

Moderator, I would like to tell the story of a young woman today.

It had been a quiet night. For once she has been able to choose what to watch on the telly, her mum and stepdad were out, and her baby sister was sound asleep in the cot. She didn't need to mute the tv to hear the noises in the street. She could hear them coming through the underpass, the echoes of bickering with an edge of menace. She instinctively knew that the quiet of the night was well and truly gone as the front door opened. Hiding in her room, cuddling her sister, the familiar sound of arguing and the shuffle and thump of the last fight of the night went deadly quiet, and then peaked with a crescendo of violence. For this young woman, tonight was the last night.

Fifteen years old, she picked up her baby sister out of the cot, and slipped out into the cold frost of the early hours, walking through the darkness of the local park with a tiny bundle, and knocking on the door of a house she knew could offer her safety. That young woman, never returned home, carving out her own way into the world into the fiercely independent woman she is now, fighting professionally now for child protection with as much passion today as she did 31 years ago. That story is as close to my heart as it can be, and her story is the reason why I am so passionate about Safeguarding.

She reached a place that was safe that night. But not everybody does. Some end up in a place deemed safe, only to find themselves cowering for fear of violence and sexual assault. Some seek safety in organisations known for their care - charities, and churches. And as that caring hand is extended, as shelter is offered, as love and care and concern is shown it takes just one perpetrator, the proverbial wolf in sheeps clothing to destroy everything. Positions of trust simply cannot be taken for granted. We must have the courage to stand for safeguarding.

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 must have the courage to stand for safeguarding.

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 must have the courage to stand for safeguarding.

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.

And we need to take another step further. We need to have both the courage and the humility to acknowledge that men, women and children have suffered from abuse within our own ecclesiastical walls of safety. And men, women and children have been survivors of abuse and have come to us and have been met with indifference or worse still, silence.

The very first keynote speech I ever heard about violence and abuse came from Dr Myrid Tagg, 25 years ago when I was a candidate for ministry. Her words still echo in my mind today. Abuse thrives on silence. This year marks the culmination of many years of work in drawing together a policy for survivors of non recent abuse, and with your approval, our commitment to ensure that survivors voices are heard, and that we can start to become a trauma informed organisation so that no one will ever be met with indifference or silence, ever again.

The working group committed to the engagement of survivors in the development of the policy; however, we were also aware of the possibility of re-traumatisation of survivors and members of their families. This led us to seek the support of the CELCIS team at the University of Strathclyde who identified survivors to participate, and guided the design of participation activities. Their input was invaluable and has ensured we have a trauma informed policy which meets the needs of survivors.

The clear voice that this policy offers to survivors can never be underestimated. Sure it could get lost in the labyrinth of policies and procedures of which we are so fond – I have to admit my faults here, I have been a member of legal questions and I have been a presbytery clerk so I know a wee thing or two about just how fond we are. I have previous. It might get lost, but it shouldn't and to those who need it, it says, "you matter, you are precious, you are heard, and we will listen."

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.

If we recognise this, we must refocus our vision of safeguarding. The development of Safeguarding within the Church over the last two decades and more, has been phenomenal. Legislative changes introduced 'Standard' and 'Enhanced' Disclosure checks, for those working with vulnerable groups; Prompted in no small part by the Dunblane Massacre. The Church took on the challenges of implementing these processes and we have worked tirelessly to maintain our compliance with subsequent legislation and national guidance, and the PVG Scheme.

The implementation of the Disclosure Scotland Act 2020, due in April 2025, will pose our next big challenge. Ensuing compliance with the Act will not be easy. Out-with the Safeguarding Service and CrossReach, safeguarding within the Church is heavily reliant on volunteers.

Ensuring compliance with legislation in these circumstances will need significant development in safeguarding governance within congregations, Presbyteries and National Offices, particularly around accurate and up-to-date data regarding those carrying out 'regulated work'. We have recognised this within our proposed deliverances.

There's also a couple of things that just haven't made it into the Blue Book, one a matter of timing, and one a matter of evolving legislation

Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 - accredited body fees and proposals for discounting: PVG scheme consultation.

We would like to draw your attention to the Disclosure Scotland consultation regarding payment for PVG Scheme applications for volunteers. Preparing a response to this consultation was not possible in the timeframe to include it within our report; however, we think it is important that we make you aware of the proposals. While there are a few different aspects to the consultation, the most impactful is the proposed charges for volunteers.

Currently as a Qualifying Voluntary Organisation within Disclosure Scotland legislation, all Church of Scotland volunteer PVG applications and memberships are free.

As Major David Cavanagh of the Salvation Army referred to this in his comments yesterday, the impact of these proposed fees (£70) would be wide reaching. While the consultation proposes Qualifying Voluntary Organisation will benefit from a 60% discount of fees (£28), this represents a significant increase in costs in real terms.

In the 12 months to end April 2024, the Safeguarding Service processed 1596 PVG Scheme membership applications at no cost.

With the proposed discount, we would have a new cost of £44,699 – representing 40% of £111,720 total with no discount. In addition, this fee would not be a one-off as the new Disclosure Scotland Act introduces time limited memberships requiring an update application every 5 years.

With our conservative estimation of approximately 30,000 volunteers within the Church, this could represent a cost of £840,000 for the lifetime of a PVG Scheme membership, (30,000 x £28). This has the potential to significantly impact the vital services and activities we provide within our communities. It is also of note that the potentially devastating impact that this could have on priority areas, especially if the burden was placed on the volunteer to meet the cost.

The Safeguarding Service will be submitting a response to the consultation on behalf of the Church of Scotland robustly opposing any fee for volunteers.

Second, it became clear at meetings in March and April of this year between the Safeguarding Service, The Boys Brigade, Volunteer Scotland Disclosure Services and Disclosure Scotland that the current Service Learning Agreement between the Church of Scotland and the Boys Brigade is no longer compliant with evolving safeguarding legislation.

As a boy in the 1st Hamilton Company, 4th Clydebank, 2nd Clydebank and chaplain to the now disbanded 234 in Glasgow, I know well the longstanding entwining that has existed between the Church of Scotland and the Boys Brigade. For many of us, one does not exist without the other. However, neither the Boys Brigade nor the Church of Scotland can ignore the fact that the current agreement for the provision of safeguarding, needs changing, to make sure that both organisations are meeting their requirements in ensuring good, legally competent and robust safeguarding.

I will be the first to admit that this particular challenge has caused issues. A questionnaire, meant for safeguarding coordinators to comment on the challenges of safe recruitment was also sent to Session clerks where there has been no coordinator. This had been intended to provide organic data and garner collective experience from our coordinators as to what works well and what doesn't. That is all. I apologise here and now if anyone has felt that there has been criticism of the Boys Brigade and its officers. I hear your concerns, but I would also say, don't let those feelings of injury, harm either the longstanding harmony between the Boys Brigade and the Church of Scotland, or the collective responsibility that both charities have to make sure that Safeguarding is both robust and compliant.

There is a new deliverance in the name of Rev Elspeth Mackay on behalf of the safeguarding committee as I am not a commissioner to address the challenges of creating a new service agreement. We wholeheartedly endorse the 130 year history of combined work between

the Church of Scotland and the Boys Brigade, and we seek only to address the issue of the competence of an agreement that has been in existence for a decade. Together, we can affirm the importance of the Christian witness of the Boy's Brigade and its integral part in the life and work of the Church of Scotland.

Throughout the last year, the work of the Safeguarding Committee has continued to ensure professional guidance and support is available across all aspects of the work of the Church. The report contains statistical information as well as details of some specific pieces of work that have been undertaken.

Finally I would like to thank our partners for their continued work, to our partners within Central offices who help support the work of the service, 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, the years of sterling service that Julie Main gave as Safeguarding Manager before retiring in December and the enthusiasm with which our new Manager Debs Blackhurst has in taking on her new role. To all volunteers across the whole country, and to my Vice Convener, Judy Wilson who guides our training element with quiet confidence and utmost ability and commitment.

Moderator, I submit the report, and as I am not a commissioner, I invite the Principal Clerk to move the deliverances.