

Senior Leadership Training

Last week I was invited to join the pilot senior leaders' safeguarding course. It's designed to offer a level of training beyond the Advanced Module for members of the Connexional Committee, senior Connexional staff, District Chairs and others with key strategic roles in the Methodist Church. The content was concerned with identifying how leaders, as front-facing, public church representatives need to set an example through their own conduct and respond well when safeguarding concerns are escalated to them.

In preparation, and before the day course took place, participants were asked to watch three films about how church leaders in the past had not taken full and proper responsibility for investigating serious complaints and holding individuals to account where their treatment of children and young people breached a wide range of accepted behaviours. In the case of John Smyth, who established the Iwerne Trust in the 1970s as a project that provided holiday activities for public school boys, his reported behaviour was little short of barbaric. You may recall that Justin Welby's association with the Trust, where he was a young leader one summer, and his failure to follow up later reports of Smyth's behaviour, led to his resignation in 2024. Channel 4 broadcast two films about Smyth late last year and featured interviews with his family as well as some of his victims. Entitled 'See no Evil' they were both a sobering and hard watch. You can access them via the Channel 4 website, and I do recommend them to anyone with an interest in understanding more about how churches can both get it so wrong and then, hopefully learn to do better.

I found the course helpful in setting out the expectations that the Church has of its leaders. It provided space for personal and shared reflection on such topics as the theology of safeguarding, spiritual abuse, the abuse of power, confidentiality and when to share, and, in particular, trauma informed awareness and response. This last topic echoes one of the sessions we had at the district conference last year and for me, represents an aspect of practice where many of us could probably add to our learning. This could be something we look at again in the district in future years.

As I write, we await the outcome of the safeguarding audit that ran throughout February. My grateful thanks to all from around the district who took part in any way, whether in preparation, being interviewed or joining a meeting with the audit team. The DSG will meet again on 30th March, when we will learn how we have done. We have already identified a few areas where we could be a bit sharper in our practice. So, we wait and see.

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