

Safeguarding Service Speech—General Assembly 2023

Mr Adam Dillon

I'm tired.

I don't know about you, but I'm tired. I'm not talking about that just been sitting in a warm hall all day, and now after lunch, my belly's full, and the next circulation break is going to give me a caffeine hit that will get me back up. I'm not talking about that kind of tired.

It's been a long shift. We've had a worldwide pandemic to deal with, and when we thought that we could return to normal, we found that normal was somehow different. Some people didn't return to church, patterns had been broken. Presbyteries were re-forming, and presbytery planning has been a massive part of how we have lived our church life. And it's been tiring. For everyone.

Sometimes, though, it can be cathartic to exhale and say, I'm tired, absolutely cream crackered, or in the words of my late Nana Gibb, 'Ah'm aww pech'd oot.'

Tiredness, though, comes in all sorts of forms. Emotional exhaustion, empathetic distress and compassion fatigue are all markers in the caring professions, and notably in ministry.

Our own emotional ups and downs can also take up energy, space and time. However, what can be more tiring than dealing with our own difficult emotions is the energy drain that can come from suppressing our feelings or not dealing with the feelings that are there.

We often expect a lot of our bodies – to sit at a computer for long periods of time, to sleep when we want to sleep, to digest and metabolize food, or to maintain a state of health. We can also experience physical fatigue from too much or from too little physical activity.

With physical fatigue, it's important to remember that rest is not always the immediate answer, because we may first need to do things that support quality rest and sleep such as regular movement, not eating too much sugar and setting boundaries with technology.

In *The Queen's Gambit*, Stanford professor of neurology Robert Sapolsky said that chess grandmasters can burn 6,000 calories a day in tournaments. Mental exercise requires endurance, and the amount of decision making, changes, strategy, stress, uncertainty, focus, and thinking our brains have had to do this year has required a lot of energy. Think of the calories you have burned engaging with the Assembly!

We can become tired from too much social interaction, too little social interaction, or from not engaging in the kind of social interaction that aligns with your personality. Being socially

tired can also involve your virtual interactions, social media use, or involvement in social, political, or global movements.

And then there's spiritual exhaustion. That can be a difficult and dark place for all of us. It can be hard to describe, but I suspect that there's a bit of it all that we can recognise at some point in our lives. It's not something to panic about. It can be an important time of recalibration, rebirth, and reflection.

It is also important to remember that we can feel tired not just from doing too much, but from a lack of engagement in things that are meaningful and purposeful to us on a spiritual level.

I say this because I think it's important. We need to be careful of not normalizing or glorifying the experience of being tired, and we don't want to use tiredness as a measuring stick for productivity or success. We need to recognise the issues.

We've had a number of driving analogies thus far. From the altered priorities ahead roadworks of the Moderator-producing town of Kilmarnock, to the 20 miles per hour speed limit signs raised by a commissioner during our Theological Forum.

We used to drive regularly up and down the M74 from Glasgow to Moffat and we would drive past the electronic road signs. My son would insist on sticking his head out the window at seventy miles per hour, craning his neck to look at the wheels. Why? Because it said: Check your tyres. 'Yip, they are all still there,' he would say with great satisfaction. And then, if he happened to have a pal in the car, he would ask 'Are you tired?'. As soon as they said 'yes,' they fell into the trap. 'Dad, Dad,' came the smug eleven-year-old's voice, 'we need to stop.' Turning to his friend, 'you'll need to get out, my Dad can't drive you, it says right there, don't drive tired.'

Despite the hilarity in the Dillon mobile, it was a serious message. Don't drive tired. Because mistakes can happen. When we are tired, it's tempting to cut corners. When we are tired, we don't always communicate well. When we are tired, we make mistakes. When we are absolutely cream crackered, aww pech'd out with the demands of living out the Gospel as a church in Scotland, we can get cranky, carnaptious, we don't see the wood for the trees, and we say, 'I'm too tired for all that.'

Let me be abundantly clear, in a world where people in positions of trust have maliciously and sinfully and criminally abused and sexually assaulted young children, vulnerable adults, women and men, we cannot say, I'm too tired for all that.

And in a society where trusted leaders, and at times too, trusted religious leaders have violated every norm, expectation and ounce of integrity when they prey on women and

girls, using the pastoral tool for misconduct and abuse, assault and infidelity whilst destroying lives and congregations, we cannot say, 'I'm too tired for all that.'

We must humbly say that this kirk, imperfect as it is, must do everything it can to robustly safeguard its people, its volunteers and those it reaches out to in Christ's name from the fear of abuse, assault or harm of any kind. We simply cannot say, 'I'm too tired for all that.'

Often in the church, when we think about safeguarding, we might think about training days, process, paperwork, and safeguarding officers. The word can create discomfort about being out of our depth and a fear of not responding well. A whole host of emotions are loaded onto the word, and by the time these emotions combine with the sense that safeguarding is about process and getting things right, safeguarding becomes this thing that we do, a requirement, a duty.

But what if there were a completely different way to look at it? What if safeguarding is not being reactive, but being the church? What if we first ask ourselves, 'What does it mean for us to be human and to be church together?' 'What kind of community, filled with what kind of people, is God calling us to be?' and 'How does safeguarding fit with the ministry of the Gospel?'

Jesus had a very clear message about the most vulnerable people. It is a theme which is replicated throughout the whole Bible, with God portrayed in the 121st psalm as the keeper of Israel. This Hebrew word can be translated as Safeguard, which is God's need and wish for the Church, not only that we are safe, but we all work for the safety of all people. That is affirmed in the theological idea of Salvation.

In both the Greek and the Latin version of the word, the root of the word is safekeeping. The theological imperative of God is the safety of his children. Jesus consistently calls us to care for the most vulnerable in our midst.

So, let me tell you some of the things that are important to us in safeguarding this year.

It is vitally important that we all pull together, despite our tiredness, to meet the demands and expectations of creating a robust safeguarding framework ensuring that we have a safe church for all. My plea to you is that it is of absolute importance that if people are undertaking regulated work in the congregations and presbyteries that they are recruited properly and are PVG/DBS checked. If people are unsure whether someone is undertaking regulated work please be in touch with us—we're here to help and advise. This is very important with the implementation of the Disclosure Act as it now goes beyond a moral imperative to a legal responsibility. We have a huge number of people registered with us for regulated work, and we need to make sure that register is maintained in real time. Please

let Disclosure Scotland and the safeguarding service know if you stop doing regulated work so we have accurate records for when we need to reregister.

In response to the 2021 deliverance to scope out a mandatory training programme for ministers, we were able to introduce the Safeguarding Learning Pathway. This was in response to a recognition that there was a gap in training for ministers, with the emphasis having been placed on training volunteers. The Pathway was set out in a tiered approach to learning and was intended for everyone who has some responsibility for vulnerable groups within the church. It had particular expectations of ministers. We do acknowledge that there are challenges facing presbyteries/congregations in terms of meeting the timescales in the compliance pathway for safeguarding training but we do have to do everything we can to make sure everyone who needs to be trained is trained as soon as is practicably possible. I cannot emphasise enough how important this is for all of us. We also acknowledge that there is some catching up to do in trying to achieve this, and we are rolling out extra training sessions across the whole country, with a team of trainers who will attend particularly to the areas and presbyteries who are struggling to facilitate this particular responsibility. The training officer staff are here to help you, if you need signposting to an available training session.

Speaking out on behalf of the voiceless, is an important consideration for safeguarding. Those who are vulnerable are not to be seen just as victims but as those with a voice that deserve to be heard. Victims and survivors have their own decision-making opportunities and indeed with their unique and personal experience can be effective advocates for others and pursuers of justice in their own right if empowered to do so. We are continuing our work with survivors and will bring a report to next year's assembly. Put simply though, safeguarding in this respect has to be a partnership: not something done to the vulnerable, or about them, but with them. Speaking up for them and alongside them is therefore a deeply Biblical principle.

Finally, I would like to thank our partners for their continued work, to the communications department in helping us bring safeguarding online, and IT for helping us implement a new case management database, our work with and for the United Reformed Church, CrossReach and the Boys and Girls Brigades. I would also like to place on record my thanks to the staff of our service, to all volunteers across the whole country, and to my Vice Convener, Fiona Reynolds who steps down this year but has led our training side tirelessly over her years of service.