

Managing Allegations against Members of Church Staff and Volunteers

Back in the early 2000s when churches were becoming aware of the need for safeguarding policies and background checking, we had to consider the extent to which as churches we should submit to legal requirements. At that point, there was discussion about state interference in the spiritual life of the church, but over the following years the necessity, and indeed wisdom, of these requirements has been largely accepted.

Since that time, safeguarding practice has advanced considerably. However, this progress has not always been reflected in churches; many now finding themselves significantly behind current best practice. In addition to this, historic and current cases of abuse across all organisational sectors (including churches) has resulted in increased mistrust and concern.

As a result, we now find ourselves in a climate of:

- Increased awareness of the importance of safeguarding
- Increasing awareness of the deficiencies of past safeguarding practice
- Increasing awareness of the ever-changing and increasing safeguarding risks
- Increased expectations of all organisations to safeguard the vulnerable
- Increasing scrutiny from civic authorities
- Calls for greater transparency, accountability and even regulation of those working with the vulnerable

The other key factor that is of significance, particularly for Faith Based Organisations, is the changing attitudes and views within society with regard to issues that have, heretofore, been regarded as moral or ethical issues, which is resulting in increasing divergence from, and to some extent hostility towards, traditional biblically-based values.

In this climate, serious consideration of our response, including reconsideration of the question of the extent to which churches should submit to the authority of the state is required. There is not a simple, clear-cut answer to this question and there are many principles to consider. We cannot explore all of these thoroughly, however, we will try to “plot a course” that is both biblical and legally compliant.

The appointment of leaders within churches is not merely a question of the person best qualified for the role as is the case in secular organisations, but rather the recognition that God has gifted and called this individual to the position; they are “raised up” by God to lead and teach his people. As such, accusations against leaders should not be taken lightly (e.g. 1 Timothy 5:19 and 1 Samuel 24:5-6). Church leaders have a solemn duty to God to faithfully declare his word, even when that message is unpopular (2 Timothy 4:1-5). It is our place as leaders to shepherd, nurture and build up the church (Ephesians 4:1-16).

Given that on occasions leaders must deliver hard messages either to an individual or to whole groups, the possibility of people taking exception to the ministry, even when conducted faithfully and with due sensitivity and love, is nonetheless real. Allegations against leaders must always be considered in the light of the character of the leader and the solemn responsibility that God has placed upon them. This must, however, be held in balance and must not place them above contradiction or in a position of power that can be abused. As leaders, we are servants of the church and under-shepherds, accountable to God (e.g. 1 Peter 5: 1-4). Leaders are not beyond temptation themselves (e.g. Galatians 6:1) and when they fail they should be called to account (e.g. 2 Samuel 12:7-9, Galatians 2:11-14).

It is important that as churches we are wise and discerning and that as leaders, we follow the example of Jesus himself as servant-leaders who fully embrace the calling of God on our lives with humble confidence in him and that we walk in a manner worthy of that trust.

A further important aspect that requires consideration is laid out in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 – the handling of disputes between church members. The question is how far should we take Paul’s teaching. To what extent should cases between believers be dealt with “in house”?

The context here is important. We know that Paul is dealing with a church at Corinth where prideful competitiveness and the tolerance of serious sin were amongst the issues he is addressing. In terms of the immediate context, one member has a grievance against another (v1) and the cases are relatively minor (v2). Paul appears to be addressing proud selfishness that asserts its own rights and is unconcerned about the witness that this displays to the watching world. There is an important principle here, namely that we should not indulge these prideful attitudes, and that the church should be able to address such issues amicably. From the point of view of our submission to the requirements of the state, however, there is a need for consideration of further biblical teaching.

The thrust of New Testament teaching seems to be that authorities and rulers are appointed by God and that we should obey them as the Lord’s servants (e.g. Mark 12:17, Romans 13:2-7, Titus 3:1-3, 1 Peter 2:17-18). Thus, if we bring these together, we see that we are to be subject to the state as those rulers have been ordained by God to that role, that evildoers have cause to fear the state but that those who do what is right have no such cause to fear. Also, the church should deal with trivial cases internally, rather than bring the gospel into disrepute before the authorities. This conclusion is not intended to undermine consideration of how we handle a situation where the law of the land contradicts the Law of God; that is a different discussion that is beyond the scope of this article. Our point here is that to generalise the 1 Corinthians 6 principle so that every case, including matters of abuse or other illegal activity, are to be dealt with internally is to develop the text beyond its legitimate interpretation, such that it at least potentially contradicts those other passages.

Also, if we consider some of the recent media coverage of the handling of serious allegations within high profile churches (the Southern Baptist Convention, The Village Church, Sovereign Grace Ministries, Willow Creek etc.) much of the criticism revolves around issues of accountability and lack of transparency in how those churches went about investigating the accusations.

At this point, we need to sound a cautionary note. It is easy to be critical with the benefit of hindsight, particularly when dealing with historic cases and it is important that we consider the actions taken in the context of that time. That said, it is also important that we learn from the past so as not to repeat mistakes made. We must recognise that:

It is no longer sufficient simply to do the right thing; we must be seen to be doing the right thing.

While this may be seen as worldly wisdom, the argument arises from scripture. First Peter 2:11-17 (particularly verse 12) tells us to watch our conduct so that even though we are accused as evildoers, our actions will speak for themselves.

We know that the gospel is an offence to many (Galatians 5:11, 1 Peter 2:8) and we also recognise that as views of mainstream society change, some orthodox biblical beliefs are now being seen as offensive, abusive and evil. In this environment, Peter’s exhortation seems to land with particular force. We may apply this teaching as: *Even though many in the world may find our views offensive and even abusive, when they look at our conduct, they have to acknowledge that we love and care for people well and that our safeguarding of the vulnerable is exemplary.*

This application arises from our fundamental belief that,

Safeguarding should be a practical outworking of our biblically-based values and our gospel witness.

One final issue that we must address, particularly in relation to historic allegations of abuse is the question of the responsibility of believers to forgive one another (Luke 11:4, Matthew 18:21-35). While it is certainly true that, for all believers, forgiveness of others is a biblical requirement, and for victims of abuse forgiveness is an important part of their journey to healing and peace, this should never be used to silence victims and cover up the crimes that have been committed. First Peter 4:8 has sometimes also been quoted to encourage victims of abuse to forgive and love those who have abused them. Here it becomes important to distinguish between what is an important part of the individual's spiritual journey and what is helpful to the process of healing and recovery (forgiveness for those who have sinned against us), and on the other hand the requirements of justice and our responsibility to protect the vulnerable. God is both a God of mercy and of justice. To deny either one of these characteristics is to deny his true character and the very basis of the gospel. God loves the weak and vulnerable in a particular way and calls us to protect and care for them.

Our view of safeguarding should be shaped by all of our biblical principles. These would include, but are not limited to:

- People are made in the image of God
- We live in a fallen and broken world
- Israel's law protected the weak and vulnerable
- God values the life of unborn children
- God's love for people
- Jesus welcomed children and vulnerable adults
- The church as a community of grace should be a place of love, healing, restoration and safety
- We are commanded to obey authorities because they are appointed by God
- We are commanded to do everything for the glory of God

Scripture calls for those in positions of authority to be accountable (1 Samuel 2:12-36). Where God's servants are faithful and obedient, they should be given all due respect and honour (1 Timothy 5:17), but those within the church who sin should be challenged, in love, with the aim of bringing them to true repentance. Where wrong has been done, justice must be upheld. Salvation does not always remove from us the consequences of our sin (e.g. Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus).

All of the above principles are important when considering allegations. We must consider all of these factors carefully and must not minimise any of them, taking care to act with honesty and integrity.

All of the above considerations must be carefully considered and weighed; however, we would suggest that there is no real biblical foundation for any opposition to the principle of referring allegations to the local authority or the police for investigation where necessary. Indeed, we would suggest that Scripture directs us to submit ourselves to the authorities. What is that we have to hide that would cause us to refuse to be transparent about our practice?

Definition of an Allegation

An allegation is defined in guidance as a claim that someone who works with vulnerable people has either:

- behaved in a way that has harmed, or may have harmed them *or*
- possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to them *or*
- behaved towards a vulnerable person in a way that indicates he or she may pose a risk of harm to them

Where we have received an allegation or have a suspicion about such abuse, we must contact the Local

Authority to discuss the matter. Every Local Authority has an allegations manager; often referred to as the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) but other titles may be used. Each Local Authority publishes its procedures for handling safeguarding concerns (including allegations) on its Safeguarding Board's website and local procedures must be followed.

There are several steps that we must take. Typically, allegations management teams work office hours. As such, we may need to manage the situation ourselves initially, but it will be possible to contact the police where required for assistance and support. Where a concern comes to light while the LADO is available, they can be contacted for advice.

The following steps should be taken:

- Make an initial assessment of the situation:
 - *Is there any immediate action that is required to ensure the safety of a child, children or vulnerable adult?*
 - *Is there a possibility that evidence could be corrupted or destroyed?*
 - *Do we have sufficient information or does any initial fact finding need to be conducted?*
 - *Who should be handling the situation on behalf of the church? Usually this should be one of the elders/leaders rather than the Designated Safeguarding Officer, but you must act in accordance with your policies and procedures*
 - *How will the person against whom the allegation has been made be supported through the process?*
 - *How will reputational risk and/or damage be managed?*
- Take any immediate action that is required to ensure the above
- Contact your insurer to notify them of the allegation
- Speak to the Local Authority at the earliest possible opportunity to seek advice and ensure transparency:
 - *The LADO will advise what further action needs to be taken*
 - *Further action may include an examination of the policies, procedures and culture of the organisation*
- If an investigation is initiated:
 - *Participate fully and transparently in the investigation*
 - *Support the accused individual throughout the process as advised/requested by LADO*
- Once the investigation is complete:
 - *Take any actions that are required as advised by LADO*
 - *Dependent upon the outcome of the investigation, records will need to be either retained or destroyed*
 - *In some cases, you may need to refer the case to the Disclosure and Barring Service but LADO will advise should this be required*
- Review the experience for lessons learned and any changes to systems, processes etc that may be required

In addition, the potential for reputational damage (harm to the reputation and witness of the church) should be considered. It may be necessary to formulate official statements (in conjunction with the LADO).

Further information about handling allegations is available from Christian Safeguarding Services (CSS) and advice and support around specific allegations (anonymously discussed) can also be provided. CSS can be contacted on 0333 303 4101 or 07960 751778, or email info@thecss.co.uk or visit www.thecss.co.uk

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