

Paper R2

Safeguarding Advisory Group
Historic Review

United Church 2015
Church 2015
Reformed Church 2015
Church 2015



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Safeguarding Advisory Group Historic Review

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	<p>Before Mission Council: John Proctor john.proctor@urc.org.uk</p> <p>After Mission Council: Richard Church richard.church@urc.org.uk</p>
Action required	Outline approval, according to the resolution below.
Draft resolution(s)	Mission Council directs the General Secretariat to set in hand a safeguarding review, along the lines described in the report, and to report back to every meeting of Mission Council until further notice.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To outline a way by which the URC can begin to review its historic safeguarding record, and to set this task in hand.
Main points	Review will be necessary, and must be methodical. Both synods and the central URC office hold significant quantities of material. One way to begin this task is by checking ministerial files.
Previous relevant documents	None.
Consultation has taken place with...	Ecumenical partners.

Summary of Impact

Financial	An initial triage will involve much time, but this will mainly come from existing staff and volunteers. Subsequent costs will depend on what we find in the triage.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	A number of other denominations are ahead of us. We are seeking to learn from their experience.

Historic Safeguarding Review

1. In 2004 the URC set up a Safeguarding Reference Group (now the Safeguarding Advisory Group [SAG]), which seeks to support and anchor the work of Assembly staff in safeguarding, and to promote good and careful practice in this important area. The group, which is chaired by the deputy general secretary (discipleship), includes representatives from Ministries, Education and Learning and Children's and Youth Work. The group normally reports to Mission Council through the Mission Council Advisory Group, but on this occasion has asked to bring business forward directly.
2. Standards in safeguarding are getting steadily more rigorous, and many institutions are concerned to review past decisions, to see if they match today's needs. A number of other churches have already embarked on a thorough review of historic files. There are several reasons we might want to do something similar:
 - 2.1 Duty of care. We want to ensure that the people we serve are treated safely, and that our denomination can witness with integrity. It therefore matters that those who serve in our name are known to be fit and proper people.
 - 2.2 Reputation. We wish to make clear to our people and the public that we take this issue seriously and will make responsible efforts to review our record.
 - 2.3 Public Inquiry. The forthcoming independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, initiated by the home secretary and convened by Justice Lowell Goddard, will be concerned with the work of a large number of statutory and non-statutory bodies. Churches are likely to be included, and the inquiry may ask to see evidence of our dealing with safeguarding matters across the years. It would be better to review the records for ourselves, so that we know what we have to discuss and disclose.
 - 2.4 Action. We may have a duty to consider what appropriate steps we ought yet to take in dealing with people who have been involved in difficult past events.
 - 2.5 Learning. We may need to review the procedures and training we offer and expect within our common life as a Church.
3. The work of other denominations shows that there are several ways of reviewing safeguarding work, and that material and issues may appear from several quarters. Our own management of church life, with a wide network of synods and local local churches, is quite diffuse. Much material may be held in synod offices, or local churches, and what is outlined below may be only a first step. Further, we are not yet ready to begin this work.
4. The present paper therefore asks for initial and outline approval, for work that ought not to proceed without the endorsement of a central council of the Church, but that the Church may want to start before Mission Council meets in November.
5. If we are to start promptly and work systematically, and to do so as far as possible within existing resources, the SAG recommends that our review start with the files of the Church's ministers (of Word and Sacraments and CRCWs). Ministerial accreditation reaches across the denomination; it is not narrowly local. A minister's role is intentionally representative, and their public profile is often high.
6. Ministerial files are normally held by synods. When a minister moves, the file follows to the new synod; when a minister dies, it comes to Church House. There are other records in Church House (payroll, pension, discipline, media), but generally the bulk of a minister's pastoral record will be in the office of the synod where the minister serves or lives. There are some loose ends and exceptions; but that is the usual rule.

7. We should like synods to appoint appropriate volunteers to triage these files. Triage means reading through to decide whether there is anything that needs a closer look. That is all. So triage will require people of experience, trust and objectivity, but they need not have a formal safeguarding qualification. It may be important for volunteers to have some detachment from the life of the synod and its ministers – and this might be easier to sustain if help were sought from another denomination or adjacent synod.
8. What criteria are we to use for the triage? At time of writing, detailed criteria are not yet available. But in general we mean to look for concerns that, if they arose now, would be brought to the attention of the LADO (local authority designated officer); anything we would not send to the LADO should not trouble us.
9. Mission Council will wish the detailed criteria to be clear and robust. We therefore propose that these would need to be 'signed off' by the convener of the safeguarding advisory group and the safeguarding officer, by the convener and secretary of the Ministries Committee (which is responsible for the integrity of the Church's ministry), and by our legal adviser. As mentioned above, 'sign off' must depend on appropriate professional endorsement of our plans, and our insurers too may wish to comment on the steps we propose to take. When criteria are ready, we shall supply these to synods, so that they can be followed consistently around the Church as a whole.
10. Staff in Church House will be responsible for the triage of files held there (including those mentioned in para 6 above), following the agreed criteria.
11. Timing. We shall aim to get through the triage of synod-held ministerial files – once we are ready to start – within a few months.
12. Historical horizon. We do not expect to audit files of ministers who died or left the ministry before 1972. It may not be right for us to see files of ministers who served in feeder churches but chose not to enter the URC. But we should monitor the URC's oversight of those who have been on its ministerial roll since 1972. Whether we can go into the ministerial files of those who came into the URC from other churches, we do not yet know; in principle we would wish to look at this material; in practice we may not always be able to get it. We must be as thorough as we reasonably can, and log precisely what we have and have not been able to see.
13. After triage we shall wish to consider with care those files that are picked out, and we shall need qualified staff to do this. Until we see how much there is, we cannot know whether present staff will be able to cover the task. And indeed a high level of pastoral and legal sensitivity will be required, should any of the cases need to be taken further.
14. Our legal adviser reminds us of the need for proper caution around data that was supplied confidentially or privately (see Section 7 of the Data Protection Act, 1998).
15. There will be a cost in doing this work – and it will not all be financial. We may turn up unpleasant truths, which lead to difficult decisions, and our trust in one another may come under strain. Several things will help to keep these difficulties in proportion: (i) proper preparation – not starting until we have clear rubrics, methods and criteria, then following these with care; (ii) due confidentiality, allied to clear lines of report and disclosure; (iii) the conviction that this task matters; (iv) the knowledge that when it is done we shall be breathing cleaner air. Alongside and within all of that, we must surround with prayer the task and the people we ask to do it. Vigilance, accuracy, honesty and wisdom will be vital, as will the grace of God, on which we can depend.