



LEADING SAFER CHURCHES: POWER AND VULNERABILITY IN CHURCH LIFE

Bulawayo, Zimbabwe
6-10 September 2024

An Anglican Safe Church Commission Conference

CONFERENCE REPORT

An Anglican Safe Church Commission capacity development conference to engage, equip and encourage church leaders to embrace and adapt the Safe Church Guidelines for implementation in their own contexts

About the conference

From 6 to 10 September 2024 the first international Safe Church Conference for the Anglican Communion was held in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The conference was organised by the Safe Church Commission (SCC) of the Anglican Communion in collaboration with the Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa (CAPA) and the Episcopal Ministry team of the Anglican Communion Office (EMAC) (for a list of conference contributors, please see Appendix 1). It was hosted with great warmth and generosity by the Church of the Province of Central Africa (CPCA) and specifically the diocese of Matabeleland.

Conference objectives

1. To develop and equip episcopal and lay leaders from across the Anglican Communion to confidently and effectively lead the implementation of the Safe Church Guidelines in their diverse contexts.
2. To provide opportunities for church leaders to:
 - a. share learnings and insights from Safe Church work in their own contexts;
 - b. share contextual needs and requests.
3. To establish/strengthen regional networks of support for Provincial Safe Church representatives and bishops in order to progress the work of implementing safeguarding policies and practice.

Conference delegates

The conference was attended by 227 delegates comprising bishops and their spouses, provincial Safe Church representatives, and clergy and laity from the Church of the Province of Central Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular. Local delegates included heads and chaplains of Anglican schools, theological educators, diocesan registrars, secretaries and chancellors, development project officers and people involved in child and youth ministry. Delegates represented 28 provinces of the Anglican Communion and 35 countries.

Those gathered included:

- 16 Commission members from: Zimbabwe, West Indies, United Kingdom, United States, South Africa, Scotland, Pakistan, Mexico, Melanesia, Malaysia, Ghana, Canada, Burundi, Brazil, Australia
- 18 Provincial Representatives from Zambia, Wales, West Indies, Tanzania, South India, South Africa, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Melanesia, Kenya, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Brazil, Bangladesh, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia, Angola

- 31 Bishops from: Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, the United States, United Kingdom, Tanzania, South India, South Sudan, South Africa, Lesotho, Kenya, Ghana, Eswatini, Cameroon, Bangladesh, Botswana, Angola
- 14 Bishops' spouses
- Many Provincial and Diocesan level 'registrars', chancellors, heads of schools, and secretaries-general of the CPCA.
- Most of the clergy of the dioceses in Zimbabwe, along with spouses.

Context

Safeguarding is a critical issue for the global Anglican Church. In the past two decades, numerous cases of abuse within the Anglican Church have been reported across many provinces. Many of these have not been managed well. Church leaders have often compounded the suffering of those who have been subjected to abuse by responding inappropriately or inadequately when they disclosed the abuse. As a result, several member churches have been held to account by their governments for safeguarding failures.

The church acknowledges that this needs to change and there is an urgency in ensuring that it does. Preventing abuse within the Anglican Church worldwide is fundamental to the church's integrity and credibility in fulfilling its mission of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

In 2017, the international Anglican Safe Church Commission was established and developed *Guidelines to enhance the safety of all persons within the provinces of the Anglican Communion* ('the Safe Church Guidelines'). In 2019 the Anglican Consultative Council adopted the Guidelines and requested their implementation across the Anglican Communion. Safe Church work (safeguarding) received priority focus during the Lambeth Conference in 2022. The bishops discussed, and unanimously supported, the Lambeth Call on Safe Church.

However, many bishops have approached the Safe Church Commission to request capacity development, resources and support in order to effectively implement the Safe Church Guidelines in a way that is relevant and appropriate in their contexts. Similarly, Provincial Safe Church Representatives (appointed by their primates) identified capacity building resources as their priority need in order to support bishops in leading Safe Church work.

In November 2022, a Safe Church Commission survey showed that approximately three-quarters of the provinces of the Anglican Communion had either not yet begun to implement the Safe Church Guidelines or were just beginning.

Until effective safeguarding measures are implemented in a diocese or province to prevent abuse and harm, there is a heightened risk that a church worker may use their position of trusted authority to establish an abusive relationship with a child or adult in the church community. This can have devastating consequences for the person who is abused as well as for the church community and the reputation and ministry of the church. When reports of abuse are made and those in leadership respond callously or ineffectively, it compounds the suffering of those who have been harmed.

Conference programme

(For overview of conference programme see Appendix 2)

Theological Reflections

The Safe Church Commission takes seriously the theological grounding of Safe Church work and each day we intentionally incorporated reflections on Safe Church themes led by African theologians, followed by intercultural bible study following the same theme.

Day 1: Care for those who been abused – Bishop Rose Okeno (Bishop of Butere, Kenya)

Bishop Rose presented a scripturally-grounded case for why the church should care for those who are abused, covering:

- the biblical mandate for the church to act with compassion and pursue justice for the oppressed and marginalised;
- the biblical assertion that every person is created in the image of God and therefore possesses inherent dignity and worth;
- the church's ministry of healing and restoration;
- the church's moral and ethical responsibility to protect the vulnerable and to address abuse, particularly within the church, with transparency and integrity;
- the church as the Body of Christ and the importance of care for those who are abused as an aspect of nurturing the wellbeing of the entire community; and
- the church's witness within broader society – by offering refuge and healing to those who have been abused and as well as standing against injustice and advocating for those who have been wronged, the church reflects God's love and justice.

Bishop Rose then drew on Micah 6:8 as a guiding scripture to address the question of what we as church should do in response to the reality of abuse, highlighting the three fundamental imperatives of acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God:

1. When considering the imperative to act justly Bishop Rose addressed: acknowledgement and accountability; advocacy and protection; and restoration and reparation.
2. In caring for those who have experienced abuse, Bishop Rose argued that loving mercy can be expressed through: compassionate listening; offering resources for support and healing; and while acknowledging that forgiveness is complex and a deeply personal journey, creating environments in which survivors can move towards forgiveness and reconciliation at their own pace.
3. Bishop Rose suggested that walking humbly with God in the context of Safe Church, could be enacted in the following ways: corporate reflection and repentance for ways in which church members have not been protected and/or cared for; openness to God's leading; and accountability within community.

Bishop Rose also shared about the work which her diocese had initiated in Butere in supporting both women who experience violence and teenage mothers.

Day 2: Power, vulnerability and abuse – Professor Esther Mombo (Professor of Theology, St. Paul's University, Kenya)

Prof Esther's straight-talking reflection on power and vulnerability in the Anglican Church, with particular emphasis on the African context, offered delegates some challenging perspectives on what embracing Safe Church means.

She started by acknowledging that abuse is a real issue in Africa and highlighted a statement emerging from the All-Africa Bishops Conference in 2010. In that statement, the bishops committed to advocating for the protection of all people, particularly women and children, and working actively to end all types of abuse.

Making the link between abuse, vulnerability and power, Prof Esther spoke of power within the Anglican Communion as multifaceted, often contested, and influenced by cultural and theological contexts. Examples of the visible signs of those power dynamics include objections to female representation in church leadership and the anxieties faced by ordinands regarding the power of bishops and influential church groups.

Acknowledging the limited representation of women bishops in Africa, Prof Esther spoke about the 'Africa Six': six pioneering women bishops whose consecration has challenged traditional raced and gendered hierarchies in church leadership. Five of those women bishops were present at the conference. She pointed out how even the question of how to name the women bishops (male bishops are traditionally called 'my lord bishop' or 'his lordship') requires one to confront histories of both colonial and patriarchal power.

Prof Esther characterised patriarchy as a systemic 'powerhouse' that creates inequalities and called for theological and cultural critiques of gender dynamics within the church. She went on to explore how religious teachings (such as teachings about 'perseverance' in a context of suffering) can perpetuate women's suffering and emphasised the need for a shift from hierarchical power (power over) to collaborative power (power with and power to) that promotes mutual respect and empowerment.

Prof Esther argued that the theological foundation of Safe Church is the belief that God created all people in God's own image, thereby establishing their inherent worth. She went on to define a safe church as one where individuals are free from discrimination and harm. She therefore called for a reassessment of theological teachings that have historically upheld patriarchal norms and a reimagining of church practices that prioritise justice and the dignity of all persons.

She cautioned about the emergence of movements for change such as the one recently driven by 'Generation Z' in Kenya which challenge existing power structures and reflect a broader push for inclusive, ethical, and community-centered practices, as well as social justice, equity, and relevance within faith communities.

Prof Esther's overall message emphasised the need for humility and a robust and honest critique of existing issues related to power, vulnerability, and systemic abuse in the church in order to create more safe and equitable spaces.

Day 3: Forgiveness (Justice, healing and reconciliation) in relation to abuse – Bishop Cleophas Lunga, Bishop Brian Marajh, Bishop Vivienne Faull and Bishop Justin Holcomb

In this session, the four contributing bishops were asked to share a personal experience which had caused them to grapple with the complexities of forgiveness and then to reflect on that experience theologically.

Each of the four bishops shared profound experiences of either being harmed or harming others and the processes of justice, healing and, sometimes, reconciliation and restoration which had followed. Each story was unique, each bishop's understanding of forgiveness had its own nuances and each bishop's journey with forgiveness had followed a different path, although all had taken place over substantial time periods.

The delegates received the stories with gratitude and reverence, and time was given for silence, reflection, and prayer as delegates contemplated the stories they had heard.

Day 4: Safe Church and the mission of the church – Professor James Amanze (Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana)

Prof James' carefully argued reflection on the relationship between Safe Church and the mission of the church started with reiterating the definition of Safe Church: a Safe Church is one where every person is safe, free from harm and abuse. This requires proactive measures to create a safe environment for all members, promote respect and dignity, prevent abuse, and provide quality care and support for those who have been victimised.

He then described the nature of abuse within the church, which arises from unequal power dynamics. Church leaders may misuse their authority to silence victims and manipulate congregants using religious teachings. This is contrary to the concept of the church as the Kingdom of God; a sanctuary that defends, supports, and cares for its members, ensuring they are not exploited or harmed. The church should be a trustworthy environment for healing and growth, free from misconduct, promoting peace and justice.

Prof James outlined the ways in which Safe Church environments promote loving relationships, passionate spirituality, effective structures and empowered leadership, aligning with Jesus' mission of abundant life for all. Safe Church is therefore integral to the church's mission to glorify God, preach the gospel, and nurture believers. Church leaders have a special responsibility to ensure a Safe Church, by maintaining trust and ensuring that measures are implemented to safeguard the well-being of members.

Quoting Luke 4:18-20, Prof James emphasised that Jesus came to heal the broken-hearted and liberate the oppressed, and thereby to demonstrate the vital role the church should play in addressing these issues. The church is also called to evangelise, make disciples, and share the gospel with the world, fulfilling Jesus' command to spread His message.

Throughout, Prof James stressed that a Safe Church is essential for fulfilling the mission of the church and promotes the Gospel values of love, care, and justice.

Bible Studies

After the theological reflection each day, delegates were asked to form diverse groups of 6 to 8 people and to engage in a pre-prepared bible study related to the theme of the theological reflection. Bible studies were prepared by Revd Dr Isabelle Hamley (Principal, Ridley Hall, Cambridge) and Dr Kim Barker (consultant to the SCC) (for Conference Workbook which includes complete bible studies, see Appendix 3). After reading the relevant text and spending some time in discussion around the bible study questions, feedback was invited from several groups.

Introduction to Bible Studies

In the Revd Dr Hamley's introduction to the bible studies, she highlights and discusses four themes that run through Scripture that can help us to think theologically about safeguarding/Safe Church work, namely:

- care for the vulnerable,
- the communal or collective responsibility for this care,
- the need to challenge unhealthy power dynamics, and
- complete honesty about our human nature.

Bible Study 1: Care for those who have been abused

Text: Mark 5: 21-34

Jesus stops on his way to the home of Jairus, leader in the synagogue, when a woman touches his coat. The woman is healed and she reluctantly comes forward. Jesus listens to the woman and restores wholeness in every aspect of her life, including her place in the community. The study considered Jesus' example in his response to a woman who has been abused and the implications of this for the church.

Bible Study 2: Power and vulnerability

Text: 2 Samuel 11-12

The bible study offered the opportunity to reflect on the power dynamics within the well-known story of King David and Bath-Sheba, as well as challenging some of the widely accepted myths related to the narrative. Power and vulnerability play a central role in all that unfolds and delegates were challenged to consider the implications for safeguarding in the church.

Bible Study 3: Justice, healing and reconciliation

Text: Genesis 45:1-15

There are very few stories in Scripture which relate to interpersonal repentance, apology, forgiveness, justice and reconciliation and those that we do encounter are complex and quite messy. This text is one of those. The bible study invited delegates to consider some of the complexity and processes involved in coming to forgive those who have caused harm.

Bible Study 4: Safe Church and the mission of the church

Texts: Exodus 22:21-24; Leviticus 19:34, 25:35; Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:28-29, 24:17-18, 26:12, 27:19; Job 29:12-17; Proverbs 15:25, 23:10; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 7:6-7, 49:11; Matthew 25:31-46; James 1:27

This bible study highlighted the repeated emphasis in Scripture, both Old and New Testament, on the collective responsibility of the community to care for the vulnerable. This responsibility is a foundational aspect of being the people of God in the world. Safe Church work is therefore absolutely central to the mission of the church, rather than being a peripheral add-on.

Worship

The conference was opened with a wonderful, celebratory Eucharist service with Archbishop Albert Chama of the CPCA presiding and preaching. Worship was enhanced by a local choir and the All Stars acapella group singing the beautiful and moving songs written specially for the occasion by Bishop Cleophas Lunga.

Each day began with Morning Prayer and ended with Evening Prayer led each time by a different region represented at the conference. The liturgy had been prepared by Revd Dr Eileen Scully and each group presented readings and hymns in languages spoken in their region.

On the Sunday in the middle of the conference, all delegates attended a service at St. Columba's High School which marked the 71st anniversary of the diocese. The Very Revd Canon Sammy Wainana, Adviser on Anglican Communion Affairs to the Archbishop of Canterbury, gave the sermon during the service.

At the start of his sermon, 'Shepherding the Church to Safety', Revd Sammy affirmed that people expect churches to be safe places and that abuse by church leaders is devastating both for those abused and the entire church community. Nobody should have to experience abuse and particularly not within the church. He emphasised that making our churches safer places for everyone is a practical expression of the Gospel.

Drawing on John 10:1-15, which speaks of the relationship between Christ and His church as that of the Shepherd and his sheep, Revd Sammy highlighted several characteristics of Jesus as a Good Shepherd:

1. *Jesus knows his own people*

Jesus is like a shepherd who knows each sheep by name. He cares deeply for each sheep and protects them. This personal connection is different to a thief who is a stranger and harms the sheep.

2. *Jesus nurtures his own people*

Jesus is both the shepherd and the gate, guiding his flock to safety and nourishment. He offers true life, while false leaders may exploit or harm their followers.

3. *Jesus dies for his own people*

Jesus voluntarily sacrifices himself, demonstrating his deep love and commitment.

4. *Jesus transforms his own people*

Jesus gathers people from all backgrounds, creating one united flock. In Christ, everyone is equal, regardless of differences.

He concluded that just as a good shepherd protects and takes care of the sheep, the church and its leaders need to provide protection, boundaries and the opportunity for fellowship for its members.

A Eucharist service that was both vibrant and poignant, drew the conference to a close. The Rt Revd Jo Bailey Wells, Deputy Secretary General of the Anglican Communion and the bishop for Episcopal Ministry at the Anglican Communion Office presided and preached during the

service. In her sermon she drew on the following texts: Exodus 3:1-10; Ephesians 3:14-21; and Luke 6:12-19.

Bishop Jo's sermon focused on discipleship, starting with celebrating the decision to follow Jesus as the best choice one can make. This joy of discipleship is amplified when shared with a diverse community of fellow believers, as at the conference.

She also reminded delegates that our decision to follow is rooted in God's prior choice for us, emphasizing the relational aspect of faith. Jesus emphasizes this in the book of John, reminding us that we are called because God first chose us.

Bishop Jo highlighted the following three key truths about discipleship:

1. *Personal Calling*: Each person is called by name, highlighting the intimate nature of God's invitation.
2. *Investment in Calling*: Jesus invested deeply in his disciples, reflecting a commitment that goes beyond superficial relationships.
3. *Inclusivity of God's Call*: Jesus chose a diverse group of disciples, including unlikely candidates like Judas, illustrating God's radical inclusivity.

She then issued a warning against the abuse of power by church leaders, saying that the listing of the twelve disciples should not suggest a sense of privilege or exclusivity. Jesus' ministry was characterized by inclusiveness, welcoming all kinds of people, including women and marginalized individuals.

Bishop Jo emphasised that discipleship can lead to adventure and challenges rather than security, but that the journey of discipleship is filled with opportunities for growth, learning, and responding to God's love. Believers are encouraged to dream big, to trust in God's guidance and to embrace the unknown paths ahead.

Capacity development sessions

Ten capacity development sessions were offered across the four days of the conference. Each day had an overarching theme and that day's sessions addressed the theme.

Running through the first eight sessions was an extended narrative that was based on the parable of the good Samaritan but which related to abuse within a church context and the responses of various role-players to the abuse. A new 'chapter' of the parable was introduced at some point in each session and groups were invited to make connections between the content of the parable and the issues addressed in that session (For the full text of the parable, see Appendix 3: Conference Workbook).

Day 1: Safe Church – Fundamental Concepts

Session 1: Developing a shared understanding of Safe Church and abuse

This session invited delegates to reflect on their own understandings of safeguarding and 'Safe Church' and to move towards a shared understanding, drawing on the Safe Church Guidelines. From the perspective of the Anglican Communion, Safe Church is our commitment to do all we can to ensure that our churches are safer places for everyone. We emphasised Safe Church's two primary concerns, namely,

1. to prevent harm and abuse of any member of a church community by any person in a position of leadership or authority within the church; and
2. to ensure that church leaders respond well – effectively, consistently and with compassion – whenever abuse is disclosed and/or reported.

The session went on to discuss what we understand by the term 'abuse' offering a range of definitions to broaden understanding, including the definition provided in the Guidelines, which emphasises the role of power dynamics, namely:

When a person uses their power in a relationship or situation to say things or do things which:

- a. cause harm to the other person, or
- b. intend to cause harm to the other person, or
- c. put the other person at risk of harm.

We discussed some of the impacts of abuse on those who are abused. Bishop Justin Holcomb's personal story of childhood sexual abuse and recovery underlined these impacts and also the hope of healing.

Finally, the Parable of the Compassionate Church Leader was introduced to the delegates. The first chapter was read to delegates and they divided into groups to discuss key questions.

Contributors: Kim Barker, Bishop Justin Holcomb

Session 2: Caring for all who are impacted by abuse in the church

This session looked more broadly than the needs of the primary victim/survivor of abuse to consider the broader impacts of abuse in a church context. We considered together who the different groups of people/ members of the church community are who might be impacted when abuse occurs and who will need care. Delegates generated extensive lists which included: the victim's family and close friends, the alleged perpetrator, their spouse, their children, other members of their family and those in the church who love and support them, the clergy and lay

leaders in the church, the bishop, ordinary church members and so on. Our experienced panel then responded to questions about how we care for all those impacted by abuse in a church community. Delegates reflected together on the next chapter of the parable, related to care for all those impacted by abuse.

Contributors: *Robin Hammeal-Urban, Bishop Rose Okeno, Marcel Cesar, Revd Sr Veronica Vasethe, Bishop Vivienne Faull*

Day 2: Preventing Abuse

Session 3: Power, vulnerability and abuse

This session considered the questions: What is power? and What gives people power? We looked at power as the ability to direct or influence other's behaviour or the course of events, or put another way, the capacity to choose what will happen in a particular situation and to make it happen. We discussed the factors that cause power to accrue to certain people and cause other peoples' power to be diminished such as age, wealth, education level, position, gender, race. Delegates then completed and reflected on their personal power audit, looking at the power they have in different contexts of their lives. Delegates were also invited to consider power dynamics within a church community, and how power can be abused in that context. Delegates were encouraged to make good use of whatever power they might hold to lead and support Safe Church work.

Contributors: *Mandy Marshall, Marcel Cesar*

Session 4: Implementing systems to prevent abuse (1):

Developing a Code of Conduct

This session was introduced with a wonderful illustration – if you pull a single strand of wool, it breaks easily, whereas if you weave many strands of wool together, it is difficult to break, no matter how hard you pull. In the same way, Safe Church work is strengthened by bringing together various processes, systems and practices. This session focussed on systems to prevent abuse and, in particular developing standards for ministry, which can be expressed in a Code of Conduct. Garth Blake, who has been involved in implementing Safe Church work in Australia for more than two decades, was interviewed about how they went about introducing standards for ministry in Australia and the lessons learned. Delegates then worked in groups to develop a Code of Conduct for leaders on a youth camp.

Contributors: *Daphne Audsley, Andrew Khoo, Garth Blake, Kim Barker*

Session 5: Implementing systems to prevent abuse (2):

Background checking

The second session on implementing systems to prevent abuse and harm in the church, focused on background checking. This was introduced through the next chapter of the parable followed by group discussion. A panel consisting of church leaders with experience in introducing Safe Church background checking shared the lessons they had learned in their

different contexts. Delegates then participated in a group discussion reflecting on their existing systems for background checking and how they could be strengthened.

Contributors: Daphne Audsley, Robin Hammeal Urban, Bishop Viv Faull, Marcel Cesar, Garth Blake, Kim Barker

Day 3: Responding to abuse

Session 6: Challenges in Pastoral Care: Forgiveness, accountability, justice and reconciliation in the context of abuse

This session followed after the theological reflection session on forgiveness where four bishops had shared personal stories related to forgiveness. Delegates were therefore given time for silent reflection on the stories they had heard and on their own experiences and understandings of forgiveness. This was followed by a discussion in groups around what forgiveness means in different languages, cultures and contexts. A panel consisting of the four bishops who had shared their stories, and the chair of the Safe Church Commission, Garth Blake, then responded to questions relating to forgiveness, accountability, justice and reconciliation in the context of abuse. Delegates also discussed the next chapter in the parable narrative. Some of the key points which emerged from these discussions were the following:

- a. Each situation where someone might ask for or grant forgiveness is unique and complex.
- b. Our culture and worldview, as well as our faith, influence how we understand and approach the process of forgiveness.
- c. Any form of pressure to forgive that is imposed on another person is never helpful.
- d. Forgiveness may come out of a healing process and this process may take a long time.

Contributors: Kim Barker, Garth Blake, Bishop Cleophas Lunga, Bishop Viv Faull, Bishop Brian Marajh, Bishop Justin Holcomb

Session 7: Implementing systems to respond when abuse is reported (1): Investigations and disciplinary process - developing fair process

On the third day, the emphasis shifted to implementing systems to respond effectively when abuse is reported. This session focussed what is required to ensure that the process which is followed after abuse is reported is fair for all concerned. Working in groups, delegates generated lists of what is essential to ensure that a process is fair:

- a. from the alleged abuser's (respondent's) perspective;, and
- b. from the victim/complainant's perspective.

Factors include: giving the complainant time and space to have their story heard and validated, informing the alleged perpetrator of the allegations and giving them time to present their own version of events, ensuring that there are no conflicts of interest for any person involved in the process, maintaining confidentiality as far as possible, and so on. An experienced panel then discussed the process of conducting investigations, and particularly what to avoid, such as having the investigator also be the person who decides if the allegation is founded.

Contributors: Robin Hammeal-Urban, Garth Blake, Canon Rosalie Manning, Daphne Audsley

Session 8.1: Implementing systems to respond when abuse is reported (2): Reporting processes and barriers to reporting

This session discussed the factors that get in the way of people reporting abuse that they suspect is happening and/or abuse that they have experienced. Delegates first looked back on the parable we had been discussing and considered why those who knew about the abuse had not come forward sooner to report. They then reflected on the barriers to reporting abuse in their own cultures and churches. In groups delegates considered the following questions:

- a. What steps can we take in our churches to create an environment where people will feel safe enough to speak out about abuse?
- b. What kind of reporting system would reduce the barriers to coming forward and making a formal report when abuse has happened in my own context?

There was brief input focussed on what a reporting system looks like and why they are important, followed by an interview with Robin Hammeal-Urban who has extensive experience in this work, around receiving reports, record keeping, and confidentiality.

Contributors: Robin Hammeal-Urban, Kim Barker

Day 4: Looking ahead – Strategic Planning

Session 9.1: Planning a Safe Church awareness raising day/event

This session was practically focused and took delegates through the process of preparing a Safe Church awareness-raising event in diocesan/regional/interest-centred groups. Several Safe Church Commission members spoke about their experiences of awareness raising in their provinces. Questions that delegates then considered in their planning included: who they would want to invite/include in the event, what the essential elements of the event would be, where they would hold it, how long it would be, what the important messages were that they would want to convey and so on. Each group came up with fairly detailed action plans.

Contributors: Mandy Marshall, Revd Sr Veronica Vasethe, Ena Barclay, Revd Efren Velasquez, Marcel Cesar, Kim Barker

Session 9.2: Challenges in sustaining Safe Church work

This was a more conversational session with provincial Safe Church representatives working in contexts where safeguarding systems have been at least fairly well-established for a period of time. The conversation focused first on the question: What are your experiences and challenges related to Safe Church in your context? The delegates then considered how the Safe Church Commission can best serve / support them going forward.

Contributors: Garth Blake, Robin Hammeal-Urban, Daphne Audsley

Session 10.1(a): Provincial representatives – Strategic planning

This session brought together all provincial Safe Church representatives to discuss what they felt priority activities should be for the Safe Church Commission going forward. This was an open discussion which started with the following questions:

- a. What is happening in your context in relation to Safe Church?
- b. What next steps would you like to take in relation to Safe Church work in your context?

Representatives requested the establishment of regional networks of support and practice-sharing which met on a regular basis, as well as whatsapp groups for ease of communication. Representatives also supported the idea of regional capacity-building events.

Contributors: Garth Blake and other SCC members

Session 10.1(b): Local delegates – Strategic planning

Bishop Cleophas Lunga, of the Diocese of Matabeleland and Mandy Marshall facilitated a session with the local delegates, dividing them into dioceses and interest groups to engage in strategic planning. Each group mapped out detailed Safe Church action steps to be taken within their province, diocese or interest group and presented these to the plenary.

Contributors: Bishop Cleophas Lunga, Mandy Marshall

Conclusion

Overall, the feedback from delegates about the conference was overwhelmingly positive (for the feedback form, see Appendix 4 and for detailed analysis of feedback, see Appendix 5).

Delegates acknowledged that abuse is a reality in all contexts, including Africa and that Safe Church is needed as a priority. Delegates reported feeling inspired and determined to implement safeguarding policies and procedures despite existing cultures of silence.

As would be expected for a conference that was the first of its kind and attracted many more delegates than initially anticipated, there were lessons learned and areas identified for improvement. This feedback is gratefully received and will be taken into account when planning future events.

Holding the conference in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, was complex and may have cost more than using a more accessible location. However, the significance of the conference taking place in the Province of Central Africa and in the Diocese of Matabeleland at this time, should not be underestimated. The outstanding support from the province and particularly from the diocese, and the large numbers of local delegates who attended demonstrated that the concept of Safe Church has been publicly embraced and its implementation is supported.

A further positive outcome of the conference was that several provinces appointed Safe Church representatives for the first time. The conference helped strengthen relationships between the SCC and these representatives, allowing them to create regional support networks. The SCC plans to keep in touch with Safe Church representatives and continue developing these connections.

Recommendations

1. The conference was highly valued by the participants who appreciated learning from delegates in other contexts. The SCC therefore recommends that regional Safe Church conferences take place with SCC members participating to encourage and facilitate cross-provincial learning.
2. Given the significant success of this conference, it is recommended that a global conference on safeguarding be held once every 3-5 years
3. The SCC needs to nurture the regional Safe Church networks which were established at the conference, to encourage support, learning and sharing of resources and best practice across contexts.
4. The SCC should continue developing resources to support church leaders in implementing the Safe Church Guidelines as these were warmly received by delegates and further resources were requested, including a Safe Church training manual.

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Report prepared by Kim Barker

Appendix 1: Contributors to the Safe Church Conference

Safe Church Commission members *(in alphabetical order)*:

Daphne Audsley - Scotland
Ena Barclay - West Indies
Dr Kim Barker - Co-opted Facilitator - South Africa
Garth Blake – Chair – Australia
The Revd Canon Wadie Far - Jerusalem and the Middle East *(unable to travel to Zimbabwe, contributed to planning)*
The Rt Revd Viv Faull – England
The Revd Dr Shazhad Gill - Pakistan
Robin Hammeal-Urban - United States
Yves Iradukunda - Burundi
Canon Andrew Khoo - Malaysia
Naw Laldini – Myanmar *(unable to travel to Zimbabwe, contributed to planning)*
The Rt Revd Cleophas Lunga – Zimbabwe (Bishop of Matabeleland and conference host)
The Rt Revd Brian Marajh - South Africa
Marcel Cesar Pereira - Brazil
The Revd Dr Eileen Scully - Canada
The Rt Revd Dr Festus Yeboah-Asuamah - Ghana
Revd Sr Veronica Vasethe - Oceania
The Revd Efrén Velázquez - Mexico/Central America

Other Contributors *(in alphabetical order)*:

Professor James Amanze – Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana: *Offered theological reflection ‘Safe Church and the Mission of the Church’*
The Rt Revd Dr Jo Bailey Wells – Bishop for Episcopal Ministry and Deputy Secretary-General, Anglican Communion: *presided and preached at closing Eucharist; Convenor and contributor, Bishops’ sessions*
Dr Helen Blake – Pastoral Counsellor, Lecturer, Supervisor: *Facilitator, Bishops’ spouses’ sessions*
The Rt Revd Albert Chama – Archbishop and Primate of the Church of the Province of Central Africa which hosted the conference: *presided and preached at opening Eucharist; presided at Sunday service; Contributor, Bishops’ sessions*
His Worship David Coltart – Mayor of Bulawayo: *welcoming address*
The Revd Canon Kofi DeGraft Johnson – General Secretary, Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa (CAPA): *Master of Ceremonies; Contributor, Bishops’ sessions*
The Rt Revd Justin Holcomb – Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida: *Contributor to conference sessions and panels; Contributor, Bishops’ sessions*

Canon Rosalie Manning, Chairperson of the Safe and Inclusive Church Commission and the Deputy Registrar for the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA): *Contributor, panel discussion*

Mandy Marshall – Director for Gender Justice, Anglican Communion; Link Director to the Safe Church Commission: *Facilitator/Contributor, Conference Sessions*

Professor Esther Mombo – Professor of Theology, St. Paul's University, Kenya: *Offered theological reflection 'Power, vulnerability and abuse'*

The Hon Judith Ncube – Bulawayo Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution: *welcoming address*

The Revd Fedis Nyagah – Senior Programme Manager, Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa (CAPA): *Facilitator, Bishops' spouses' sessions*

The Rt Revd Rose Okeno – Bishop of Butere, Kenya: *Offered theological reflection 'Caring for those who have been abused'*

The Very Revd Canon Sammy Wainaina – Adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury: *Master of Ceremonies; Contributor, Bishops' sessions*

Appendix 2: Conference Programme

Programme for Safe Church Conference September 2024

Day 1 Fundamental concepts Fri 6 Sept		Day 2 Preventing Abuse Sat 7 Sept	Sunday Sunday 8 Sept	Day 3 Responding to Abuse Monday 9 Sept	Day 4 Strategic Planning Tuesday 10 Sept
08h15 – 08h45	Opening Eucharist	Morning prayer	Combined service at St Columba's Church	Morning prayer	Morning prayer
08h45 – 10h15	Welcome and Introductions	Theological reflection and Bible Study 2: Power and vulnerability (Prof Esther Mombo)	Entertainment	Theological Reflection and Bible Study 3: Exploring Forgiveness (Justice, Healing and Reconciliation) (Bishops Cleophas Lunga, Justin Holcomb, Vivienne Faulk, Brian Marajh)	Theological Reflection and Bible Study 4: Safe Church and the mission of the Church (Prof James Amanze)
10h15–10h45	Tea	Tea	Lunch	Tea	Tea
10h45–12h45	Session 1: Developing a shared understanding of Safe Church and abuse	Session 3: Power, vulnerability and abuse		Session 6: Challenges in Pastoral Care Forgiveness, accountability, justice and reconciliation in the context of abuse	Session 9.1 Planning a Safe Church awareness raising day
12h45–14h00	Lunch	Lunch		Lunch	Lunch
14h00–15h30	Theological Reflection and Bible Study 1: Care for those who are abused (Bishop Rose Okeno)	Session 4: Implementing systems to prevent abuse (1) Developing a Code of Conduct	15h00 Return to hotels/lodges Rest time	Session 7: Implementing systems to respond effectively when abuse is reported (1) Investigations and disciplinary process: developing fair process	Session 10.1 Strategic planning Input to future work of the SCC
15h30–16h00	Tea	Tea		Tea	Session 10.2 Spouses Reflection on learnings Strategic planning
16h00–17h30	Session 2: Caring for all who are impacted by abuse in the church	Session 5: Implementing systems to prevent abuse (2) Background checking		Session 8.1 Implementing systems to respond effectively ... (2) Reporting processes and barriers to reporting Referrals, Record keeping Managing confidentiality Evening Prayer	Session 10.3 Bishops Strategic planning
17h30–18h00	Evening Prayer	Evening Prayer		Session 8.2 Bishops Challenges in Pastoral Care	Session 9.2 Challenges in sustaining Safe Church work
18h30–20h00	Dinner at the Music Academy and concert	Dinner at the Church of the Ascension	Dinner at St Mary's Church	Dinner at All Saint's, Riverside	Closing Eucharist
					Dinner at the conference venue



Safe Church Commission Conference Bulawayo, Zimbabwe September 2024

Bible Studies

Safe Church Parable



Introduction

This workbook was developed for delegates attending International Safe Church Commission of the Anglican Communion's capacity development conference in Bulawayo from 6 to 11 September entitled: **Leading Safer Churches: Power and vulnerability in church life.**

For more information on the Safe Church Commission's work see:

<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/community/commissions/the-anglican-communion-safe-church-commission.aspx>

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Revd Dr Isabelle Hamley for her contribution to the development of the Bible Studies, in particular the Introduction to the Bible Studies and Bible Studies Two and Four. Dr Kim Barker developed Bible Studies One and Three.

Thank you to Daphne Audsley for her work in extending and developing the parable that the Safe Church Commission used in their plenary at the Lambeth Conference 2022. That parable was adapted from: Parkinson, P. "What Does the Lord Require of Us? Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches" (2002) 4 *Journal of Religion and Abuse* 3-31.

We are also grateful to Daphne Audsley for compiling this workbook.

Day One Friday 5 September: Fundamental Concepts

Session One: Developing a Shared understanding of Safe Church

During the Conference the members of the Safe Church Commission will use a modern parable as an example of how Safe Church issues can affect a church community. The story of our fictional church will feature in sessions 1-8. The text is printed in this booklet so that you have it to refer to when working in groups, but please don't read the next chapter before the session it is intended for.

In the parable, if this story is similar to any situation you are aware of, or people you may know, it is not intended and is just a coincidence. The characters and the story are made up.

Parable characters in order of appearance

Charity, her son **Samuel** by her late husband

David, a church leader

Three other church leaders called **Thomas, Moses and Solomon**.

David's wife **Patience**, their son **Innocent**

A Children's ministry leader called **Faith**

Four potential candidates for ministry **Simon, Andrew, James and John** known as 'The Fishermen'

From the Diocese **Bishop Melchizedek**

Chapter 1: The Parable of the Compassionate Church Leader

Our story begins with a young woman called Charity. She is a widow with a young son called Samuel. A few years after her husband passes away, Charity joins a church group that meets every week for Bible study. After she has been attending for a few months, David, one of the church leaders, offers her a lift home. Soon this is happening every week.

Charity confides in David how much she misses her husband and about her determination to do her best for her son Samuel. David in turn, tells Charity how much he admires her courage, her sense of humour and her kindness. David also tells Charity that his own marriage is not happy as his wife Patience does not understand him. David warns Charity not to speak to friends at church about their meetings. Over many months Charity comes to depend on David's support, and she feels valued and respected by him. However, Charity suddenly stops attending the church.

A few months later, Thomas, one of David's colleagues, sees Charity out shopping. She is clearly pregnant. Thomas greets her and asks, "When do we expect to see you in church again?" Charity replies, "Your colleague David made a fool out of me, betrayed my trust and manipulated my feelings for him. When I told David about the child, he said that God would punish me for my wickedness in leading him astray, but before that he had said I was doing God's will in submitting to him and I believed him."

Thomas answers, "Are you sure that this is what happened? I know David well, and he would never do what you describe. It would be better for everyone if you stay quiet and stay away. I'll pray for you." Then Thomas walks away and leaves her.

Soon afterwards Charity is at the shops again when Moses, another church leader sees her and also asks, “When can we expect to see you in church again?” Again she explains, “Your colleague David made a fool out of me, betrayed my trust and manipulated my feelings for him. When I told David about the child, he said that God would punish me for my wickedness in leading him astray, but before that he had said I was doing God’s will in submitting to him and I believed him.”

Moses answers very seriously, “If this is what you say happened, you can make a complaint in writing, and I will arrange a mediation. You will tell your story and he will tell his. If he acknowledges his actions and accepts responsibility for them, then you will be able to say what you think should happen. If he does not accept your story, then I will refer the matter to a diocesan official and you can give evidence. If a diocesan tribunal believes your story, then the church leader in question will be disciplined. Let me know what you want to do.” Then Moses also walks away and leaves her.

A few weeks later Charity is greeted by Fr Solomon, the Rector of the parish as she walks home from town. He also asks her, “When can we expect to see you in church again?” Again she explains, “Your colleague David made a fool out of me, betrayed my trust and manipulated my feelings for him. When I told David about the child, he said that God would punish me for my wickedness in leading him astray, but before that he had said I was doing God’s will in submitting to him and I believed him.”

Solomon asks her if she could tell him more and they speak at length. Then he says, “I take this matter very seriously and I deeply regret the suffering that you are experiencing. If you are willing to give your permission, I will ask someone with training and experience in responding to situations like this to contact you about how to make a formal complaint. They will offer to meet with you to talk about what has happened and discuss options with you. You may invite anyone that you trust to be with you and to support you during the meeting.

If you would find it helpful, I can also put you in touch with a local women’s group which supports women in difficult situations in practical and other ways.’

Solomon leaves Charity after promising that he will follow up on the matters they have discussed.

For reflection

- *What stood out for you in this session?*

- *Coming out of this session, what action(s) do you want to take when you get back home?*

Session 2: Caring for all who are impacted by abuse in the church

Introduction to Safe Church Bible Studies

We are aware that thinking and talking about abuse can be distressing for those who have experienced abuse or other forms of violation themselves, as well as for those who have seen someone close to them suffer due to abuse. Please be sensitive to this and do not require all bible study members to participate or contribute. Encourage members to take care of themselves and to take time out or leave if the conversation causes them pain or distress.

The whole story of Scripture offers us a vision for communities where human dignity is protected and people flourish, starting with the creation story in Genesis. At a time when people believed that only a king was made in the image of God, and that a king had complete power while others were on earth were only there to serve the gods as slaves, the opening story of the Old Testament offers us a totally different idea.

According to Genesis, all humankind is made in the image of God, both male and female. In God's plan, there is equality, worth, dignity, and we are challenged to re-think the way power is used. However, humankind is unable to live out this vision and the story of Adam and Eve explores the ways in which relationships become broken and unhealthy, how human beings come to rule over one another, and how the precious dignity and equality of creation is lost.

From then on, the story of Scripture weaves together two themes: holding on to God's vision for his creation and living with the reality of human sin, with its terrible consequences. Sin destroys and violates the precious dignity and image of God, both in those who are victims of that sin, and those who commit it. God works continuously to restore this image within individuals and communities. This means reaching out to those who suffer and bringing deliverance; it means helping the community of Israel work out how to organise their life together in ways that support healthy relationships and flourishing; it means holding people to account when they fail, and leaders in particular. And it means being completely honest about humanity.

Four particular themes that run powerfully through Scripture that help us to think theologically about safeguarding/Safe Church work:

- care for the vulnerable,
- the communal or collective responsibility for this care,
- challenging unhealthy power dynamics, and
- complete honesty about our human nature.

1. Care for the vulnerable

God repeatedly commands his people to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger, as the people most likely to be abused because they had least power and were largely invisible. God's care and compassion is not just a reaction when things go wrong. It is ongoing, active and intentional. It challenges the comfortable in their routines and stands up against discrimination that excludes people and takes away their power. It is everyone's responsibility to care for others in a community. Scripture tells us it is not simply left to a community's leaders or those who are ordained. To care well, the entire community must organise itself in ways that support healthy relationships. The book of Judges looks at the relationship between people and leaders, and how carelessness, abuses of power and

unwillingness to speak out and challenge those in power leads to the abuse of women and children. Judges holds the perpetrators responsible as well as their communities, in their choices of leaders, in the way they are organised, and in their governance.

2. Creating safe communities is a shared task that involves every person

Challenging unhealthy power dynamics is at the heart of Scripture. The story of Exodus focuses on God's challenge to Pharaoh's terrible abuses of power - the people cry out to God, and God acts. But in setting them free, God calls Israel out of Egypt to form a different kind of community. Escaping from Pharaoh's power is not enough; the people need to be freed from Egypt's ways of thinking and organising themselves as a community. In receiving the Law, Israel is called to care for the vulnerable and not misuse power. There are laws to prevent the people gathering up too much wealth or benefiting from inherited privilege; laws to prevent a king from being too powerful and separate from the people; laws to ensure that justice is administered fairly; and laws to limit the power of male heads of households in a deeply patriarchal society. Underneath all of these is the call to love God and love our neighbour.

3. Challenging unhealthy power dynamics

Humankind is easily tempted by power and the desire to use others for their own benefit. There are many stories of power in all its forms being misused even by those who hold small amounts of power, and many stories of prophets and other people who stand up and challenge the misuse of power at every level. Finally, God redefines power in the most significant event of Scripture: the coming of Jesus Christ. Through his humble birth, life and death Jesus redefines what power means, and God demonstrates how to use power well. Jesus takes his own power seriously, does not refuse to use it, or deny it, but instead, uses power differently, to restore human beings and offer healing, welcome and even challenge. This is the power not of dominance or force, but the power of self-giving love and service. This redefinition of power is deeply uncomfortable, and the church has struggled to live it out from the earliest times.

4. Complete honesty about our human nature

It would have been easy for the Bible to be full of heroes and people who got it 'right'. Instead, we have a range of fragile, broken communities that struggle to be who they are called to be. These are communities that sometimes get it right, sometimes don't and sometimes fail catastrophically. Yet the limitations of the community of faith are never the end of the road: God patiently works with them with a never-ending grace. It is this grace that allows us to be honest: human beings do not have to pretend, because they are already known and loved.

It is complex and often traumatic to be creatures in the world, and the Old Testament confronts this reality head on: the ugliness of sin and abuses of power; the potential of every person and community to do terrible things; the deep impact of human sin on others and on ourselves.

If Scripture teaches us one thing, it is that in the face of evil, communities need to be honest about what has happened, what the consequences are, and how their own trauma, sin or brokenness shapes their response – whether it is good, bad, or non-existent. We see this in Paul's public transformation from murderer of Christians to lover of Christ. How do we create this kind of honesty within our communities and within ourselves? This is the challenge we need to take up in the church, a challenge that safeguarding requires of us as well: to be honest about who we are, to care for the vulnerable, to challenge unhealthy power dynamics, and to nurture responsible communities that support belonging, dignity, and flourishing.

Bible Study One: Care for those who are abused

Reading

Read Mark 5: 21-34, a story which is not without its own complexities and power dynamics but one that has much to offer as we think about what it means to care for those who have suffered abuse.

Context

This story unfolds as Jesus is hurrying along with Jairus, a leader in the synagogue. Jairus has begged Jesus to come and heal his daughter, who is close to death. The crowd follows and surrounds them as they hurry towards Jairus' home, but Jesus suddenly stops and searches the faces of the people pressing up against him. A hush descends, and Jesus speaks with authority and compassion. 'Who touched my clothes?'

The disciples find the question very strange. Any number of people have touched Jesus in just the last minute. What can he mean? But there is one woman who knows exactly what he means. The woman has been bleeding for 12 years. However, the physical suffering and inconvenience of the illness are not the worst of her story. Due to her condition, she has been considered ritually unclean according to Jewish purity laws and has been excluded from her place of worship and from her community. The woman has also been exploited and abused. We hear that she has been to doctor after doctor. They have taken her money but she still has no cure. In fact, she is getting worse. This is a woman who has reached the end of her own resources.

But she knows what Jesus meant when he asked who touched him. She had gathered her remaining strength and courage to force her way through the crowds just to get close enough to Jesus to touch his cloak, in a desperate hope that she would be healed. And she was. As incredible as it seems, she knows that her body was fully restored in the moment that her fingers touched the cloth. But now she is afraid. She knows that she has challenged taboos and her touch has made Jesus unclean, and so she expects condemnation. She considers slipping away into the crowd. But perhaps something in the gentleness of his voice, the softness of his gaze, the faint smile playing at his lips gives her the courage she needs to stay, and she cowers in front of him, hiding her face.

The crowd is now silent, mesmerised by what is unfolding in front of them. How will Jesus deal with this nobody, this outcast, this woman. But there is no rebuke and no harsh words. Perhaps Jesus reaches down and takes the woman's hand, raising her to her feet. Perhaps he asks again, gazing into her eyes with love and delight. Who is it that touched my cloak? And perhaps she gives her name. And we can imagine that moment of being seen with love.

At his encouragement, she tells him her whole story, not just about her physical affliction, but what has been done to her, how she has responded, the whole awful truth, as Jesus listens. In the presence of a ruler in the synagogue which has excluded her, he listens. In the presence of the community which would have marginalised her, he listens, and in his listening presence Jesus restores far more than her body. He restores her dignity and her place in society and removes her shame. And without saying a word, he exposes the injustice of those who listen with him.

Then Jesus speaks. He calls the woman 'daughter', a term of intimacy and kinship, that tells us she belongs and she is beloved. He affirms her faith, a faith that has endured despite being excluded from the faith community for more than a decade. He speaks words of blessing, and vocation: 'Go in peace', and restores her to wholeness in every aspect of her life. 'Be freed from your suffering'.

Questions for reflection:

1. Who do you identify with in the story? Are you one of the disciples who find it hard to believe what has happened? Or maybe one of the crowd who regard the woman as unclean? Or do you identify with the woman herself as a victim of abuse?
2. This woman has been abused. Who abused her and in what ways? What was it that made her vulnerable to being the target of abuse?
3. What stands out for you about the way that Jesus interacts with the woman who was bleeding?
4. Jesus didn't need to stop. The woman's body was healed when she touched his cloak. Why do you think Jesus chose to stop?
5. What does this story offer us when we think about Safe Church work?

How can we respond?

Take time to remember and acknowledge that those of us who are in the church do not always fulfil the call to love one another as God loves us. Sometimes church members and church leaders (both clergy and lay leaders) abuse and harm others in the church or in their own families. Acknowledging that people in the church can harm one another is not easy. It may be helpful to spend some time in silent prayer for our churches and for those who have been harmed by abuse within the church. Abuse does not only have an impact on the person being abused. It has an impact on their families, peers and the broader community. Abuse within the church can have devastating impacts on a church community. Pray for all those who are impacted by abuse. We can also pray for ourselves that we will have the courage to listen and to act in order to make our churches safer places for all.

Think about those who experience abuse in your own context.

- a. What can we learn from Jesus' example?
- b. How can the church express compassion and care to those who have been or are being abused?
- c. What can we do to ensure that the vulnerable are protected and abuse is prevented?
- d. What is the next step for my church?

Chapter 2: The Parable of Fr Solomon

Fr Solomon is the rector of a large congregation and there are many demands on his time. A few weeks after Charity tells her story to Fr Solomon, David resigns his post and leaves immediately. The congregation is told that David has resigned for family reasons.

There are rumours in the congregation and some gossip about what has happened to David. Some people come forward to Fr Solomon with concerns about how David behaved towards themselves, and some complain that David was forced to leave because Fr Solomon and other leaders were jealous of his success and popularity. Many people miss David and want to try to persuade him to return to their church community. Fr Solomon finds it difficult to know what to say in response to the rumours, and the additional pastoral work with people who are confused, worried and sometimes angry takes up a lot of his time and weighs heavily on him.

The ministry team is stretched after David's departure, and Fr Solomon takes on extra duties. Fr Solomon's health suffers because of the stress, and he contacts a former college mentor for support.

Day Two Saturday 7 September: Preventing Abuse

Bible Study Two: Power and Vulnerability

Reading

2 Samuel 11-12

Context

The story of David and Bath-Sheba is well-known. However we don't usually consider it from the point of view of all the different people in the story, or think about the story in terms of power, vulnerability and safeguarding. There are many myths about this story – such as that Bath-Sheba was bathing on the roof in order to tempt the king. In actual fact, she was following normal custom and was unlikely to be naked. Also, the text does not say that she was on the roof, it says that David went out on the roof. Bath-Sheba would not have been aware that she could be seen. Only the king's palace would have been higher than her home and this was the time of year when kings would usually go out to war would not be expected to be in the palace.

It is also important to think about the power dynamics in this situation. David has great power as a king, as a man, and as a Jew in relation to the vulnerability of Bath-Sheba's sex, ethnicity (Uriah is not Jewish; it is uncertain whether Bath-Sheba is) and social position. Nowhere is there any mention of Bath-Sheba being asked for or granting consent. If we read on and come to Nathan's challenge to David, the image he uses of a 'little ewe lamb' is a symbol of both innocence and vulnerability, while the rich man 'takes it'. This suggests that violence and coercion or force were used.

The prophet's confrontation with David is very public: David as leader is not allowed to lie or hide. He is held to account. David repents and confesses – this is the setting given for Psalm 51. David does not escape the consequences of his actions. In some contexts today, we might expect him to lose his own political leadership; within the world of the text, the judgement threatens the succession to the throne in David's line, which may be seen as a greater judgement. David's failures will end up hurting his family, his children, and the entire nation.

Questions for discussion:

1. How is Bath-Sheba usually spoken about and understood in your church or culture?
2. Did Bath-Sheba have any power to choose or resist what was happening? What do you imagine would have happened if she had refused to go to David or refused to have sex with him?
3. What types of power are available – or not – to different people in the story: David, Bath-Sheba, Uriah, Joab, Nathan?
4. What is the impact of *how* we tell this story for the people in our congregations? How can we use this story-sharing power carefully and wisely?
5. The story gives an example of accountability and judgement in a very different time to now. How do accountability and judgement work within your context?
6. Do you think David should have kept his position of leadership?
7. Thinking about the theological reflection this morning and this story, what do you want to particularly remember or apply in your life and work?

Session 3: Power, vulnerability and abuse

Chapter 3: The Parable of Faith, Innocent and Patience

One year before the start of our parable, before David's relationship with Charity has begun, Innocent the six-year old son of David and Patience tells Faith (one of the children's workers at the Church) that his father is often violent towards him and his mother and that he is frightened. Faith is young, has only been a leader for a short time and doesn't know what to do or who to tell. David is very popular in the church community and Faith is in awe of him.

Faith decides to speak to Patience, David's wife, who assures her that Innocent makes up stories all the time and all is well with the family. Patience is expecting her second child. Faith does not speak to anyone else about what Innocent has said even though she and others have noticed that David frequently humiliates Patience in front of others. David does this in a joking manner so people don't take him seriously.

Chapter 4: The Parable of the 'Fishermen'

At around the same time that Innocent tells Faith about his father's violence, David is asked to mentor a group of young men who want to learn more about leadership and ministry. Because of the coincidence of their names - **Simon, Andrew, James and John** – they are known as the **Fishermen**. Initially David is very positive and praises their commitment and enthusiasm, but over time this changes.

David starts telling them all to work harder and harder. He says that God is disappointed in them. Sometimes he just stops speaking to one of the men completely but continues to be friendly towards the others. Whoever is being treated this way has to beg David's forgiveness without having any idea of what they have done to upset him. John is quieter and David treats him more kindly than the others. John feels guilty that David favours him but is afraid of making David angry if he stands up for his friends. Simon challenges David's behaviour more than the others and suffers the worst of David's anger. He is left feeling angry himself and hurt. The Fishermen stop trusting each other and the friendship between the four of them becomes strained.

Fr Solomon is not aware of any of this because David only tells him good things about the Fishermen's progress. Much later on, after David has left the congregation Fr Solomon meets with the Fishermen. Only then do they have the courage to talk about how David treated them.

For reflection

- *What stood out for you in this session?*
- *Coming out of this session, what action(s) do you want to take when you get back home?*

Session 4: Implementing measures to prevent abuse (1)

Chapter 5: We hear more about David's resignation

Although Fr Solomon follows up just as he had promised after speaking to Charity, Charity herself feels anxious about taking the matter further. Her baby is due soon and she asks to delay meeting with the diocesan official. David resigns from his post before any investigation into his behaviour towards Charity can take place. Fr Solomon has kept the matter confidential, but as we have already heard there is gossip in the congregation. He has been very careful in his conversations with David and the other leaders, and is shocked by David's sudden resignation. David and Patience move away from the area immediately.

Session 5: Implementing systems to prevent abuse (2)

Chapter 6: David is appointed to a new job

Within a year of leaving Fr Solomon's church, David has taken up a similar position at a church in the next diocese. David is very charming and the church leaders there are delighted to appoint him. They have watched his popular series of videos on Christian Values on YouTube. They are impressed by his confident manner and inspiring vision for their congregation. They accept that his resignation from his previous role was for family reasons, even though he doesn't give details. They do not see any need to ask David's former colleagues to confirm his achievements or give more information.

For reflection

- *What stood out for you in sessions 4 and 5?*

- *Coming out of these sessions, what action(s) do you want to take when you get back home?*

Day Three Monday 9 September: Responding to Abuse

Bible Study Three: Justice, Healing and Reconciliation

Context

Any discussion about justice, healing and reconciliation in relation to abuse within the church, usually leads us to the topic of forgiveness. Forgiveness can be a difficult topic in relation to safeguarding/Safe Church. Talk of forgiveness can be used:

- to pressure victims to forgive before they are emotionally ready to do so;
- to minimise (make smaller) the reality of what has happened,
- to avoid a process of accountability and justice.

Yet at the same time there are passages in the Bible that seem to require forgiveness and suggest that it is important for healthy people and communities. What is not always clear, is exactly what the writer means when they use the word 'forgive'.

Forgiveness can sometimes be unilateral (from one side only, the victim chooses forgiveness even when the offender has not acknowledged what they did or apologised). In this case it is about one person choosing to let go of revenge, anger, bitterness, hatred or resentment and the ongoing desire to hurt the one who has hurt them.

However, many would argue that for true forgiveness to take place, truth-telling must happen first: one can only forgive what has been acknowledged by the person who caused the harm as needing forgiveness; where there is remorse and repentance, as well as honest confession and apology. Also, a person needs to have a strong sense of who they are and their place in the world, in order to freely choose to forgive. However, abuse can cause damage to this sense of one's identity and a journey of healing may be needed first which may take time.

Reconciliation is different to forgiveness. It involves a restoration of relationship and it therefore needs to involve both parties. Jesus tells his disciples to forgive an offender who repents, but reconciliation is more complex, because it requires observable change on the part of the wrongdoer. Even if it is possible to restore a relationship, it does not mean that the relationship will just go back to what it was before hurt or abuse arose. The relationship will be different and may not be as close as before. Having healthy boundaries in place will be essential. If the one who has been hurt does not believe that they will be safe again in the relationship, reconciliation may be impossible.

Neither forgiveness nor reconciliation assume that the consequences of someone's actions will be wiped away: justice and judgement are a society's way of remaining safe and healthy.

In the Bible, there are far more examples of revenge and retribution in response to harm than there are examples of forgiveness and reconciliation. Although there is a strong focus in Scripture on asking God's forgiveness for our sins, there seems to be less emphasis on apologising to the people we have harmed and restoring relationships.

For example, in our bible study yesterday we reflected on the story of David and Bath-Sheba. While we have Psalm 51 as a powerful expression of David's repentance and remorse expressed to God, nowhere does the Bible tell us that he apologised to Bath-Sheba or took steps to make amends for his terrible actions.

In truth, there are very few stories in the Bible of repentance, apology, forgiveness, justice and reconciliation and those that we do encounter are complex and quite messy. The story that we will study today is one of those.

Reading: Genesis 45:1-15

Background

The background to the story starts much earlier in Genesis. Joseph's brothers are jealous that he is their father Jacob's favourite and they are tired of what they see as his arrogance. When Jacob sends Joseph out to check on his brothers who are tending their flocks, the brothers first plot to kill him. Reuben pleads for him, and they throw him into an empty water well instead. However, when a caravan of traders passes by, Judah persuades his brothers to sell Joseph as a slave instead. They present his bloodied coat to their father who believes he has been killed by wild animals and is distraught.

Fast forward to Genesis 42. There is severe famine affecting Canaan, prompting Jacob to send his sons to Egypt to buy grain. When they arrive, they unknowingly encounter their brother Joseph. Many years have passed and Joseph is in now a position of authority and influence. The power dynamic has shifted and his brothers can no longer hurt him. In fact, he has power over them. Joseph recognises his brothers, but they do not recognise him. He chooses not to reveal his identity. Despite the time that has passed, and having forged a successful life and in many ways having overcome what was done to him, Joseph still experiences distress and grief when confronted with his brothers, and he is desperate for news of his father and youngest brother.

Joseph seems unsure how to manage the situation and he accuses his brothers of being spies. He then devises a plan to test them - are they still the same people who wanted to kill him and sold him into slavery? He poses a challenge to them that will reveal their attitudes towards their father and Benjamin, his full biological brother.

They expose even more than he expects about their guilt and remorse for their actions towards Joseph by talking in front of him in their home language, thinking he won't understand. Joseph demands that they bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, back to him to prove that they are in fact honest. He knows that this will cause turmoil at home and lead to much reflection, soul-searching, and discussion. Joseph keeps Simeon as a hostage while the others return to Canaan with the grain they have bought. On the way back they discover that the silver they used to pay for the grain has been put back in their sacks which causes further fear and confusion.

In Genesis 43 the brutal famine continues, forcing Jacob to eventually give in and send his sons back to Egypt, with his beloved Benjamin. The brothers are anxious about how Joseph will receive them, but he welcomes them warmly and hosts a meal, showing special favour to Benjamin, even though he is overcome with emotion when seeing Benjamin and leaves the room abruptly to hide it. The brothers are reunited with Simeon and treated well. They still don't recognise Joseph even though they are surprised he seats them in their correct birth order at the meal.

In Genesis 44, Joseph sets up a final test for his brothers by hiding his silver cup in Benjamin's sack and then accusing them of theft. The brothers are brought to Joseph, where Judah steps forward and offers himself as a substitute to save Benjamin, showing that he has truly changed and is no longer the same young man who sold his brother for 20 shekels of silver.

Their words and actions finally convince Joseph that there has been a shift in his brothers. He sends his servants away and then reveals his identity.

Read Genesis 45: 1-15

Questions for reflection

1. What surprises you about this story?
2. If you think about forgiveness, what do you notice in this story?
3. Why do you think Joseph even considered forgiving his brothers?
4. Why does Joseph need to test his brothers in the way that he does? Think together about what a victim/survivor might need to have happen or have in place before they are able to consider forgiving the person who has abused or harmed them.
5. How could Joseph's actions towards his brothers in this passage could be seen as an abuse of the power he now holds. Reflect together on the complexity of the impacts of abuse and harm for the person who has been abused and the process of healing .
6. Is there anything you want to remember from this story or from the theological reflections this morning as you think about your own life or ministry and experiences related to abuse and forgiveness?

Session 6: Challenges in Pastoral Care

Chapter 7: We hear more about David

About two years after joining this new church, David tries to have a relationship with another young woman in difficult circumstances similar to Charity's. This young woman refuses him, and he rapes her. She reports this immediately to David's rector. The story gets out and is shared on social media. Very soon people in David's previous congregation hear about it.

Chapter 8: Patience seeks help

When he realises that his actions have been found out, David beats Patience and Innocent in a violent attack, leaving them afraid for their lives. Patience realises that David will never change, so she asks for help and tells her story. David has abused her throughout their marriage, and their son Innocent from when he was a small child.

Chapter 9: Charity's daughter is born

When Charity's daughter is born she realises that her love for her child is strong. She calls her Joy. David has not been held accountable for his actions and has shown no remorse. Charity realises that that David will never apologise or acknowledge Joy as his daughter, but she now feels able to let go of her anger and resentment and focus on being a loving mother. However, when she hears that David has abused another woman Charity feels strong anger and resentment again.

Chapter 10: Patience and Innocent

Patience cannot forgive David. She still carries the physical and psychological scars from her marriage to him. She is afraid that he will find her and kill her and her children.

Her son Innocent sees his mother's suffering and he is angry that Faith did not believe him when he told her what was happening. He struggles to trust people.

Chapter 11: The Fishermen

When the Fishermen hear about David's behaviour, they are traumatised. Thomas tells the Fishermen that David was teaching them to be obedient to God's will. Thomas also tells the Fishermen they should forgive David because they do not understand the pressures that he faced.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Go through the characters one by one. What does each character need most at this time?
2. Go through the characters one by one again. How would you respond pastorally to each person if they came to speak to you and to seek your guidance?
3. Would a discussion about forgiveness be appropriate in any of these situations?
4. What are your thoughts about Thomas telling the fishermen to forgive David and the reason he gives for doing so?

Session 7: Implementing systems to respond when abuse is reported (1)

Chapter 12: Faith feels guilty

Faith hears what has happened to Patience and Innocent and feels guilty about not helping Innocent when he told her about his father's abuse. She tells Fr Solomon about what Innocent tried to tell her several years before.

Chapter 13: Bishop Melchizedek hears about what has been happening

Bishop Melchizedek is very concerned to hear about what has happened in one of his congregations. He is disappointed that the issues were not shared with him at the time. He is worried that things could get very much worse if nothing is done. He is also concerned that he doesn't yet have the whole story and that they may still find out more about David's behaviour. Bishop Melchizedek recognises that he needs to find advisers who can help him manage the situation and respond to the wide range of allegations that have been made. He also wonders what can be done about a disciplinary process for David. He calls a meeting to discuss what action should be taken.

Session 8.1: Implementing systems to respond when abuse is reported (2)

Chapter 14: How our parable ends

We have one final chapter of our parable to bring you up to date with what has happened to our characters.

Fr Solomon is still the Rector. He has learned to take better care of his health and mental wellbeing and has introduced measures to support the other church leaders. He teaches about Safe Church in his sermons. Fr Solomon shares any Safe Church concerns with Bishop Melchizedek as soon as he hears about them.

Thomas was deeply shocked when he heard all the things that David was alleged to have done and he has struggled to come to terms with it all. Since then he has had many doubts. Sometimes he questions his faith and whether he should continue in ministry. He wishes the church community could be the way it used to be. He misses his friend David and feels lost without him.

Moses still quotes rules at people, but thankfully not as frequently. He now understands more about the effects of abuse and the importance of listening and responding well. He has apologised to Charity for his unhelpful and insensitive response when she told him about David's abuse.

Moses is now in charge of mentoring the 'Fishermen'. **The Fishermen** have come to appreciate Moses as their mentor – he keeps clear professional boundaries, and treats them equally and with respect. To everyone's surprise including his own, Moses is a really good teacher. He offers helpful advice without criticism and he is a calm and reassuring presence. However, David's behaviour has made all four the Fishermen feel less certain of their calling. Only time will tell whether any of them will go to college to start formal training for ministry.

Bishop Melchizedek is taking the lead in improving Safe Church work in the diocese. A Diocesan Safe Church Adviser helps to co-ordinate this work and is building up a network of contacts across all the congregations in the diocese. Sadly, there is no funding to employ someone to do this important work, but a retired healthcare professional is willing to serve the church as a volunteer. All church leaders are offered Safe Church training and know that help and support is available from their diocese. Bishop Melchizedek seeks and takes advice when he is faced with complex situations.

After more than a year away, **Charity** has started to attend church regularly again. She teaches young boys in the Church to respect women and she volunteers with the local women's group which had supported her when she was pregnant with her daughter Joy. Charity is not ready to form a new relationship. She finds joy in her two children and her work with women and children.

Faith has benefitted from Safe Church training and is now more confident as a leader. She makes contact with Patience to say that she is sorry that she didn't know how to help her and Innocent before. She is putting her faith into practice by helping to set up a refuge and advice centre for abused women and children.

Patience and her children still live in fear that David will find them. Patience receives support from the local women's group, but every day is a struggle for survival on very limited finances and living with the trauma of her past experiences. She finds it hard to trust anyone. Patience and her children are too scared to attend church. Innocent is struggling at school and has difficulty making friends.

And what of David? Bishop Melchizedek's office now holds a file with details of all the allegations and the investigation that took place. This will be kept so it is available at any point in the future to any congregation that may consider appointing David to a position of trust.

David himself has disappeared, dropped out of church life completely. Nobody, not even his friend Thomas, knows where he is at the moment. He could be looking for a new role in the church, perhaps in a congregation near someone here today, where nobody knows him. How well is your church prepared?

Day 4 Tuesday 10 September: Strategic Planning

Bible Study Four: Safe Church and the mission of the Church

Readings

Exodus 22:21-24

Leviticus 19:34, 25:35

Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:28-29, 24:17-18, 26:12, 27:19

Job 29:12-17

Proverbs 15:25, 23:10

Isaiah 1:17

Jeremiah 7:6-7, 49:11

Matthew 25:31-46

James 1:27

Context

Safe Church or safeguarding can sometimes be thought of as an 'add-on' to the church or for an organisation's work; something imported from the Western world (Global North), or the secular world; or it can be thought of as just being a reaction to situations where things have gone wrong. Yet Scripture consistently emphasises that entire communities are responsible for caring for the vulnerable. It is a foundational part of being the people of God in the world.

Scripture places a responsibility on the entire community (not just leaders, priests, prophets etc.) to support and protect the health and welfare of the community; throughout Old and New Testament, repeated again and again, there is a requirement to prioritise care for the weak and vulnerable. The entire community is responsible for the welfare of the vulnerable, and entire communities are held accountable for abuse and oppression taking place within their communities (this is seen both in narrative texts, such as Samuel and Kings, as well as in the Prophets).

Protection of the widow, orphan, and stranger, commanded so strongly and repeatedly in the Old Testament, and repeated in the New Testament is all about being aware of vulnerability and using power wisely. Widows and orphans did not have a male head of the household in a culture where your belonging and welfare depended on 'the house of the father'. To not have a male head of household meant that you lacked a protector, a provider and a defender. This resulted in very real vulnerabilities in a harsh society. It would almost certainly result in poverty and the inability to fight for one's rights. To be a stranger or alien was similar: like widows and orphans, they had way in to the social connectedness they would need to be safe and prosperous. Therefore, those who are secure in their membership of community networks and have the safety and protection of their households are told to take active steps to ensure the wellbeing of those who are vulnerable. It is an essential part of the witness of Israel, and an essential part of the witness of the Early Church. To care for the vulnerable, to be a community within which all are cared for is not just a good thing to do but it reflects the character of God himself. It is an essential part of the calling and mission of the people of God.

A community of survivors, people who have experienced abuse within churches, wrote this about safeguarding/Safe Church work:

Often in the church, when we think about safeguarding (Safe Church work), we might think about training days, process, paperwork, safeguarding officers. The word can create a sense of being out of our depth and brings up 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?”

<https://survivorsvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Theology-for-safeguarding-paper.pdf>

Questions for reflection:

1. What effect does it have for you to hear all these verses, one after the other?
2. If you take the orphan/widow/stranger as a way of talking about those who are vulnerable, who would the ‘orphan/widow/strangers’ be in your own community and in your church?
3. What are the factors that put those people at risk within your community or church?
4. What steps does your community already take to take care of or protect those who are vulnerable in your community?
5. How can you help your community be a safer place for those who are vulnerable?
6. Having reflected on these texts, how would you now answer this question: “How does safeguarding/Safe Church work fit with the ministry of the Gospel?”
7. Thinking about the theological reflection this morning and this study, what do you particularly want to remember and apply in your life and work?

Appendix 4

Safe Church Conference, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe 6-10 September 2024

Feedback Questionnaire

Thank you for attending the Safe Church Conference. Your feedback will help us improve future events. Please take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire. You can use the blank page on the back for writing comments.

1. General Information (optional)

- **Name:**
- **Country:**
- **Role/Position:**

2. Conference Content

- a. How would you **rate the overall content of the conference?**

Terrible				Average				Outstanding		
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- b. **How relevant was the content** to your work or ministry?

☐ Very Relevant ☐ Somewhat Relevant ☐ Not Relevant

- c. Comments about conference content:

3. Theological Reflections and Bible studies

- a. How would you **rate the theological reflections and bible studies** presented during the conference?

Terrible				Average				Outstanding		
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Comments about theological reflections and bible studies:

4. Overall Experience

- a. How would you **rate your overall experience at the conference?**

Terrible				Average				Outstanding		
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

- b. What was the **most valuable** part of the conference for you?

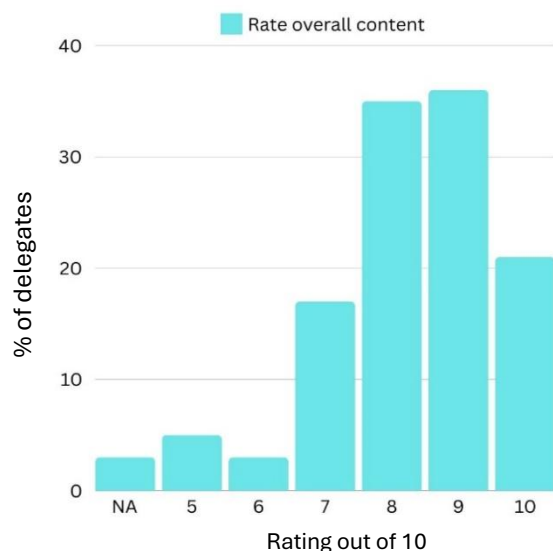
- c. What suggestions do you have for **improving future conferences?**

- d. Please provide **any additional comments or feedback** on the back of this page.

Appendix 5: Analysis of conference feedback

A printed survey was handed out to all delegates present on the final day of the conference and time was allocated in the final session for delegates to complete and submit the survey (See Appendix 2). A total of 120 delegates completed the survey and the responses were captured and analysed.

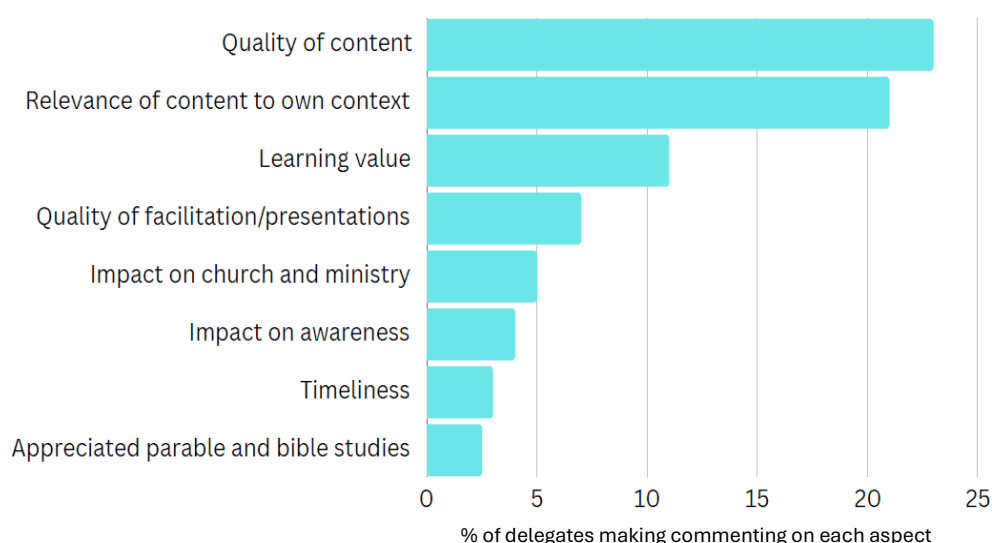
Quality of the content provided in conference sessions



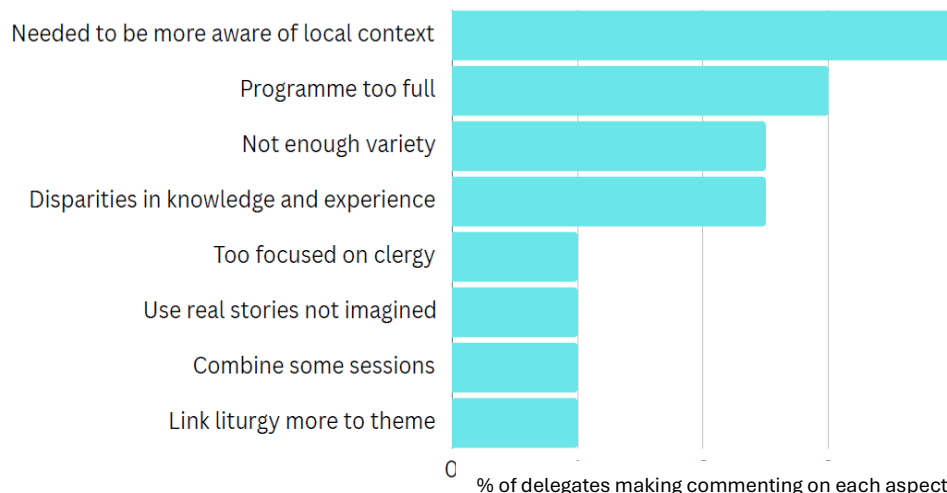
The vast majority of delegates rated the quality of the content between 7 and 10/10. None rated it below 5/10.



Most delegates responded positively to the content. Specifically, 21% said it was relevant to their own experiences. 11% found it educational, and 7% praised the quality of presentations. 5% believed it could significantly implement their church and planned to share their learnings. 4.2% felt it challenged their previous beliefs, using phrases like 'eye-opening' and 'mind-blowing'. 3.3% thought it was timely, and 2.5% appreciated the use of the extended parable as a teaching tool.



Positive comments on content

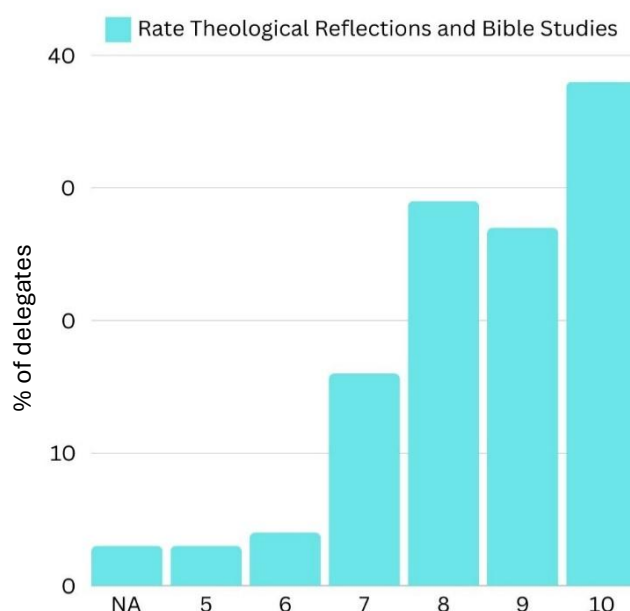


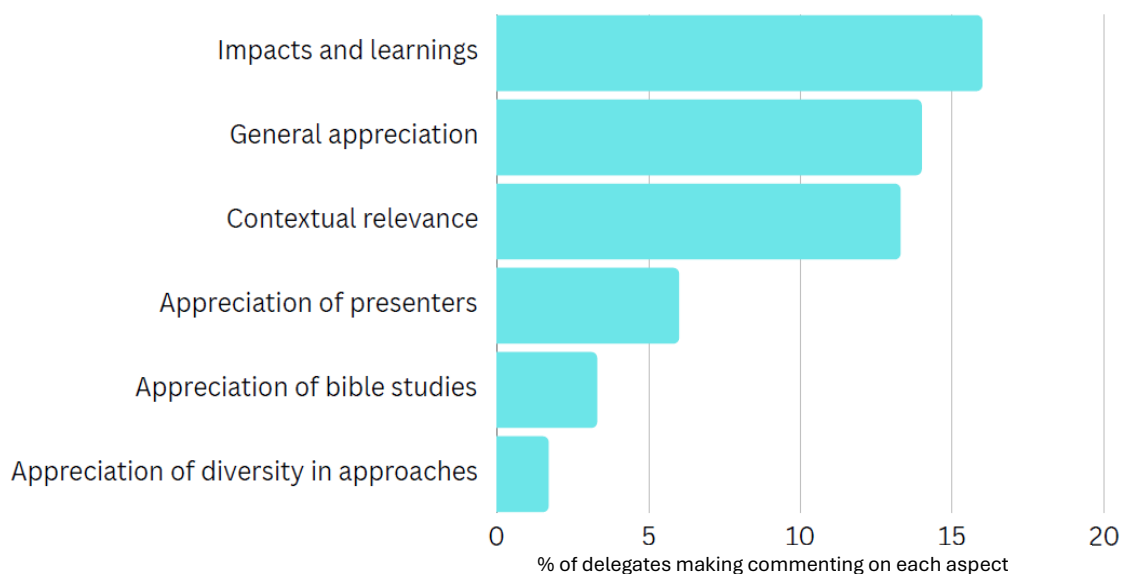
Critical comments related to content

A very small percentage of delegates offered critical feedback about the conference. 4% thought the organisers should have been more mindful of local African context and culture. 3% felt the programme was too full and 1% suggested combining some sessions. Another 2.5% wanted more varied teaching methods, while a further 2.5% thought differences in baseline knowledge among attendees made learning harder. Additionally, one delegate said the focus was too much on clergy and not enough on other church leaders who hold power in church communities, and another would have liked to discuss real case studies instead of parables. One delegate also suggested linking worship practices more closely to the day's theme.

Quality of theological reflections and bible studies

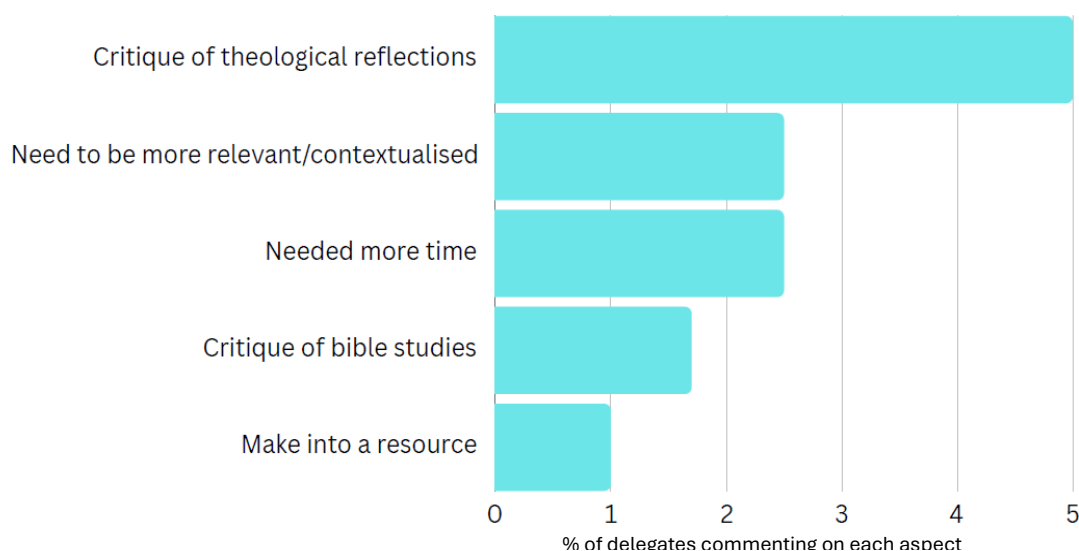
The theological reflections and bible studies were the most highly rated aspect of the conference with 38% of delegates rating them 10/10.





Positive comments on theological reflections and bible studies

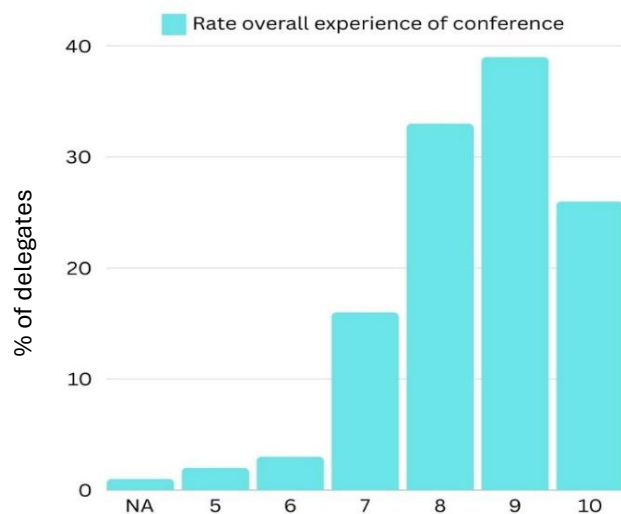
Feedback on theological reflections and Bible studies was generally very positive, with delegates valuing the learning opportunities they offered, their relevance to their own experiences, hearing the diverse perspectives offered, particularly during group discussions, and appreciating the quality of presenters.



Suggestions to improve theological reflections and bible studies

Once again, the percentage of critical comments was low. A few delegates suggested improvements in relevance of theological reflections, and level of engagement with delegates, and some requested more time for discussion. One delegate suggested making the bible studies available as a booklet.

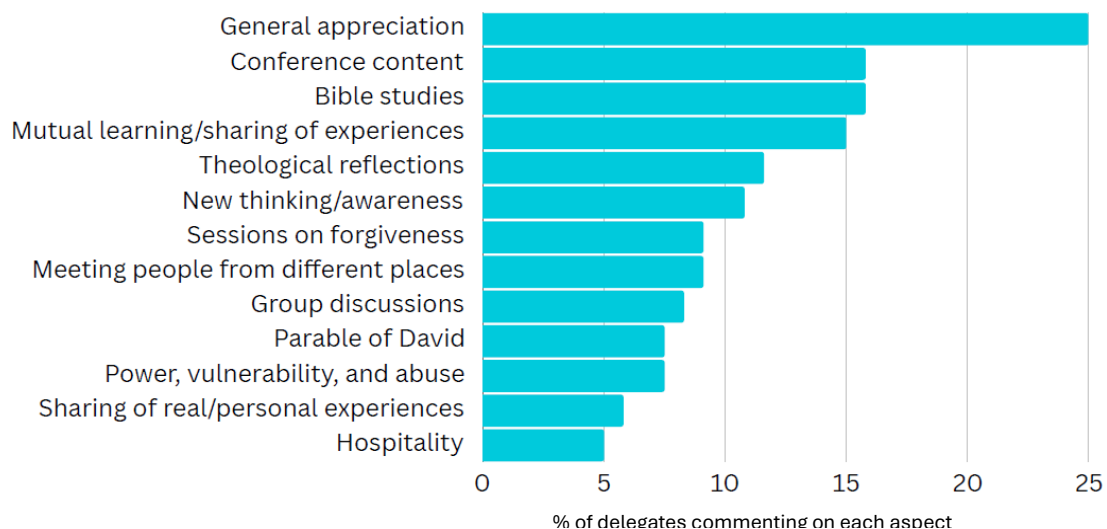
Overall experience of the conference



Nearly 40% of delegates rated their overall experience of the conference 9/10.

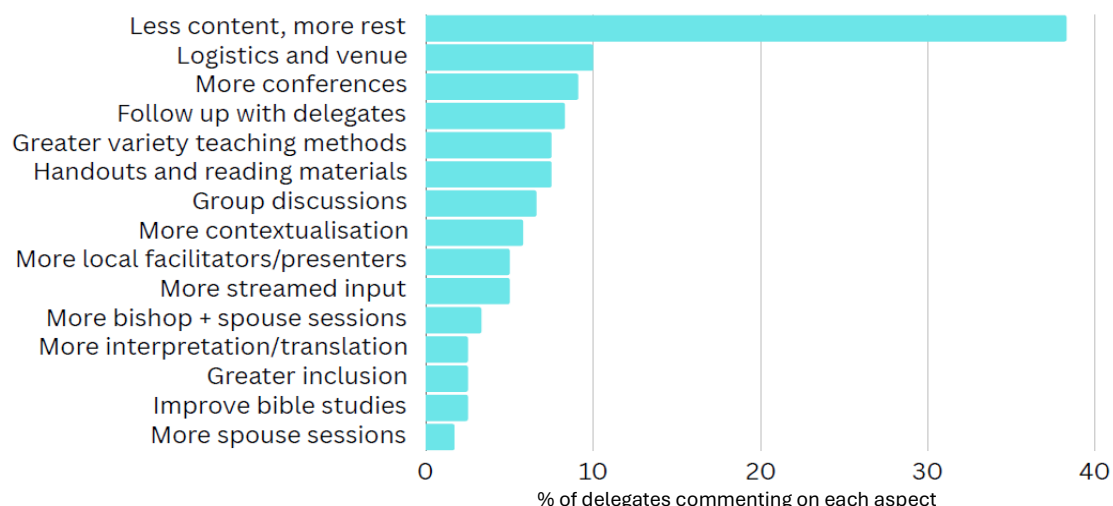


25% of delegates most valued the overall experience of the conference while 15.8% found the content of sessions most valuable and another 15.8% highlighted the bible studies. 15% appreciated the opportunity to learn from and share experiences with people from different backgrounds, while 9.1% valued meeting and connecting with people from different places.



Most valued aspects

Delegates greatly valued the diversity of delegates and learning opportunities at the conference, highlighting theological reflections, opportunities for raised awareness, sessions on forgiveness, the use of the extended parable and shared discussions on real-life issues as key highlights.



Suggestions for improvement

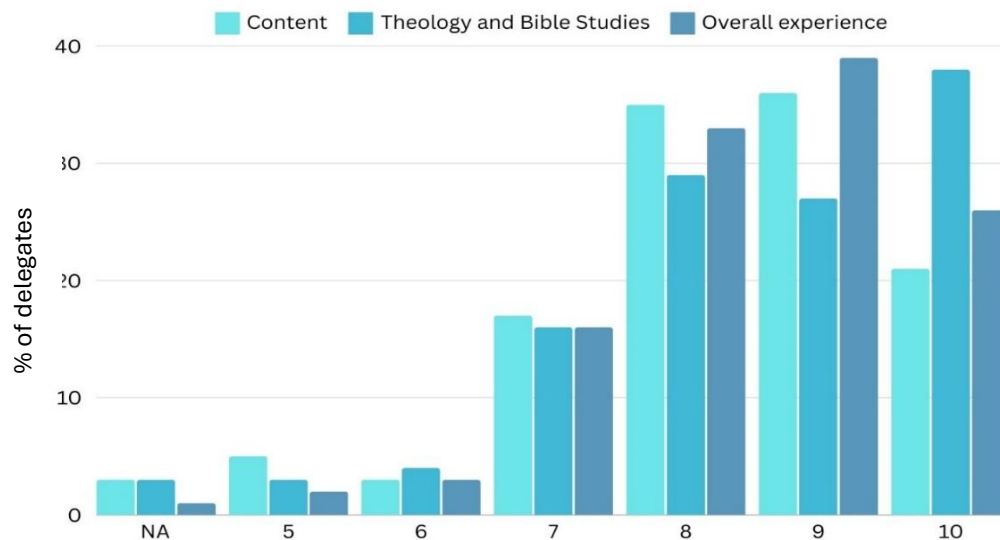
The biggest criticism of the conference, which was only mentioned by 38.3% of delegates, was that the schedule was too busy. They wanted more time to rest, reflect, and connect with others. A few delegates (3.3%) noted that the packed program made it harder to focus on key topics. Several delegates suggested that they may have benefited more if they had more time to process the input. 10% suggested that having the accommodation and conference venue closer would help. This feedback highlights the need to think carefully about logistics and build in more time for reflection in future conferences.

Only a few delegates raised other concerns. 7.5% of delegates suggested more engaging activities and varied teaching methods, and another 7.5% wanted handouts or reading materials in advance. Feedback on group discussions was mixed: some wanted more discussions, others felt there were too many, and one delegate suggested more time for sharing feedback.

Although more of a positive response than a critique, 9.1% of delegates suggested offering more conferences in different locations and 8.3% requested follow-up interactions to keep the positive effects going.

5.8% thought the material could relate more to real-life experiences (to be considered alongside 21% who responded to an earlier question that the material was entirely relevant to their life experiences), and 5% wanted more local facilitators to provide diverse perspectives. 1.7% asked for a more balanced approach to theology, while 2.5% suggested translating materials into more languages. Additionally, 5% mentioned that it would be useful to provide more focused content for different interest groups.

Some delegates (3.3%) felt bishops and their spouses could benefit from more time to talk together, and 1.7% requested more sessions for spouses. 2.5% wanted to include youth and people with disabilities in future conferences. While 2.5% offered suggestions for improving bible studies, 1.7% found the parable helpful and wanted to develop it further.



The comparison graph above shows how ‘conference content’ received the most 7 and 8 ratings, while the overall conference experience received the most 9s and the theological reflections and bible studies received the highest ratings overall, and the most 10/10s. This offers support to the comment made by one delegate: ‘I got a huge amount from [the theological reflections and bible studies] as hearing from different regions and cultures hugely enriches your reading of scripture. There might be the temptation to cut some of these for practical content - I think that would be an error’.

