

What's being done about the church?

(Making Church Safe) Sermon transcript, 13 November 2016

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Bible Readings: Luke 12:1-3 and Matthew 5:1-11

Pre-sermon DVD FIS chapter 4: care for little children, don't hurt them

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cK8VGOwu_wU&index=5&list=PLTj4KeEVy_pFD3QhiNDnphpYslSL083WLR

(chapter 4 of Faithfulness in Service, developed as a church wide resource with the assistance and talent of aboriginal and TSI Anglicans from around Australia.)

Introduction

Today, we're going to talk about a topic that is not easy. In the Australian church, including the Anglican church, there have been instances of abuse of power by leaders in parish communities and, sometimes, a failure to respond appropriately when leaders in the church have been told about that abuse.

Awareness of the Royal Commission and the movie 'Spotlight' have focussed attention on institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Parishioners have asked, "What is our church doing to respond to these abuses of power?" and many have also found the church and the gospel dismissed by people who aren't members of the church on the basis that churches are not safe places.

I'm going to focus on two things – what is the Anglican church doing to respond, and what can we do to create a safe church environment.

I want to be clear, I will not focus on particular cases of abuse. I will not make excuses for the church – there are none. Because this is an area I volunteer in I may state things pragmatically that you'd prefer I was more circumspect on. Some of the things I talk about, you may find distressing, you may feel depressed or angry; uncomfortable with what I say. I hope, by the end you will be willing to join in making our church a safe place.

Why did Steve ask me to talk about this?

In 1985, I was living in Ballarat. One of my friends was a widow in her mid-20s with a young son. As young women do we talked about life, the universe and everything. One day we talked about faith and belief and why, even though she had grown up in the Roman Catholic church, she was reluctant to send her son to a Catholic primary school and why she no longer went to church.

Her husband had been abused as a teenager by the priest at the Catholic school he went to. Her understanding was he wasn't the only boy who had been abused. He had told no-one except her (*I have since come to realise how brave and how unusual that was of him – the average time for a survivor to speak to anyone about what happened to them is 23 ½ years*). Ultimately, he was unable to cope, took extreme risks and died in an accident. She made the observation that there were other young men from the school who had also died young.

I was 19. Intellectually I knew about child abuse. It was on the news, in crime novels, it happened to people I didn't know. I grew up in small country towns, there would occasionally be rumours, people your parents told you to be careful of, or who made you feel uncomfortable. But from the perspective of a happy and safe childhood I assumed everyone I knew was, on the whole, happy and safe. From some of those towns I grew up in, boys had gone to the same school as my friend's husband and after our chat I realised that some exhibited risky behaviour and others had died young either in accidents or by their own hand. For many of them, their families were invested in the church.

I wasn't naïve enough to think a similar thing couldn't happen in the Anglican Church, but I probably did have an unconscious bias along the lines of "Anglican clergy marry" and "Anglicans don't have 'brothers of the cloth'". Both of which of course are complete rubbish and have nothing to do with who will abuse a child or vulnerable adult. *[As we now know, abusers, while predominantly male, come from all levels of society, sexual orientations, marital statuses, faith creeds (and no faith), from all brands of churchmanship, ages and ethnicities. They are a small, but destructive number, and research by forensic psychologists shows that risk indicators are more likely about boundary transgression rather than social markers.]*

For the next 15 years, I didn't consciously say, "I'm going to change the way my church deals with this". If someone had asked me, I probably would have said, 'what can 1 person do to make this right'? I work in the financial services sector,

I taught Sunday School, I was a vestry member and church warden, I studied theology and was appointed to Council of the Diocese in the early 2000's. It was at that time, that the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne first set in place a process to receive and respond to complaints from people who had been abused by clergy or church workers.

You see, in the 1990's a grassroots movement of lay people (mainly lawyers and social workers) discovering the way church leaders had responded to abuse that had occurred in the 50's and 60's said, 'this is not right'. In 2002 they pushed the General Synod to establish the Child Protection Commission to look at how the Anglican Church could better respond to complaints of abuse and what needed to be done to protect children. This became the Professional Standards Commission which I was asked to join in 2007.

In a boring bureaucratic way, we're part of the governance stream of the Anglican Church. We recommend policy on matters relating to professional standards, safe ministry practices and training, care and support for ordained and authorised lay ministry and we develop Canons (legislation) and resources to promote safe ministry. Our work is at the national level but the Anglican Church is a federated structure so each of the 23 Dioceses are responsible for how to implement our policies in their own diocese.

That federated structure has made it challenging to answer clearly, What is the Anglican church doing to respond?

The church has put in place strategies for both prevention and response. In prevention we have set standards of behavior- Faithfulness In Service has been the national code of conduct for clergy and church-workers since 2004. It's language is tertiary educated English and not always accessible. In particular, aboriginal and Torres Strait islander and Language other than English congregations asked for a video version which they helped to create. This was completed in 2014 and is on You Tube. In addition, Power and Trust training is mandatory for all clergy and many church workers.

For Response, each diocese has a process to respond to complaints that includes independent investigation, counselling and where needed, redress. There are professional standards boards who make findings on cases brought to

them, review panels (because in Australia we do believe in the right of appeal) and disciplinary tribunals.

Church leaders have apologised to survivors. In some dioceses, the cost has been incredibly high, on the one hand bishops have sold church assets, even bishop's court, to pay redress to survivors, in others bishops have resigned because they failed to follow procedures.

However, none of that is relevant when faced with someone who is a survivor or who says the church has a lot to answer for in its handling of abuse.

If someone tells you they are a survivor of abuse by a clergy or church-worker, acknowledge their pain. Most importantly, believe them. None of us are qualified to make a judgement on the veracity of someone's experience of abuse.

Believe them, acknowledge their pain, be compassionate, encourage them to report the abuse to the Director of Professional Standards if they haven't already done so. It is not up to you to fix it for them. You are not qualified, this is a specialist area.

If the person who tells you they've been abused is still a minor, there are mandatory reporting laws in Victoria for child abuse, tell one of our clergy or, if that's not possible, contact the Director yourself. There is a link and details on the front page of the Melbourne Anglican website and the details are also on today's handout.

When talking with a challenger on the basis of the church's response to abuse, it will not cut it if you immediately try to defend the church. It might be really tempting, because often the statements are sweeping. "The church is full of abusers", "The rate of abuse is higher in the church", "the church has done nothing for victims, it just tries to protect itself".

In that situation, acknowledge the church has not always responded well, it has sometimes protected itself. If the conversation moves on you can say that your church does have a process independent of the church for reporting abuse and that the process considers the needs of the survivor.

There's not a lot you can say to the 'sweeping statements' that won't sound like justification even though, sadly, the rates of abuse in the church are on par with

abuse in the broader community. It might be true, but as an organisation that for centuries held itself as the arbiter of morality in the community, it's not a good statistic.

To a challenge that the church just tries to protect itself, you can now say that Melbourne Diocese has set up a body that is capable of being sued so that survivors can take that civil approach, although we hope our survivor support and redress schemes are generous enough that it's not needed.

And you can acknowledge that the church is learning from its mistakes (although not always). While we have processes for responding to complaints and for risk management in selection of clergy and for training and prevention they only work if people follow the processes. For prevention, we also have to be alert to transgression of boundaries as that is the most likely risk indicator.

What can we do to create a safe church environment?

The church is a place where people find community, our practice is to gather together in all age groups. Our beliefs are focused on trust, love, obedience to God, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. Both our practice and our belief have made us vulnerable for targeting by those who would cross boundaries. As a church community we need to take responsibility for preventing abuse and creating a safe place for children and adults to thrive.

You may not be aware but as a parish St Michael's have had safe ministry policies for decades, not just years. In our children's ministry we have long had policies of line of sight, line of sound, and 2 adults present. We have incorporated safety into the very fabric of our building by using glass to limit the extent of privacy.

We are a fairly aware congregation, but as the saying goes, "the price of freedom is eternal vigilance'. Under the updated legislation passed by Melbourne synod this will mean safe ministry training for volunteers and clearance for ministry. Sometimes it will feel onerous. But, safety of children and vulnerable adults in our congregation is not just a risk management issue. We have to treat it as part of our mission.

Safe church is a change of mindset. It treats protection of the vulnerable as a gospel issue, because it understands you can't say 'Jesus said, Let the little

children come to me', if you can't provide a safe environment for them. Just as saying that Jesus is Saviour makes no sense if you can't keep your people safe.

This is tough theologically. *Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. How many times shall you forgive them, seven times? No, I tell you 70 times 7.* [Matthew 5:5 & 18:22]

Trust, love, the use of power, the language of might, the perception of trust embodied in representative activity such as leading, reading and welcoming, the responsibility of forgiveness. Our un-nuanced theology of forgiveness and repentance has, to my mind, been a contributing factor historically in the church's poor management of offenders. It's one of the reasons independence is so important in the response process and why Melbourne's new legislation requires the bishop to act on the recommendation of the independent professional standards board in the finding of a case in respect to fitness for ministry..

A central tenet of Christianity is that people have the ability to repent and go and sin no more. It's a real challenge for us to understand that absolution of sin doesn't absolve the church of our duty of care.

Interestingly, this doesn't go against biblical standards of forgiveness. Paul in Corinth talks about that residual responsibility to the congregation in the face of breaches of trust even where there has been forgiveness. In our Matthew reading today, Jesus teaches about the nature of those who are blessed in the eyes of God and in Luke (and elsewhere) he emphasises that an integral activity of God is bringing the dark things into the light where they cannot thrive. Theologically we've often treated the Beatitudes as a kind of aspirational innocence, but actually, they're the hard graft of living as a disciple.

Where there is broken trust and abuse of power (because that's what sexual abuse is about, it's not about the sex, it's about the power); where there is broken trust and abuse of power there is no safety. That's true both inside and outside the church.

As a parish we aspire to build community and share hope as well as proclaim the gospel. To do that we need to make our church a safe place. It is not easy, it will take all of us working together to have respectful relationships, an

understanding of healthy boundaries, a willingness to speak up and a determination to succeed.

I was recently asked, “why do you do it Dianne? Why do professional standards stuff?” My answer is simple. I don’t want it to happen to anyone else. Either the poor response, or more importantly, I don’t want the abuse to happen in the first place. I would like to say that the processes we have in place now mean that it will never happen again. But I can’t. The abuse of children and vulnerable adults continues to happen in this state. I have been heartened by the greater focus on violence against women and children as I believe there are deep seated cultural issues we need to address, but we can’t say that abuse is done and dusted and we can now move on. To do so would be to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Conclusion

In the 31 years since I became aware of child sexual abuse in the church I have learned that 1 person can make a difference. More importantly, I’ve learned that many people can make an even bigger difference. The church has not done well and we need to do better in both response and prevention. It matters to survivors and those impacted by abuse, it matters to those in the church and it *matters* to those who will refuse to hear the gospel because the church has not lived out its own calling.

Transition to prayer time: one person praying for community. Opportunity for supported prayer during communion and after service.

We’re going to spend a little time in quiet and then [intercessor] will come and pray for us.