Church Safeguarding:
A Pastoral Perspective

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Safeguarding can sometimes make Christians nervous. For some, it could be yet another example of secular culture imposing itself on the Church. For others, it is associated with bureaucracy, policies, training courses and DBS checks. But safeguarding shouldn't begin with government legislation or church policy. It should begin with the character of God and teaching of His all-sufficient Word.

The impact of an increasingly post-Christian society and greater awareness seems to be leading to more safeguarding issues being identified or even an overall increase in cases to deal with.

Safeguarding is not a lack of faith in our God

I have recently heard it said that a church which has a safeguarding policy clearly does not believe in a God that keeps and protects His people, by His omnipotent power. But this is not what we read in God's Word. We are not to go into battle only with faith, but with the whole armour of God. We pray, we trust and we take practical steps to avoid unnecessary risks and use God-given wisdom. We do not leave a fire unguarded knowing its danger and power.

God cares for the vulnerable

Throughout God's Word, The Lord is concerned for those who are vulnerable and easily exploited. The Old Testament speaks of the widow, the orphan and stranger. The Lord is described as the One who "*executeth judgment for the oppressed*" Psalm 146:7, while Proverbs warns against moving ancient landmarks and oppressing the vulnerable.

God's character is always to be righteous, just and compassionate. The Church therefore cannot claim to reflect the character of God while being indifferent to the safety and welfare of people within its fellowship.

James gives us a searching definition of "pure religion": "*to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction*" James 1:27. True religion is not merely about what we believe, but about how our beliefs shape the way we build relationships and treat the needy. Safeguarding belongs in that framework.

Shepherds are called to protect

The Pastoral language of the Bible makes this even clearer. Peter exhorts elders to "*feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof*". A shepherd does not merely feed sheep; he watches over them. He recognises danger. He protects the vulnerable. He does not deliberately place them in situations where they are likely to be harmed.

Paul similarly warns the Ephesian elders that they must take heed both to themselves and to the flock Acts 20:28. His concern was not simply that the church should have correct doctrine, but that the people of God should be protected from those who might seek to exploit them. That has profound implications for pastoral ministry today. Church leaders who take safeguarding seriously are not becoming less trusting of God's people. They may be seeking, however imperfectly, to honour God-given responsibilities to watch over the flock.

Love requires wisdom

There is sometimes a false choice between being a loving church and being a careful church. We should not accept the idea that Christian love means assuming that everyone is safe simply because they profess to be Christians.

At the same time, we should remember that many people who serve faithfully in churches do so with sincere motives and a genuine desire to care for others. Wise safeguarding is not about casting suspicion on everyone, but about creating conditions in which trust can be exercised responsibly.

Scripture itself warns us to be discerning. Jesus told His disciples to be "*wise as serpents, and harmless as doves*" Matthew 10:16. Paul warned the Ephesian elders that "*grievous wolves*" could arise even from among those associated with the church Acts 20:29–30. Biblical love therefore includes discernment.

We do not safeguard because we believe everyone is dangerous. We do so because we recognise that people are sinners, power can be abused and vulnerable people deserve protection. We also recognise that abuse can leave deep and lasting wounds. Those who have suffered may find it difficult to speak, may fear not being believed, or carry shame that does not belong to them. They need patience, respect and compassionate support, not pressure to tell their story before they are ready.

Neither should safeguarding become an excuse for suspicion, gossip or treating people as guilty without evidence. Justice requires fairness as well as protection. Allegations must be handled carefully, confidentially and appropriately. A person raising a concern should be listened to with seriousness and kindness, while the person accused should also be treated fairly and not subjected to rumour or

premature judgment. Where there may be a risk of harm or a potential criminal matter, churches should seek appropriate professional advice and contact relevant authorities rather than attempting to investigate beyond their competence.

Legitimate concerns must never be dismissed because the person involved is respected or influential. Nor should survivors be made to feel that protecting the church's reputation matters more than caring for them. The Church's first response should be truth, humility and concern for those who have been harmed.

Safeguarding is more than paperwork

Good safeguarding certainly includes appropriate policies, safer recruitment, training and clear procedures for responding to concerns. These things matter. But they are a means, not the ultimate goal.

A church can possess a clear safeguarding policy and yet still have an unhealthy culture. The real question is: What happens when something goes wrong? Do people feel able to speak? Are concerns listened to? Are vulnerable people believed and supported? Are allegations taken seriously? Are appropriate authorities contacted when necessary? Are those in positions of responsibility willing to be accountable?

Previous articles in ET have rightly challenged churches to move beyond merely "box ticking" towards a genuine safeguarding culture. When abuse has occurred, people may need time to grieve, ask difficult questions and rebuild trust. Churches should not rush to forgiveness, reconciliation or a renewed involvement in ministry. Christian hope is not served by minimising pain. It is served by bringing the truth into the light and offering patient, practical care.

Christ-like Care

Safeguarding should be understood through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He always demonstrated deep tenderness towards those who were vulnerable. He welcomed children, noticed those who society overlooked, defended the oppressed and confronted religious leaders who used their position to burden others. His words regarding children are especially solemn: "*Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me…*" Matthew 18:6.

The Church should ask not just "What does the law require?" but, "What does Divine love and wisdom require of us?". It requires us to think carefully, act wisely, establish appropriate boundaries, listen to concerns, exercise proper accountability and put the welfare of the vulnerable before church reputation. That is not capitulation to the spirit of the age. It is the application of biblical wisdom to the realities of life in a fallen world.

A Pastoral Responsibility

Safeguarding must be embraced as part of faithful pastoral ministry. We recognising that every person is made in the image of God. We are to love our neighbour, and protect those who may be vulnerable. Authority must be exercised responsibly, by "*doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God*" Micah 6:8. Our goal surely is to create a culture of trust, openness, accountability and care.

A healthy church should be a place where children are safe in Sunday School, deaf or vulnerable adults are respected, those who have suffered abuse are heard and supported, and those entrusted with spiritual leadership open to accountability. It should also be a place where leaders can acknowledge our faults, weaknesses and mistakes, receive help and respond to concerns with humility rather than defensiveness.

The Church does not safeguard because it has lost confidence in Scripture and abandoned a living faith in the unseen "Sovereign Protector". We safeguard because we believe Scripture—and because we desire our churches to reflect the character of the God whom Scripture reveals?

Safeguarding is not "Wokeism" it is wisdom

At its heart, safeguarding is about protecting the Lord's name and His honour. It protects people from harm, takes seriously the vulnerability of others and ensures that those entrusted to our care are treated with dignity, compassion and justice. These are not secular values the Church has reluctantly adopted. They are thoroughly biblical concerns.