

Safeguarding newsletter



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Introduction

With many of the restrictions we have lived with for the past 18 months come to an end, I am reminded of this poignant Bob Dylan lyric: ‘Come gather ‘round people wherever you roam ...for times, they are a-changin’.

If, like me, you are more prone to patterns of self-judgement during periods of change, I invite you to gather your thoughts, to gather your mental strength and composure, and to safeguard against the mind’s tendency to self-judge. Find space in this period of change, find kindness inward and within, find humility and a joyous heart in our ability to love and be loved.

This quarter’s newsletter will highlight some significant changes happening within the URC that not only raise the profile of safeguarding but embed safeguarding within our governance structures.

Hiring has now begun for the Designated Safeguarding Lead, the new role title for the Safeguarding Adviser, and a new Safeguarding Training and Development Coordinator.

A prominent feature of this newsletter is a digest of the latest IICSA report and the safeguarding papers that went to General Assembly in July 2021. The passed resolutions include changes to the structures of safeguarding in the URC, the formation of a new safeguarding committee, updates to the Safeguarding Training Framework and additions to the DBS background checks for churches.

Special thanks must go to Synod Safeguarding Officers and Adrian Bulley who have worked hard to shore up the safeguarding team during a period of transition and change.

With kindest wishes, Matt Baxter, Assistant Administrator (Safeguarding).

Changes to legislation about Positions of Trust

One of our SSOs, Jan Murphy, attended an All-Party Parliamentary Group in October 2019 to give evidence on behalf of the URC in support of a change in the legislation. We now have a new Bill, The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021: Positions of Trust. The factsheet sets out the intention to extend “positions of trust” to include situations where certain activities take place in sport or religion. Details of what they are going to do and how they are going to do it can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-factsheets/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-positions-of-trust-factsheet>

GA papers

Much gratitude is owed to those who played a part in the creation of six General Assembly papers. The information, amendments and resolutions delivered in these papers will solidify the crucial work of implementing the Safeguarding Strategic Plan within the URC and assist in making the URC a safer place to work and worship. You can access all the papers here with a simple right click.

- Paper T1 [Annual safeguarding report 2020](#) (PDF | 68kb)
- Paper T2 [Additions to URC Structure](#) (PDF | 56kb)
- Paper T3 [Safeguarding Advisory Group](#) (PDF | 25kb)
- Paper T4 [Safeguarding Policy Statement](#) (PDF | 61kb)
- Paper T5 [Safeguarding Training Framework](#) (PDF | 68kb)
- Paper T6 [Criminal Record Check](#) (PDF | 39kb)

Paper T1 Annual Safeguarding Report 2020

In 2021, the Annual Safeguarding Report was written by the SSO for South West Synod, Jan Murphy, and includes deep insights into the changes and developments faced by churches and safeguarding during lockdowns. Key findings and updates include:

- Work is being carried out by Ministries regarding the recruitment of Elders.
- The reporting of concerns to outside authorities were higher for adults at risk than they were for children: the types of abuse recorded included domestic abuse, physical abuse, self-neglect, sexual abuse of children and bullying.
- The delivery of Safeguarding training online has been very popular and seems to have increased awareness of safeguarding concerns and strengthened the relationship between SSOs and attendees. It has, however, also proven a barrier for some.

- The report highlighted that, as a matter of urgency, the process of safer recruitment in churches requires more support: a tendency to solely rely on DBS checks needs addressing; the publication of a new GP5 appendix to accompany will help to provide churches with further resources.
- Some churches need further support to update their safeguarding policies, the report also acknowledges the adverse effect of the pandemic had on the ability of churches to update their policies.
- When churches create contracts for those who pose risks they must consult their SSO– the report discovered that several SSOs were unaware of some contracts in their synods contrary to advice given in GP5.
- Moving forward, a lot of work has been done by SAG and the SSPG to simplify the annual church returns forms for 2021. There is also a plan to digitise the forms.

Paper T2 Additions to the structures

With extensive consultation and lead by Adrian Bulley the creation of paper T2 heralds, for the first time, the addition of safeguarding functions to the structures of the URC. Its resolutions make explicit that the primary responsibility of safeguarding in local churches lies with local churches – its meetings and Elder’s meetings. It is then the responsibility of synods to support the churches with safeguarding policy, the Safeguarding Co-ordinators, safeguarding training, and monitoring the implementation of safeguarding through the annual church returns.

Paper T3 Safeguarding Committee

Paper T3 saw the passing of resolution 46: that Mission Council’s Safeguarding Advisory Group be disbanded and that a Safeguarding Committee be assembled as a standing committee of General Assembly. The Safeguarding Committee is responsible for overseeing the implementation of General Assembly’s Safeguarding Policy throughout the URC. The development of the Committee is partly in recognition of the need to implement lessons learned from the Past Case Review and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA).

T4 Safeguarding Policy statement

Paper T4 sees the adoption of a URC safeguarding policy statement at General Assembly and commends it to church meetings, elder’s meetings, and synods for consideration and implementation. The overall aim is to underpin the implementation of safeguarding throughout all the councils of the URC.

T5 Safeguarding Training Framework

T5 saw the passing of resolution 48: a formal adoption of the Safeguarding Training Framework. The framework now outlines four levels of training: pre-foundation, foundation, Intermediate and advanced. It stipulates, by role, which level is relevant/necessary (see Appendix 2 of the framework).

T6 URC roles eligible for a criminal record check – updated

General Assembly approved the updated matrix of roles eligible for a criminal record checks. The new additions to the matrix include the following roles eligible for enhanced without barring checks: serving Elders, assembly accredited lay preachers, locally recognised worship leaders in training, and those authorised to preside at the sacraments of communion and baptism. The roles that now require basic checks are Church Caretakers and Cleaners, Church Administrators, Church Treasurers, and Synod Treasurers.

Affirmative action towards an Anti-racist Church

The Equalities Committee presented their report to General Assembly which can be found at Pages 71 to 77 of the GA Book of reports. An appointed group will be tasked to make recommendations and to explore how the URC might implement a policy of 'affirmative action' to address underrepresented Black and ethnic minority people in Assembly-appointed posts; to explore a recruitment policy which actively engages with, and seeks to correct, the current racial imbalance in Assembly-appointed posts

IICSA – Child Protection in Religious Organisations and Settings Investigation Report

This latest report is one of a number of reports that the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has produced. If you would like to read the full report, or parts of it, please see <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/child-protection-religious-organisations-and-settings-investigation-report-september-2021>. This report repeats what the Inquiry have said in other reports:

“What marks religious organisations out from other institutions is the explicit purpose they have in teaching right from wrong; the moral turpitude of any failing by them in the prevention of, or response to, child sexual abuse is therefore heightened. The religious organisations and settings examined in this investigation have a range of theological beliefs and practices. Respect for a diversity of beliefs is a hallmark of a liberal democracy. However, freedom of religion and belief can never justify or excuse the ill-treatment of a child, or a failure to take adequate steps to protect them from harm.

Highlighted statements from the report include:

- Adequate child protection policies and procedures are essential in ensuring that children are protected against sexual abuse perpetrated by individuals connected with religious organisations and settings.
- There are a number of factors that may impede the effective reporting and management of allegations of child sexual abuse, which they set out.
- Those in leadership positions provide direction to the organisation and are vital in stressing the importance of child protection and generating changes – by their actions as well as their words, which includes acting decisively to ensure that child protection failures are challenged and steps are taken to learn lessons.
- Internal investigatory or disciplinary processes should not be used as a substitute for reporting to external authorities.
- The services that were offered to people who had been abused were ad hoc and very much dependent on access to local support services. It would be helpful for religious organisations to be aware of counselling and support services available nationally or in their local area, or for these to be developed
- Forgiveness is central to the teachings and practices of many religions. However, care must be taken to avoid creating a culture in which the encouragement of forgiveness results in safety concerns and the assessment of risk to others being overlooked.
- There was a broad measure of support for oversight of child protection by a body external to the religious organisation.

There are several matters that will be explored further by the Inquiry (although they state that this list is not exclusive)

- Mandatory reporting.
- Vetting and barring.
- Regulation of the voluntary sector in respect of religious organisations and settings.
- Introducing primary legislation to provide that voluntary settings adhere to basic child protection standards.

If you would like to read the full report, or parts of it, please see

<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/child-protection-religious-organisations-and-settings-investigation-report-september-2021>

Further updates will follow. The final report is currently due to be published in the summer of 2022.

Updates to DDC

DDC have updated guidelines in line with new DBS identity guidelines. The good news here is that verifiers using DDC will not have to make any changes – DDC will update the system and all documentation to reflect the updated guidance. However, you may want to update any internal documents. Main changes include the removal of all references to EEA in the UK national route, amendments to the primary documents for the international route and you must do a separate check to make sure a job applicant is allowed to work in the UK. DDC are happy to talk you through the changes if you have any doubts or have applicants struggling to provide supporting documentation.

Suggestions for Synod part of the newsletter

We would like to thank Matt Baxter ((Assistant Administrator (Safeguarding)) for all he has done to ensure that essential safeguarding tasks have continued to operate in this time of vacancy and change and would echo his thoughts to show compassion to ourselves as well as others as we navigate our way through more change.