

Letter from the Churchwardens to the St Helen's church family

4 June 2021

Dear St Helen's church family,

Thank you for your continued encouragement and prayers. We are deeply thankful for our church family's unity in the gospel and the many sacrifices you make to serve the Lord and His people; it is a privilege to serve with you in this gospel work.

It is not our usual practice to write to the church family, but we wanted to update everyone on the next St Helen's "Healthchecks" that we introduced at the Annual Parochial Church Meeting (APCM), and on related matters.

As many of you will be aware, an Independent Lessons Learned review was recently published by the safeguarding organisation thirtyone:eight (31:8) concerning Rev Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Church Wimbledon, the church of which he was the vicar from 1982 to 2012. As some will remember, Jonathan Fletcher was a curate at St Helen's from 1976 to 1981 and has preached at St Helen's occasionally over the years since then.

The abuse described in the report by 31:8 is shocking and distressing. We have been grieved and saddened that these things have happened amongst the household of God. Many have been hurt by Jonathan Fletcher, when he was meant to be serving them as Christ's under-shepherd. We stand alongside others in wholeheartedly condemning such abuse.

We are grateful that the truth has come into the light and especially grateful to those who have bravely stepped forward to bring this into the open. We encourage us all to continue in prayer for Jonathan Fletcher's victims and survivors, and for all who have suffered abuse in any circumstances. We recognise how difficult it is for survivors of abuse to come forward and the time it may take them. Within St Helen's, we have seen more in recent years how important it is to support victims and encourage them to report their abuse, however long it may take them to reach that decision.

The report by 31:8 rightly encourages churches to reflect on its recommendations to ensure churches are safe for everyone. Therefore, we want to share with you our plans for St Helen's. In addition, we want to speak about accusations which have been made publicly about the robustness of our safeguarding. And lastly, we want to address some of what has been said on social media and elsewhere regarding when William Taylor first knew about abuse by Jonathan Fletcher and by another prominent abuser, John Smyth (whose abuse of young men has been widely reported since February 2017).

It is important to emphasise at the outset that we, as the churchwardens, and the PCC and staff team, want St Helen's to be a safe and loving place for the church family and all who visit. If you ever see or experience anything that concerns you, that makes you uncomfortable, or that doesn't seem right, please do speak up. Please speak to a small group leader / member of staff / ministry leader / PCC member / churchwarden. If you would like to speak to someone outside the church, details of who you can contact outside St Helen's can be found on our website under safeguarding at www.st-helens.org.uk/about/safeguarding.

On a wider level, we hope everyone knows that through our small group leaders and our congregation leaders, we have people and systems in place to offer personal and pastoral support. Please do use them. If at all unsure, please do ask.

St Helen's will reflect seriously and deeply on the 31:8 report and our culture

When serious harm caused by a prominent church leader comes to light, all churches need to reflect and respond seriously and humbly. Whilst we receive many unsolicited positive comments about the warmth and care within the church family, we recognise that we are not immune from problems and never will be. We need to ask questions such as: is our culture healthy in all its aspects? Do people find our church kind, caring and safe? How can we improve the ways we care for people and love them? How can we prevent things going wrong here? How do we ensure our church is a safe environment for everyone involved in its ministry? And how do we teach and live out godly behaviours?

We want to ask these and other questions without making assumptions about the answers. We want to reflect seriously and deeply on our culture, our structures, and our processes. As outlined at our recent APCM, William has asked the Churchwardens and the PCC's Standing Committee to lead a collective church family process of reflection. We would like to hear the wisdom and experience of the whole church family as we do that.

This process of collective reflection will build on the initial St Helen's Healthcheck last year, which was focused on our workplace culture, policies, and processes for our staff team. That review was undertaken by a lawyer who specialises in employment (and human rights) issues, and all employees and associates and some former employees and associates were encouraged to participate in it.

In order to reflect carefully and deeply on the recommendations of the report by 31:8, we intend to focus next on three broad areas, in the following ways:

1. An externally led review of the leadership and culture of our small groups, for which we have instructed the same lawyer who conducted our Healthcheck last year. We will be surveying all small group members (1,000+ of the church family) and other church family members later this month.
2. A professional external review of our safeguarding policies, practices and approach, for which we have already engaged *Christian Safeguarding Services*.
3. Detailed internal consideration of the 31:8 report recommendations, informed in part by the findings of 1 and 2 above.

Thank you to those who have volunteered to assist with these different reviews; work is already starting on them.

We are keen for people from across the church family to participate, so we encourage everyone to engage in the upcoming small groups questionnaire and the Q&A sessions we will be organising in the coming weeks.

St Helen's takes safeguarding very seriously

Since the 31:8 report was published, a number of concerns have been raised on social media, and directly with us, about actions we are said to have taken or not taken in relation to certain issues which are either specific safeguarding issues or regarded by those raising them as safeguarding.

Our safeguarding team has been through each of those issues with the London Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser (DSA). In every instance, he confirmed the safeguarding advice the Diocese had previously given, on which we had relied, or he confirmed that the issue being raised was not a safeguarding issue, notwithstanding the views of those raising them. In those instances where criticism has been made regarding safeguarding issues, we have presented the full facts to our DSA and his judgment is that in those specific cases he has no concerns.

We are not able to address the specifics of any individual safeguarding cases, even if accusations or insinuations have been made publicly. We are acutely aware that there are survivors and victims in our church family, who could experience harm from misuse of information about their original experience of abuse. We want to be very clear that no church should use private information disclosed by survivors of abuse to defend its reputation – and sometimes that means that untruths cannot be rebutted. We are very conscious of the sensitivity of the personal information which has been entrusted to our safeguarding team. We want to reassure survivors of abuse that St Helen's will only use their information for proper purposes. Where allegations or criticisms are made in relation to our safeguarding, we will submit ourselves to the DSA.

One of the issues identified in the 31:8 review of Emmanuel Wimbledon related to their relationship with the Southwark Diocese safeguarding team. So, at our APCM we wanted to address head-on the issue of our relationship with the London Diocesan Safeguarding Team and their perspective on how we are doing when it comes to safeguarding. To that end our DSA provided the following quote and permission for us to make it public at the APCM.

"In relation to the working relationship between the Diocesan Safeguarding Team and St Helen's I am happy to say and believe that we have a good and open working relationship, where you flag matters up to us of concern or seek advice if you are unsure whether matters reach the threshold for safeguarding. Likewise any enquiries that result from the support work carried out under the name of St Helen's are flagged or advice sought. I have felt that there has been open dialogue whether with you or the clergy side."

Diocese of London Safeguarding Adviser

That said, we do not suggest that there are no improvements to be made in our safeguarding. This is why we are engaging *Christian Safeguarding Services*, as external experts, to work with us and to help us make improvements where needed.

William Taylor's knowledge about Jonathan Fletcher's abuse and John Smyth's abuse

For several years, insinuations have been made, largely on social media, that William Taylor has been covering up abuse committed by both Jonathan Fletcher and by John Smyth.

As Churchwardens, like all Christians, our allegiance is to the risen Lord Jesus. We know that sin permeates all our hearts and that we all fall short of God's perfect standards. We do not automatically assume that insinuations or allegations are untrue or that our leaders do not fall short, however godly they may appear to us. We take accusations against St Helen's and our staff extremely seriously. Whenever substantive concerns have come to our attention, we have reported them to the Diocese.

In light of recent social media activity, we have concluded, and William has agreed, that we should address each of these matters at this time.

William Taylor's knowledge about Jonathan Fletcher's abuse

Some people external to St Helen's have suggested that William must have known about Jonathan Fletcher's abusive activities earlier than February 2019 and, therefore, that William lied when he said he first learned about these abusive activities in February 2019. It is said that Brian O'Donoghue knew of an investigation 'concerning Fletcher's abuse in late 2018' (as a trustee of the *Anglican Mission in England (AMiE)*), from which some infer that Brian is bound to have told William before February 2019. These claims and insinuations have been put forward in terms that question William's honesty and integrity, and Brian's obligations of confidentiality as an AMiE trustee and his approach to safeguarding.

Given the seriousness of the allegations, we commissioned an independent law firm to conduct a fact-finding investigation to establish when William first came to know of Jonathan Fletcher's conduct, as well as what Brian knew and what he did with that information. This involved approaching key people for their accounts of events and reviewing relevant documents.

Edward Connor Solicitors concluded that "*William Taylor did not have knowledge of Jonathan Fletcher's abuse, prior to 5 February 2019.*" This confirmed that William told the truth when he has said that he first learned of Fletcher's abuse in early February 2019. The lawyers also confirmed that the limited nature of the information provided to Brian and the capacity in which it was provided means that Brian acted properly in not informing William.

Following similar accusations to those mentioned above, in January 2020 the Diocese of London also looked into what William knew and when about Jonathan Fletcher's abuse. The Diocese, also, concluded that "*everything had been appropriately referred*" by William and St Helen's.

Since William found out about Jonathan Fletcher's abuse in February 2019, from what we have seen, we know that William acted both to prevent Jonathan Fletcher engaging in ministry, in order to prevent further abuse or harm to victims, and to help victims come forward to receive help. It is evident to us that this has been William's priority and he has consistently acted with the survivors' interests at heart.

We confirm that William participated in the 31:8 Review. The 31:8 Review did not name William (save for referring to his ReNew address) and did not criticise any action he took.

We want to reiterate that neither we nor the independent investigation have found any credible evidence to support allegations, inferences or rumours that William has not told the truth or has acted to cover up Jonathan Fletcher's abuse.

If anyone considers that they may have credible evidence, please would they contact wardens@st-helens.org.uk to be put in touch confidentially with one of the Churchwardens.

William Taylor's knowledge about John Smyth's abuse

William has asked us to address this issue at this time as well. We do so with his full permission, but conscious that his request that we do so sadly reflects his loss of any real choice in the matter.

Over the past few years, people have noted on social media that as a young undergraduate William attended Iwerne camps at the time (40 years ago) when John Smyth was a Iwerne leader. Until February

1982 in England, and in subsequent years in Africa, John Smyth committed many acts of horrific abuse which have been widely detailed in the national media.

Some have repeatedly challenged William to say what he knew and when, the innuendo being that William covered up John Smyth's abuse.

William has asked us to state publicly what he knew and when. William knew in late 1981 that John Smyth engaged in violent beating of undergraduate students, because William was one of those beaten by John Smyth.

William has asked us to share the following personal statement:

"I became a Christian in December 1979, aged 18. I first remember meeting John Smyth in July 1981, as a young Christian aged 20. I was deceived by John Smyth and first beaten in Smyth's shed in late August 1981. I recall being beaten twice more, the last in early December 1981. After that, I never went again. On 12 February 1982, I reported the beatings to the minister of the church I was attending at the time.

My heart goes out to all those abused by Smyth in this country and in Africa. In the last few years, I have become aware that others suffered far worse experiences than me and have endured long lasting effects. I am grateful that Smyth's abuse is being thoroughly investigated and I have participated willingly in the Church of England review undertaken by Keith Makin.

Like many abused by John Smyth I have always wanted to keep his abuse of me private, though not secret. Until very recently, none of those abused by Smyth have sought to contact me, nor I them (with one exception), to discuss what happened 40 years ago. It is my hope that, having been forced to make my personal experience public, none of those abused by Smyth will have to face the same treatment I have faced online, which has had a significant effect on me and my family. I thank God for those who counselled and cared for me in 1982, and that God has blessed me with a loving family, close friends, and thirty years of pastoral ministry immersed in God's living and active word."

William has confirmed that he never played any role in any abuse of others by John Smyth. William graduated in June 1983 and spent the next 5 years serving in the British Army, after which he trained for ministry and was ordained in 1991.

After making his full disclosure in early 1982, William did not keep his experience secret, although he did choose to keep it private. That was then, and is now, the prerogative of any victim. He did not report it to the police, because he did not think he had been the victim of a crime. He was never discouraged from reporting to the police. It is important to know that our practice today at St Helen's is to train our staff always to encourage victims to report to the police, where their disclosure is of something that may be criminal in nature. We seek to offer support to victims as they reach their own personal decision whether to report or not. In the case of the abuse perpetrated by John Smyth, as far as we know, no victim reported their experience to the police until more than 30 years had passed.

Before being appointed Rector of St Helen's in 1998, William told those responsible for his appointment that, as a student, he had briefly been involved in a cult in which physical chastisement had been used. Until Channel 4 reported the full horror of John Smyth's abuse in February 2017, William (like all those abused by Smyth) was unaware of its full and ongoing nature. William then fully disclosed what had happened to the Associate Rector, the Parish Safeguarding Officer and two other members of the PCC Standing Committee. In line with our practice, they encouraged William to go to the police and he did report his experience to the

police. He has cooperated fully and voluntarily with the police and with the ongoing Church of England John Smyth Review.

William, like all abused, should be entitled to privacy and anonymity if that is their wish. Becoming a clergyman does not change that basic right. Yet social media, which can be used for good, appears sadly to have been used to pressure William into a public disclosure of his intensely personal experience, including by some who had clearly come to know that he had been abused by John Smyth.

40 years on, William's right to privacy in relation to his own abuse has been, in effect, stolen. It saddens us that some on online blogs, social media and Twitter should have regarded it as a comfort to other victims for William to be pressured into a public disclosure. It is no comfort to William, his wife, his children or his wider family to have been treated in this way. Indeed, it concerns us that what has been done to William will be detrimental to victims of other abuse who may fear receiving similar treatment.

Should anyone wish to see and understand what has been said online, [key examples are available](#). We would have concerns about the effects on any abuse survivor and their family of receiving this sort of treatment in public online.

It has even been insinuated that those who knew of John Smyth's abuse in England bear some measure of responsibility for the death in Africa of at least one young man for which John Smyth is said to have been responsible. Any such insinuation against those who knew of John Smyth's abuse because they were victims of it is a disgrace. No abuse survivor bears the responsibility of having been abused, or of having to stop their abuser from abusing others. Any assertion that an abuse survivor bore this sort of responsibility is unjust and profoundly unkind, as well as having the potential to cause them further harm and discourage them from sharing their experience. We are not aware of any other victim in any other case who has been told that they should bear responsibility in this way, let alone a victim who first reported the abuse to their vicar less than three months after their experience of the abuse ended.

We are also aware of pointed suggestions from outside St Helen's that, having been abused by John Smyth 40 years ago, William has adopted a similar leadership and pastoral style himself. That is not our experience of William's leadership over many years; many of us in the church family have experienced his warm pastoral care as well as valuing his teaching ministry. The staff 'Healthcheck' that we undertook last year found that *"there is a great deal of respect and affection for William Taylor and the other Team Leaders at SHB, as well as thankfulness for their clear vision and leadership. There is nothing to suggest any actual authoritarian, coercive or bullying tendencies, and a lot of reference to 'servant leadership'"*.

As you read this, you may be shocked by what happened to William 40 years ago, and what has brought him to this position today. In the kindness of God, Christian friends in 1982 enabled William to talk through and work through what happened to him at the hands of John Smyth. As a result, the three beatings in 1981 have thankfully not dominated his life or his thinking. Since then, the Lord has worked deeply in him and we thank God for equipping William for his ministry among us.

It would have been William's choice to keep this experience private, but he has decided (and, with sadness, we agree) that it should be shared now. William has not been, and is not, defined by three beatings spread over 14 weeks when aged 20. It would be unwise of us to project our own reactions onto him, or to think less of him on the basis of what he has now disclosed. Despite the further accusations and insinuations that the coming days may bring, William's desire is for ongoing committed gospel partnership by us with him, as together we seek to bring glory to God by knowing Him and making Him known.

Please continue to hold William and Janet in your prayers at this time. They are much loved by us all and we know that you share our thankfulness to God for them, and for their unstinting service here at St Helen's and beyond.

Conclusion

We want St Helen's to be a loving and safe church, where people can hear of Jesus and grow in their love for Him free from harm in a kind and caring church family. We encourage all of us to pray that this would be the case and to engage in the various reviews we are conducting.

If any part of our letter has raised further questions for you, or you wish to discuss anything, then please do come to one of the Healthcheck Q&A sessions we will hold this month, or contact one of the Churchwardens at wardens@st-helens.org.uk. Dates for the Q&A sessions will be on the notice sheets this Sunday.

It may be that you are a survivor of abuse and you want to talk to someone outside St Helen's about your experience or about any issues that this letter has raised for you. If so, we would encourage you to contact the Diocesan Safeguarding Team (safeguarding@london.anglican.org or 020 7932 1224) or Safe Spaces (safespaces@victimsupport.org.uk or 0300 303 1056).

In all of this, we remain conscious of the pain and suffering caused to victims and survivors of Jonathan Fletcher, John Smyth and other abusers, and our prayers continue to be for victims and all affected.

'Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.' Hebrews 13:20-21 (ESV)

Thank you for your prayers and your ongoing partnership in the gospel.

Yours in Christ

The St Helen's Bishopsgate Churchwardens

Jeremy Anderson, Richard Andrews, Charles Kasenene, Andy Ross, Richard Tett, Sam Trowbridge