



## **The Bishop of Lincoln**

### **The Presidential Address given to the Diocesan Synod on Saturday 16th November 2024 by the Rt Revd Stephen Conway, the Bishop of Lincoln**

Any form of abuse committed against children, young people and vulnerable adults is a vile sin against God and the rejection of who Jesus is. Jesus names children and by extension all the vulnerable his 'little ones'. And he wills that every human being flourish. These are the measure of the kingdom of God. It is unspeakable that individuals and groups purporting to be devoutly religious rob people of at least part their future and possibly their whole childhood for their gratification. And worse of course that people are left bearing shame which is not theirs to bear.

On Thursday 7th November, the Makin Review was published – an independent review of the Church of England's handling of allegations about John Smyth, regarding the heinous physical abuse of young men and boys connected with the life of the Church, schools and Christian youth camps.

The Makin Review makes for distressing and sobering reading. I urge you to read the report in full – to begin to understand the terrible suffering experienced by so many, and to see where the Church has fallen short of our calling to love our neighbour and defend the vulnerable.

I am named in the report for my involvement in 2013, when as Bishop of Ely, I responded to a disclosure of Smyth's abuse. I reported this matter in full both to Lambeth Palace and the diocese in South Africa where Smyth was residing. I believed that a full referral had been made to the police and that this matter was being pursued by the appropriate authority. I am properly criticised by Makin for a 'lack of curiosity' in ensuring that concerns about Smyth were being pursued in full. For this I am deeply sorry.

I bitterly regret the impact that this has had on victims and survivors of Smyth. As I speak to you today, I am conscious too of the impact that the events of this week will have had on victims and survivors of abuse in our own Diocese of Lincoln – among our parishioners, colleagues and neighbours.

The publication of this Review and its reporting in local and national media will certainly have affected you and the parishes you represent. My words here today will be made available online so that you can share them as you feel appropriate with those with whom you serve, work and worship. I urge you to reach out to us or to our Safeguarding Team if we can support you further at this time.

It is appropriate, if not actually providential, that tomorrow is designated by the Church of England as Safeguarding Sunday. May tomorrow be an opportunity for us as fellow disciples to come together in worship, to repent of our failings, and to commit ourselves afresh to making our churches, schools and chaplaincies as safe as we can for the sake of all, for whom we share the cure of souls.

As this week has unfolded, I chose to give an interview to The Times, at the invitation of their Religious Affairs correspondent, Kaya Burgess. I want to share with you all what I said during that interview.

The interview, published on Thursday afternoon, draws attention to others named in the Makin Review, including those who may have had significant knowledge of Smyth's abuses but did not act or may have actively concealed that knowledge.

Turning to me, the interview describes the actions that I did take upon receiving that disclosure in 2013 and that I did not seek to conceal it in any way.

During the course of the interview, I fully acknowledged what I have been criticised for in the Makin Review: for a 'lack of curiosity' and for not pursuing the matter more vigorously with authorities both nationally and internationally. I reiterated my apology and deep regret to the victims and survivors of Smyth, as indeed I do today.

We discussed the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, which I acknowledged as his taking personal and institutional responsibility for an acute failure in safeguarding. I understand and respect his decision, and believe it was made with integrity. I also acknowledge the pressure upon him, and also on his family.

There have been calls this week for me to step down as the Bishop of Lincoln in the wake of this report. During the interview, I was able to share the news published earlier that morning, that there is going to be a forensic investigation by the National Safeguarding Team into all those who are named in the Makin Review. I welcome this news and fully submit to that process and I am open to the discipline and guidance of the Church. My actions were also investigated in 2021, which the Makin Review acknowledges, and notes that I was found to have acted entirely in accordance with contemporary safeguarding practice.

I am not defensive about this crucial process of forensic review, but nor am I relaxed about it – this is about my public ministry among you and my own vocation.

I do believe that I have learned significantly more about safeguarding since 2013 and I have been committed to developing good safeguarding practices in both the dioceses where I have served and am serving. As the Bishop of Lincoln, I want to learn from the mistakes of the past and commit to making a difference going forward. I humbly submit to that process of review and to its outcome.

The interview also addressed the matter of police involvement in the disclosure made in 2013. I believed that a full report had been made to the police in Cambridgeshire and that the intelligence was passed on to the police in Hampshire where the abuse had taken place. I was led to believe that the police were acting upon this, and I noted that I did not have the mechanism for checking further action by the police.

Towards the end of the interview, I was glad to be able to commend our excellent Safeguarding Team in the Diocese of Lincoln, who are developing (with my support and the support of senior colleagues) effective and preventative safeguarding practice in all our parishes and church contexts. I also spoke of the independent safeguarding audit we will be participating in this month with the organisation called INEQE. I believe that this independent audit points to something crucial for the future of the Church – that robust independent scrutiny of church safeguarding will enable greater accountability in the Church, and ensure we are protecting people and making our churches as safe as they can be.

I am grateful for the opportunity which this interview provided, and for the opportunity to address you today as your Bishop. I am also deeply thankful to those who have contacted me personally this week – to some for their honesty, to others for their bravery in sharing their own experience of abuse; to those who have firmly committed to the improvement of safeguarding in our churches, and those who have offered their personal support and prayer for me.

This has been a devastating and turbulent week in which lives and futures have been changed. I hope that from this pain, what will emerge will be repentance, learning and true change in the life of the Church.

A wise person once reminded me: ‘God may call us to be broken, but he never calls us to be destroyed.’

As we approach this Safeguarding Sunday, I stand before you as a fellow disciple of Christ. I commit to greater awareness, vigilance and improvement in safeguarding culture and practice, where the needs of victims and survivors of abuse are at the front and centre of our response, and where our churches, schools and chaplaincies may be known as places of safety and refuge.

I ask you to join me in that commitment.