

Louise Whitehead on safeguarding and the Christian life. On Safeguarding Sunday Louise speaks about how safeguarding isn't an add on to Christian life, it is the Christian life. It is compassion turned to action.

So it's good to have a bit of time today to talk to you about safeguarding. And when we think about safeguarding, a lot of the time we think about children. But today, I want us to think about how we safeguard adults in our community, in our church. And I'm not just talking about people who have additional needs. I'm talking about people you may be sitting next to today. And I think we are pretty good in this church in how we safeguard.

But it is Safeguarding Sunday. And I don't want us to be complacent about safeguarding. So I'm going to talk for about five minutes and I'm going to give you five things to take away about safeguarding. So first of all, harm can and it does happen in our community. Yeah, we are a lovely market town in the Cotswolds, but harm still happens.

Now what kind of harm are we talking about? We have a number of older people who come to church. Let's think about what kind of harm they could experience. And I mention older people because with age there can be vulnerability. And we need to safeguard people when power intersects, when it meets vulnerability. It's when a powerful person takes advantage of someone's vulnerable state.

Now someone may be experiencing financial abuse. Maybe their daughter is taking money from them. Someone may have to ask their husband to leave their house. Someone may be lonely and desperate for connection, and their neighbour takes advantage of this and exploits them. I've seen all of these situations in my job in the diocese, and they all demonstrate how power takes advantage of vulnerability. Okay, so secondly, let's think about what we can do. What does good safeguarding look like in our community?

So I think it begins with awareness. We need to be attentive to signs that something may not be right. Maybe it's changes in mood, unexplained injuries, sudden financial difficulties. or withdrawal from church life. So not every concern will turn out to be a safeguarding issue. But noticing is the first act of protection. and it also involves speaking up. If something worries you, even if it's small and you're not sure, it's always better to raise it than to stay silent.

Churches really need to be places where people feel free to express their concerns and where we take those concerns seriously. And it's not about an accusation, that's not what sharing concerns are about. It's about care. Now, the third point about good safeguarding is about boundaries. Clear boundaries protect everyone. We've just discussed as a PCC what good pastoral care looks like. Where people giving pastoral

care are safely recruited, they handle information carefully, and they make sure no one's placed at risk.

Now, I quite often hear, this is all too much. and it's a waste of time. But boundaries do not put limitations on our ministry. They're actually structures that make ministry trustworthy. And in fact, church settings like ours can create particular vulnerabilities. People come to church seeking comfort. They're quite often seeking healing or they're seeking meaning, particularly after bereavement or life changes. This trust they put in church is really quite sacred and we really cannot misuse it or take it for granted. So ensuring our pastoral visits and our prayer ministry are conducted safely and respectfully protects those receiving care and those giving it.

Now, the fourth point is about culture. Of course, policies matter and training matters. But the most powerful safeguard is a community shaped by kindness, care and accountability. When we cultivate a culture where people feel valued, they feel included, they feel listened to, we actually reduce vulnerability. And finally, safeguarding is about hope. Sometimes it can feel heavy, can feel filled with risk assessments, difficult conversations, and really quite painful stories. But fundamentally, it's a ministry of hope. It says everyone deserves to be safe. In the gospel, Jesus continually reaches out to those who are pushed to the margins, those who are fragile, those others overlook. His example shows us safeguarding is not an add-on to the Christian life. It is the Christian life. Its compassion turned into action.

So as a church, let's make safeguarding a shared responsibility. It's not just for the PCC or Fergus or me. Let's be people who pay attention. Let's be people who speak up. Let's be a church where there are boundaries in place. And let's be people who care for one another. So we ensure our church is a place where everyone can belong safely and with dignity.