is always the case when there has been abusive behaviour) there needs to be some evidence not only that the person intends not to cause harm but that they are indeed trustworthy. The responsibility to change behaviour lies with the person who has abused. Indeed, the Methodist Church has maintained that the person who has abused another is most likely to demonstrate their awareness of the harm caused and their own ongoing brokenness and need of God "in an ongoing response in penitence" and acceptance of "a firm code of conduct" for their new life in the congregation and in Christ.[129] Through God's grace there is the possibility of change for all, but for trust to be re-established the change has to be demonstrated in the context of a community that exercises discipline and demands accountability. Safeguarding procedures help to protect the vulnerable, signal that the Church is a place of safety and justice, and maintain the integrity of its witness.

8.8. Forgiveness is also sometimes spoken of in terms which give inappropriate emphasis to the relationship between two individuals, which raises questions of what can be forgiven and by whom. Perspectives from different positions are likely to be so different that the word 'forgiveness' might refer to many different experiences. The idea that forgiveness between two individuals is always possible is unhelpful at best and profoundly damaging in contexts of abuse. The forgiveness which human beings are called to offer is not the same thing as the forgiveness which God offers. When the Church speaks of reconciliation, it is reconciliation with God which leads to human flourishing. Reconciliation between individuals may be an aspect of this, but it is not always possible or desirable. God forgives in order to release and bring wholeness. Any Christian understanding of forgiveness has to recognise what makes for wholeness and what does not in different contexts.

8.9. Forgiveness is a gift of God. It is not a right and it cannot be earned. We cannot, therefore, ever expect another to forgive. Many find the well-known text from

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128 The Methodist Conference, 2000, *The Church and Sex Offenders*
129 The Methodist Conference, 2000, *The Church and Sex Offenders,* p.3.

Matthew's gospel particularly challenging in this respect ("For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" - Matthew 6:14-15). A person who has experienced abuse who is a licensed minister in the Church of England said that every time she leads the congregation in saying it "I know I am telling a lie".[130] It is important to understand this text is primarily about God's mercy and not human action. God's forgiveness is not conditional on our actions, but rather that, in response to God's forgiveness, it is possible for us to be forgiving. For those who have been 'sinned against', being open to the possibility of transformation, healing and forgiveness being offered, primarily requires trust in the grace of God. Healing flows from the acceptance of, and the allowing of, the possibility that the forgiveness of God extends to, and may be taken into the life of anyone, be they a person who has experienced abuse or a person who has abused. It also means that healing in its fullest and deepest sense can be available for the person who has experienced abuse, even though they may never be able to forgive their abuser (and they should never be condemned or made to feel guilty for this). Whether or not the person is able to forgive is secondary to the willingness to trust in the healing and liberating process of God's love at work in their lives. This is a continual process: "part of the issue here is the highly misleading idea that human forgiveness, above all in the face of sin that inflicts deep trauma, is something that can simply be *done* once and for all".[131] There is now greater understanding of the dynamic of forgiveness in contexts of abuse and recognition that forgiveness is not something which should be expected from the person who has experienced abuse.

8.10. It is also important to acknowledge that the particular text occurs in the context of a communal prayer (the Lord's Prayer):

> "Christ prays for his members what they cannot pray for themselves, so the first and last question for believers is whether they will let themselves be drawn into his intercession for the whole church and the whole world; for the prayer of the Christian is always participation in the prayer of the whole church in Christ and not an autonomous, individual act. The point is not that each individual must be completely and perfectly forgiving, but that the church must be a community committed to forgiveness and reconciliation as inherent aspects of the way of discipleship."[132]

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130 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2017, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse,* Church House Publishing: London, p.88

131 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2017, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse,* Church House Publishing: London, p.90

132 The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, 2017, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse,* Church House Publishing: London, pp.90-91

8.11. Speaking of reconciliation in the context of abuse requires extreme caution for the potential for further damage is significant, and sometimes there is an immediate physical or emotional risk. Again, it is reconciliation with God which is primary in Christian understanding. Reconciliation is a part of a process of liberation and healing. It is hard to see how a person who has experienced abuse staying in relationship with the person who has abused them can be in any respect life-giving, and there may be continuing danger. Focussing on forgiveness and reconciliation in relation to abuse can not only be further harmful and a distortion of our understanding of these concepts, but also can deflect from responding well to people who have experienced abuse.

8.12. The Methodist Church has been clear about many of these principles in its understanding of forgiveness for over twenty years,[133] but they still do not match what is often said in practice, in relationships and from the pulpit. There are therefore persisting questions about why there continues to be a gap between our thinking and our practice in many places, and there is a significant task to be done in communicating and teaching about forgiveness and in changing Methodist customs and practice in this area.

9. Concluding comments and any resolutions

9.1. The Methodist Church identifies safeguarding as a fundamental part of its response to God and sharing in God's mission in the world. It is the Methodist Church's intention to value every human being as part of God's creation and it seeks to embody the love and grace of God in its structures and ways of relating. Safeguarding is one way in which members of the church demonstrate their care for each other and all whom they encounter. Safeguarding procedures help to protect the vulnerable, signal that the church seeks to be a place which enables human flourishing, and help to maintain the integrity of its witness. Rather than being in tension with understandings of holiness and the transforming expansiveness of God's grace, safeguarding helps the church to pay attention to what these mean for its life and worship.

9.2. Building a community of love and grace is hard work. It can also be deeply disruptive as it involves honesty about the human condition, the exercise of mutual accountability and personal responsibility, paying attention to difficult and deeply painful experiences, a preparedness to challenge and be challenged, and a willingness to change. It requires all members of the church to consider the power they have in different situations, to be aware of the language they use and images

133 See, for example, The Methodist Conference, 2000, *The Church and Sex Offenders.*

they rely on when talking about God, and to think about how familiar theological themes might be heard and interpreted by those who are vulnerable or who are experiencing, or have experienced, abuse.

9.3. It is not possible, in a report such as this, to cover all the topics which might have been explored, but it is hoped that all members of the Methodist Church will engage with its contents and continue to explore the issues and questions it raises. To help with this it is intended that some resources are produced and made available on the Methodist website, including: a *Reader's Guide* and video presentation; discussion guides for particular contexts (such as church councils, circuit leadership meetings, and local preachers' meetings for example); and a short resource to enable further reflection on forgiveness including some bible study amongst other things.

9.4. During the past few years, the Methodist Church has been seeking to implement the recommendations of its *Past Cases Review* in order to bring about the cultural change needed to fully understand what safeguarding means in every part of the life of the church. The report concluded by underlining that this is a challenge for everyone within the church, requiring courage, cost and hope.[134]

*****RESOLUTIONS**

27/1. The Conference adopts the report and commends it for study and reflection throughout the Connexion.

27/2. The Conference directs Church Councils, Local Preachers' Meetings, Circuit Meetings and District Policy Committees to consider the implications of the report for their work and practice.

27/3. The Conference directs the Methodist Council in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee to produce the resources described in paragraph 9.3, consider what other resources might be needed, and develop the theological content of the Advanced safeguarding training in the light of this report.

27/4. The Conference directs the Ministries Committee to ensure that appropriate engagement with this report is included in the training pathways for presbyters, deacons, local preachers, and worship leaders.

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134 *Courage, Cost and Hope: The report on the past cases review* 2013-2015, 2015, p.40