



Theology of Safeguarding

A Reader's Guide

Safeguarding is about the action the Church takes to promote a safer culture. It is integral to the mission of the Methodist Church and a part of its response and witness to the love of God in Christ. ('Theology of Safeguarding', 1.2)

The 'Theology of Safeguarding' report was adopted by the 2021 Methodist Conference and is therefore a significant report in the life of the Methodist Church. The report emphasises that safeguarding is not something we do because we have to, but because it relates to the heart of Christian faith. All Methodists are encouraged to read and discuss it as they continue to think about how they live out their beliefs in their ways of relating, working and worshipping.

A God Welcomes All booklet has been produced to help churches and individuals to work through the implications of the 'Theology of Safeguarding' report for their own lives and churches. Copies of the booklet are available at methodistpublishing.org.uk.

The booklet makes numerous references to the 'Theology of Safeguarding' report, so if you are facilitating a study group in your church or circuit, this Reader's Guide will be useful to help you understand the context.

The first two sections form the foundation and provide a framework for the rest of the report. Then, six main themes are explored.

Section 1: Introduction

Although the 'Theology of Safeguarding' report builds on previous work, this time particular attention has been given to the experiences of those who have experienced abuse. When Christian communities have limited time and resources there is always a choice about how to use them, and whose flourishing they will help facilitate. The report reminds the Methodist people that attention to those who have experienced abuse (in all its forms) helps form a community which can enable the flourishing of all.

The introduction reminds us that safeguarding is a shared responsibility:

Safeguarding policies and procedures concern how Methodists order their life together as the Body of Christ. Everyone associated with the Methodist Church has a role to play in promoting the welfare of children, young people and adults, in working to prevent abuse from occurring, and in seeking to protect and respond well to those who have been abused. Compliance with safeguarding procedures and policies is part of faithful discipleship. ('Theology of Safeguarding', 1.2)

Section 2: Theological roots

Why can the Methodist Church be so confident that compliance with safeguarding procedures and policies is part of faithful discipleship? Because it aligns with some of the fundamental Christian beliefs, for example:

- That people are made in God's image: that God created humanity to be in a loving relationship with God, others and the whole of creation
- That the Church is a community called into being by God to share God's love and be a sign of grace and hope in all communities, and this means being a community marked by love and care for one another and for all whom it encounters
- That there is 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
- That the Methodist Church seeks to work for justice and prioritise the welfare of vulnerable people in all aspects of its life, in the ways it does things, and where it puts its energy.

Six key themes

1. Abuse and the human condition (section 3)

Section 3 of the report reminds us how hard it can be to face the reality of human brokenness, and that the Methodist Church has always been realistic about the human condition; acknowledging that human beings are capable of horrific and appalling acts, as well as being capable of acts of inspirational grace and love. Abuse, in all its forms, is sin. Every human being is in need of grace, love, forgiveness and acceptance. There is an increasing awareness and

acknowledgment of the existence and effects of abuse (including spiritual abuse) within both the Church and wider society, and recognition of the deep damage, trauma and shattering of self that it causes. Whatever the kind of abuse, many (both within the Church and in wider society) struggle to understand how Christians can be capable of abusive acts; some because it seems to go against everything they say they believe, some because they don't see how it is possible for someone who is 'saved' or 'forgiven' or 'redeemed' to behave in such a way.

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. ('Theology of Safeguarding', 3.10)

2. Theological thinking and how it is used (section 4)

The ways in which God is understood and spoken of impacts on human relationships. Section 4 of the report encourages Methodists to reflect on how theological thinking might be used and misused. Aspects to consider include:

- how the Bible is used and interpreted and which passages are prioritised
- the language we use when speaking to or about God
- how particular themes or concepts look to those who have been in abusive situations (for example, some understandings of the Cross and suffering)
- whose experience is considered and prioritised
- what kind of symbols we use in worship
- what theological themes and resources are helpful, encouraging and life-affirming for those who have experienced abuse.

3. Failure to challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour and to maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries (section 5)

The third theme of the report looks at failures within the Church to challenge inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour or to maintain appropriate boundaries. All Methodists are encouraged to pay attention to this, as it is a responsibility for us all.

Of course, it is not always easy to tell what is inappropriate because it can range from serious violations to an inappropriate or unwanted touch, or a joke that isn't funny. It is important to recognise differences in people and in cultures: something that is ok for one person may not be for another. Being sensitive to this and giving it attention (including asking someone what is ok) is a key step.

It is clear that because people sometimes find it difficult to challenge inappropriate behaviour, it can then go unchecked, its effects be diminished or brushed under the carpet. Methodists are encouraged to think about how challenging harmful behaviour, different forms of abuse and injustice are part of our discipleship.

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. ('Theology of Safeguarding', 5.7)

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.

4. Welcoming people who have experienced abuse (section 6)

Responding well to those who have experienced abuse includes listening well, and paying attention to the assumptions we make and the ways in which our patterns of relating and worshipping might unintentionally exclude rather than welcome. This section re-examines the idea of pastoral care, highlighting that listening is not enough and sometimes, if justice is to be part of the response, some action is needed. Any response involves examining how power is used in a pastoral relationship, and whose voices and experiences are given priority.

The report particularly picks up on a key Methodist phrase 'All are welcome', a phrase which emphasises the never ending boundless love and grace of God. It does not mean that there are no boundaries to the Church's inclusivity and hospitality, not least because those who have experienced abuse and those who have abused should not occupy the same space. A theology of hospitality means that boundaries to this hospitality need to be established, not only to prevent harm but also to enable the Church to be faithful to its identity as the body of Christ.

5. Power (section 7)

Section 7 notes that power is part of church life, and encourages us to recognise that power is something we all can have in different ways. The Church is, indeed, a human organisation and has means by which it organises itself and enables the community to live work and worship together. Power takes many forms and its distribution changes. We are encouraged to consider where power is, who has it and how it is exercised in all parts of the Church's life; paying particular attention to those in positions of responsibility and leadership.

6. Forgiveness (section 8)

Section 8 of the report reminds us that forgiveness, repentance and new life in Jesus Christ are central to the gospel but that forgiveness is complex and that there are many different understandings within the Church of what forgiveness means. What forgiveness means and what it looks like can vary. It can be a part of healing and letting go, but it is primarily about a person's relationship with God. The report reminds us that:

- Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting. It doesn't cancel the effects of the past but it enables people to live in a new relationship to its consequences
- Forgiveness doesn't cancel obligations, or remove responsibility for consequences of actions. It is the person's responsibility to change their behaviour, which may include taking on particular obligations and responsibilities as part of recognising the harm their behaviour has caused and to demonstrate that they are trying to change
- Forgiveness doesn't mean that the person is wholly reformed, or good, or that previous patterns of behaviour are left behind. It is a call to a life radically different from the old, in which discipline and accountability are key. Christians believe that God can change lives, but we cannot always know or judge if that has happened.

Conclusion

Safeguarding:

- is a fundamental part of our response to God
- is one way in which members of the Church demonstrate care
- helps protect the vulnerable
- signals that the Church seeks to be a place which enables human flourishing
- helps maintain the integrity of the Church's witness
- is part of Christian discipleship.

The report concludes:

Bringing about the cultural change needed to fully understand what safeguarding means in every part of the life of the church is a challenge for everyone within the church, requiring courage, cost and hope. ('Theology of Safeguarding', 9.4)

If you have any questions or comments about the God Welcomes All course, please contact gwa@methodistchurch.org.uk

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