

Preliminary Comment

This Irish Methodist theology of Safeguarding is in substance drawn from a 2021 British Methodist Church document. Along with editorial changes, there have been other changes to the text so that the document speaks with an Irish Methodist voice and to the Irish context. The document as presented does not show by quotation the direct use of the British Methodist text but the extensive use of the material is acknowledged here. We are indebted to the generosity of the British Methodist Church in making the development of this Irish Methodist understanding possible. The document below is the understanding of the Methodist Church in Ireland.

Theology of Safeguarding

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Methodist Church in Ireland seeks to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live wholeheartedly as followers of Jesus for the transformation of the world. Our witness is in our variety of communities and that witness includes the welcome we offer to all. It is the Methodist Church in Ireland's intention to value every human being as being made in the image of God and as a place where the transformational love of God is embodied. As part of this, we seek 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). We are therefore committed to safeguarding as an integral part of our life and mission.
- 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 in Ireland has undertaken to embody best practice in safeguarding. Since the early 1990s we have been developing and increasing our 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 in Ireland affirms this and 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 our witness and faithful discipleship.

- 1.3. Safeguarding is integral to the mission of the Methodist Church in Ireland and a part of our 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 in Ireland, and that help the Methodist people to create safer spaces for human flourishing. It comes in the context of the recommendations of the Methodist Church in Ireland's Past Cases Review of 2023.
- 1.4. 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 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 in section seven and forgiveness in section eight.

2. Theological roots

- 2.1. Safeguarding is a fundamental part of the Church's response to God. God's outgoing all-embracing love for the whole of creation (God's mission) began with the act of creation itself. 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. 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 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 in Ireland seeks to embody its affirmation of the dignity and worth of all people in our 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. It can be seen in different forms of discrimination, and in the determination of some to dominate over others and determine their lives. 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) are more likely to be abused. They may be less likely to identify abuse themselves or report it. Some 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.
- 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 sisters and brothers in Christ. From our beginnings, our 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. Safeguarding is therefore an intrinsic part of how members of the Church demonstrate their care for each other and all whom they encounter.

The Church also responds to the call through Christ for justice, and it does so in various ways. We may not 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 safer 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.

- 2.5. In our structures and ways of relating the Methodist Church in Ireland seeks to demonstrate its concern to protect everyone. 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.
- 2.6. Between 2021 and 2023 the Methodist Church in Ireland carried out a review of past safeguarding cases (the *Past Cases Review*), and one of the objectives was to learn lessons about any necessary changes or developments in order to ensure that safeguarding work within the our Church is of the highest possible standard. Substantial progress

has been made in implementing the fourteen recommendations.¹ We continue 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 our life.

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”.² 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.³

- 3.2. Abuse of any kind, “tears at the fabric of one’s soul”.⁴ 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”.⁵ Experiences of abuse affect self-esteem and many aspects of relationships, including trust and attitudes and responses to touch. Accounts of abuse submitted to various review processes 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.
- 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.⁶ A person who experienced adult sexual abuse writes:

¹ <https://irishmethodist.org/news/past-cases-review-june-2023>

² Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 1991, *The Courage to Tell*. CTBI: London

³ CTBI, 1991, *The Courage to Tell*, p.14

⁴ Dr Wess Stafford, survivor of abuse, quoted in the foreword of Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, SPCK: London

⁵ CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell*, p.26

⁶ 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

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.⁷

- 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 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.⁸

- 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.⁹

⁷ Miryam Clough, 2019, 'Keeping Secrets' in Fife and Gilo, 2019, *Letters to a Broken Church*, Ekklesia: London, p.11

⁸ CTBI, 2002, *Time for Action*, p.9

⁹ CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell*, p.27

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."¹⁰ That can include their relationship with God.

- 3.6. Although problems of coercion and control in the Church have existed for centuries,¹¹ 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.¹² 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:

... 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.¹³

- 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

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, SPCK: London, p.5

¹² 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

¹³ Dr Wess Stafford, survivor of abuse, quoted in the foreword of Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, SPCK: London

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.¹⁴

- 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.¹⁵
- 3.9. The Methodist Church in Ireland views abuse as sin in all its forms. 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. 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.
- 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.¹⁶ Every human being is in need of grace and our Church proclaims the grace of God which is freely given to all people through Jesus Christ. Grace is God's sovereign love and favour, freely given to undeserving and

¹⁴ Oakley, 2018, quoted in Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, SPCK: London, p.31

¹⁵ Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J, 2019, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, SPCK: London, pp.77-78

¹⁶ John Wesley: Sermon IX, The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption, para 6

hostile people, 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 in Ireland remembers that we, too, have cause to repent, seek forgiveness and take responsibility for past actions. 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. Our Church needs to recognise how we have, at times, contributed to the abuse and exploitation of vulnerable people, not least through our use of power, and to seek to change our patterns of behaviour accordingly. This is a demanding task and it requires the participation and commitment of the whole church community.
- 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 in Ireland has engaged in self-reflection and self-examination and will continue to do so.

4. Theological thinking and how it is used

- 4.1. The ways in which God is understood and spoken of impacts on human relationships. The Methodist Church in Ireland recognises that some 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. 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 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. We recognise 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 so reflects men's experiences and knowledge of God and ways of being in the world. Theologians such as 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.¹⁷ Since the mid-twentieth century many other 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 in Ireland has always embraced in its theological method,¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ It was usually where Wesley felt that Scripture was silent that experience took on a more constructive role.

¹⁷ 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

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ 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 experience, 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, 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. Our Church is beginning to pay attention to the experience and theological thinking of those who have experienced abuse. 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. 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. Questions we need to ask include:

- 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?
- 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 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 sometimes 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 the crucial theological resource.

Methodism bases its doctrines on the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures, which it acknowledges as the supreme rule of faith and practice. 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 can 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. 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. 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 in Ireland we acknowledge that there are different approaches to Scripture and various models of biblical interpretation. 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. 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 simply to take everything in the Bible at face value without such interpretative work.

4.4.3. 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.²⁰ 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.
- 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 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 'household codes' in Ephesians 5:22 - 6:9, Colossians 3:18 - 4:1 and 1 Peter 3:1-7 closely resemble codes for social behaviour from philosophies of the period when these texts were written and 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

²⁰ 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

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.

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.

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; this affects Christian belief about how human beings should relate to one another. If some of God's 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. Christianity has always maintained that God is beyond gender, but the traditional image of God as 'Father' is deeply embedded, given its use in Scripture and traditional Church practice. It is a normal expression in the life of the Church but 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. Theology which has thought of God in terms of paradigm and central images that are male has reinforced the subordination of women, despite that not being the intention.

- 4.5.3. Theology that has overemphasised hierarchical images of the relations between God and human beings can unhelpfully contribute to the idea that hierarchical models are appropriate for all relationships (i.e. where all relationships have some 'over' or responsible for others, the 'others' being in some sense 'subordinate'). We should acknowledge that this can play a role in shaping contexts in which patterns of grooming and abuse flourish. The Christian tradition has at times represented God in a way unhelpfully close to the authoritarian male - relating to creation by command and decree and demanding a response of servile obedience, though 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 while neglecting the breadth of other language and images of God may contribute to an outlook that also "glorifies" those people who are perceived to be powerful or are in positions of authority. This can result in a failure to always recognise where power lies and when it is being used to dominate others or manipulate them.
- 4.5.4. Much of our 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 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.
- 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.

- 4.6.2. The Methodist Church in Ireland believes that Jesus Christ suffered death and was raised again for us, so that we might live for him. We acknowledge 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; that he was a ransom for many, 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.
- 4.6.3. The language which we use about the cross is very important. 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 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.
- 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.²¹ Instead, they argue for greater emphasis on teaching which enables people to challenge all kinds of suffering.
- 4.6.7. 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. This can be countered to some extent by ensuring that language of the cross is located in the context of the Trinity in which the three persons of the Godhead are one. Our language is important.
- 4.6.8. 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

²¹ 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

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, which emerged 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 the context in which they are experienced may be very different. Alternative and sometimes damaging meanings and interpretations are possible. 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. 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'.

Christian hymns, prayers and rituals send out implicit messages, and these impact on relational dynamics and people's understandings of God, self and others. The relevance of gendered language to safeguarding is outlined in paragraph 4.4.5 and 4.5.2.

- 4.7.3. Symbols convey meaning and provoke reactions and are helpful in leading worship and conveying Christian truth but sometimes these reactions may be ones of pain or distress for some who have experienced abuse. When the language of love (particularly for Jesus) is associated with ideas of obedience, submission, or with touch, this can be very difficult for some because of past experience. We always need to be sensitive to potential interpretations of the symbolism used.
- 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, a person who experienced abuse from their father may well find the use of 'Father' for God as problematic,

despite this usage being clearly biblical (e.g. Matthew: 6:6), but if there is the constant and repeated use of this particular imagery when many other images are appropriate, then we are failing those in our community for whom this is not a helpful way to understand and relate to God. Survivors need space and freedom to explore language in worship, so it is 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.

- 4.7.5. 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'. We cannot require touch without permission or make it so hard to avoid such unwanted touch without having that avoidance pointed out for all to see and comment on.
- 4.7.6. 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, discover alternative ways in which the core meaning might be expressed and no longer be a cause of anxiety for some.
- 4.7.7. 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 challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour and to maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries.
- 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.

- 4.8.2. The Bible has been a liberating resource for some survivors of abuse who have found the biblical themes of release, healing and exodus especially important, particularly in the stories told about Jesus in the gospels. 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"²² 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.²³

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.

- 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. 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,

²² CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell*, p.11

²³ CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell*, p.32

and that is a reflection of the life of the times.

- 4.8.5. Phyllis Tribble 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. 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.²⁴
- 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. We 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 misuse power. In Christ we find the vulnerable, suffering God; the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.
- 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. The story of the cross does not end with crucifixion but resurrection. 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

²⁴ Crawford, A E, Womanist Christology and the Wesleyan Tradition. In: Black Theology: An International Journal, 2.2, 2004, p.219

Christ.

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

- 5.1. The culture of an organisation is a critical factor in ensuring that it is a safe organisation. 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.
- 5.2. Some within the church have difficulty reconciling the theology of forgiveness and redemption with safeguarding, which is critical to the issue of culture. 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.²⁵

- 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 of us have sung from early childhood that "Christian children all should be, mild, obedient, good as he...".²⁶ Similarly, a naïve adoption of the narratives of reconciliation, unity and discipleship as living 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 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 be 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.

²⁵ 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

²⁶ The words are found in *Once in Royal David's City* by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895)

- 5.4. 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. 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.
- 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; in this case it is so-called peace at the expense of justice.
- 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. 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. 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 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.²⁷
- 5.9. There are many reasons why inappropriate behaviour is not challenged, and some of these are identified below. It is important that the Methodist Church in Ireland further reflects 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 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

²⁷ 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

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. 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. People may 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 struggle to recognise that those who are their colleagues and friends – and have done good things – can also do harm.

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 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 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. 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 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). 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 in Ireland 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. 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 in Ireland 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 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.
 - 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.²⁸

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 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 in Ireland 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.

²⁸ 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

- 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 by pastoral visitors, clergy and others if people who have experienced abuse are to be deeply listened to and truly welcomed in the Church, particularly noting the tendency to judge others according to particular expectations or to project onto them one's own difficult or uncomfortable feelings which might arise.
- 6.2.6. Since the member churches of CTBI were challenged, nearly two decades ago, to respond to people who have experienced abuse with compassion and courage,²⁹ much work has been done, not least through the way in which safeguarding has been 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.³⁰

²⁹ CTBI, 2002, *Time for Action*

³⁰ CTBI, 2002, *Time For Action*, p.9

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 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. No one has a 'right' to hold leadership in the Church and there are always other ways for gifts to be exercised and developed. It is unhelpful to think of roles in the Church in this way or to link understandings of membership of our 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 leadership role in the life of a 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 has 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."³¹ 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 we can do 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. 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.
- 6.4.3. The dominant and inherited model of pastoral care in the Methodist Church in Ireland is that of visiting all and in particular 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,

³¹ 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

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. 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 more seriously.
- 6.4.5. Examination of the model of pastoral care being used in our 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. 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.
- 6.4.6. A greater awareness of abuse and its devastating impact is vital if the Methodist Church in Ireland can fully 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.³²

Our pastoral care responses would likely 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.

- 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 which helps 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;
- 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:

³² CTBI, 1999, *The Courage to Tell*, p.29.

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.³³

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 in Ireland is fully 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

³³ 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

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 Methodism there is a reluctance to invest too much power in one individual 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. 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 role 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.

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 in Ireland 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 be asked. 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.
- 7.5. In Methodism much decision-making power is carried through the councils of the church and circuit, comprising of lay and ordained, with a particular leadership role given structurally (but not exclusively) to ministers. 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. We listen to all; we don't seek our view to dominate; we seek to learn from the conversation and from others. This includes paying attention to the complexities of different cultures' distribution of, assumptions about and attitudes to power.
- 7.6. Questions about the use of power particularly apply to all who hold any leadership role in the Church and the safeguarding procedures form part of the process of discernment before a person is appointed. The holding of a role or appointment within the Church signals that a person is trustworthy and will exercise power responsibly. This is the case for any role, 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 role is for but how people are seen, for example the person reading the announcements 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' words and actions carry a different kind of authority within and beyond a particular 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 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, including local preachers and lay 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.
- 7.9. The hymn 'Tell out my soul' is based on Mary's song, The Magnificat. It is a powerful song, sung by Mary, a powerless woman. 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.

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. 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.³⁴

- 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 forgiveness should be demonstrated within their structures and processes. There is work to be done in exploring

³⁴ 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

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. Such 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.

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. 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.³⁵ 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 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

³⁵ 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.

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. 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 and this transformation impacts every aspect of a life. We are truly a new creation in Christ but we 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. Change in the context of abuse has been defined as change in behaviour in a community context which

emphasised discipline and accountability. 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 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. 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. 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 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). While

interpretations of this text vary, there is broad agreement that it identifies God as the source of forgiveness and how, in response to God's forgiveness, it is possible for us to be forgiving. It does not demand that those who have suffered abuse must be able to fully forgive their abuser in order to receive God's forgiveness themselves. 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. We do not limit the radical extent of God's transforming love in an individual's life that can result in someone forgiving another for the most horrific acts and betrayal. 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".³⁶ 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.³⁷

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ 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. In the context of abuse, speaking of reconciliation between individuals requires extreme caution. The potential for further damage is significant and sometimes there is an immediate physical or emotional risk. The Christian understanding of reconciliation begins with the restoration of 'right relationship' with God. While an outworking of reconciliation will include the desire to restore 'right relationship' between individuals, it does not follow that a continuing close relationship in the context of abuse is desirable. 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 a close relationship with the person who has abused them can be in any respect life-giving, and there may be continuing danger. Rather, in situations where a relationship has been disrupted by abuse, a 'right relationship' might mean a 'no contact' relationship, or a relationship with strict boundaries. Reconciliation in this context means creating the right circumstances for safety, healing and flourishing to occur. Simplistic understandings of 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.

9. Concluding comments and any resolutions

- 9.1. The Methodist Church in Ireland identifies safeguarding as a fundamental part of its response to God and sharing in God's mission in the world. It is our intention to value every human being made in the image of God and we seek to embody the love and grace of God in our 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 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 in Ireland will engage with its contents and continue to explore the issues and questions it raises.
- 9.4. The Methodist Church in Ireland is 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. This is a challenge for everyone within the church, so that we might be as safe a place as possible for all. This reflection on the theology of safeguarding is offered to assist us in understanding safeguarding as part of who we are as wholehearted followers of Jesus Christ.