

Current affairs

You can't escape the name Jeffrey Epstein. The release of millions of documents by the US Justice Department late last week has demonstrated yet again how pervasive his influence continues to be on current affairs. Pages of coverage in the press have established evidence of a web of world-wide contacts that seemed to be all about sex, money, and getting access to powerful figures. I don't need to rehearse here the details of who has been affected by the new round of disclosures, including some who never had any contact with Epstein.

Earlier this week, the Guardian newspaper published an opinion piece that drew readers' attention to the coterie of powerful men, and they were only men, who seemed to protect Epstein from scrutiny, perhaps overlooking his behaviour, or believing he had been hard done by when first convicted. Scant, if any, attention was ever paid to the experience of the young women who were caught up in this international whirlwind of arguably abusive behaviour, the article stated.

The article prompted letters to the paper including one from a Methodist minister who firstly praised the robustness of the Methodist Church's safeguarding arrangements. But the link with the Epstein case, and how people knew and perhaps looked the other way, was a reference in the letter about how in their experience, some people in church life can refuse to believe what may have been alleged about the behaviour of a person they have known for a long time as part of the worshipping community. Even when the evidence of wrongdoing is overwhelming and there may also have been a conviction. For whatever reason, whether it be family loyalty, friendship, or the status of the person involved, it's hard for them to maintain any sense of respectful uncertainty. The victim's experience is diminished, cast as being of little or no consequence and in some cases, presented 'clearly' as a false allegation. In church, such historic concerns can often reflect the dynamic of a well-loved older man being accused by a younger female, perhaps no longer part of the church, and when surfaced, continue to reflect critically important gender and equality issues, as well as an ongoing failure to listen with care to what victims tell us.

Our training at both levels reminds us about hearing, listening, believing, disregarding status and reputation, and making sure we don't perpetuate the abusive experiences of those who have been hurt through looking away or inaction. The Epstein story is a sobering reminder of our need to take a stand.

For Epstein's contacts and others caught up in the current maelstrom – watch this space.

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