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Edward Stourton

On Thursday, the Church of England published a review of abuse allegations against the late John Smyth, a barrister who ran camps for boys, first here in Britain and later in southern Africa. The report returns a devastating verdict on the CofE priests and bishops, who failed to act on what they knew about his activities. And one of his targets is the current Archbishop of Canterbury. In an interview with Channel Four, Justin Welby, revealed he considered resigning when the report came out. Andrew Graystone is the author of *Bleeding for Jesus: John Smyth and the cult of the Iwerne camps*, and he summed up the report's findings.

Andrew Graystone

The report describes John Smyth's abuse as prolific, brutal and horrific. We know that the abuse went on from at least the late 1970s right through till John Smyth's death in 2018. Perhaps the most shocking thing about this report is that we know that at least six currently serving bishops, including the current Archbishop of Canterbury, and at least another five retired bishops and at least another 30 more junior clergy, knew that John Smyth was an abuser, but failed to act in ways that would stop him right up to his death.

Edward Stourton

The picture you paint of the hierarchy as a whole, simply failing to act is, as you say, a very alarming one, and because of the sequence events, it sounds as if it had consequences - in that when he left Britain and went to Southern Africa, he was able to continue his abuse.

Andrew Graystone

Yes, we know that when John Smyth's, abuse was first uncovered in 1982, a group of Church of England clergy who were responsible for running the Iwerne camps network where he groomed his victims. Instead of taking it to the police, they effectively hustled him out of the country and sent him to Zimbabwe, where he set up his own camping network and continued to abuse much younger children in much greater numbers. He then, later on, was caught out in Zimbabwe, went to South Africa, where he set up camps again in his last few years of his life.

Edward Stourton

All right, let's turn to Justin Welby and his role in all this. I'd like you to listen, if you could do a section of the interview he did with Channel Four in which he talks about his reaction when he first learnt about what John Smyth had done.

Archbishop Justin Welby

I first read about it back in 2013 I think. I was shaken to the core. Shocked beyond description, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, it was utterly overwhelming in the horror I felt for, that his victims suffered through this appalling, sadistic, evil abuse.

Edward Stourton

Now he says that at the time, he followed the right procedures. But one is bound to ask, if he was that struck by what he found out, right at the beginning of his time as Archbishop of Canterbury, it's not until now, more than 10 years later, that he's really talking about it, and nothing very much seems to have been done in the intervening decade or so.

Andrew Graystone

Well, that's right, and it's even more ironic given that Archbishop Welby said to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in March 2018. He said, 'nobody can say it's by fault. To say, I've heard about a problem, but it was someone else's job to report it. That is not an acceptable human response, let alone a leadership response'.

Edward Stourton

Do you think he should go?

Andrew Graystone

Many of the victims of John Smyth, who I've spoken to this week, think that the Archbishop should resign, and also some senior, very senior leaders in the church who I've spoken to this week. For myself, I'm not sure how much would be achieved by his resignation. He only has a few months left before his compulsory retirement, anyway. My worry is that he would become a sacrificial lamb, and in fact, there are many, many others who also need to take their share of responsibility. If Justin Welby resigns, will they resign too, or will the church just kind of wash its hands and move on?

Edward Stourton

He has, not unreasonably pointed out that since 2013 he has introduced all sorts of reforms aimed at dealing with the whole issue of abuse and covering it up. But I think you have some evidence that suggests that at times, that the system was simply overwhelmed by what was coming through.

Andrew Graystone

Yes, I've been sent an email from July 2021 in which a member of the National Safeguarding team at the Church of England writes to one of the diocesan safeguarding advisors and says, in effect, they are so overwhelmed with complaints against bishops over safeguards and failures, that they've made a policy decision not to investigate bishops unless they feel that there is a current safeguarding risk. Now, if that applies in the case of the Smyth review, then nobody will take any responsibility in the church for what has gone wrong. It's intolerable.

Edward Stourton

Do you think we've reached a point at which we have to say the Church of England, institutionally, just can't cope with this issue? And they have been trying, but from what you say, it's not really working well.

Andrew Graystone

It is not only me that thinks that. The church commissioned a report that was published only earlier this year from Professor Alexis Jay who said that the state of safeguarding management in the church was so chronically bad that it must be handed over to independent management and scrutiny immediately. The church hierarchy has been immensely resistant to that.

Edward Stourton

Andrew Graystone. Well, Dr Joanne Grenfell is the area Bishop of Stepney in London and the church's lead bishop on safeguarding. She listened to that interview, and afterwards, I asked her whether she thought Justin Welby should resign.

Bishop Joanne Grenfell

I welcome the fact that the Archbishop made a statement on Thursday, personally apologizing for what he described as his failures after 2013 to really ensure energetically enough that this was

followed through. He was also very clear that he wasn't aware of the abuse before 2013 and I believe and trust that's correct.

Edward Stourton

But do you think you should retire?

Bishop Joanne Grenfell

As I said, I really appreciate that the Archbishop has wholeheartedly apologized for what he could have and should have done differently in 2013. I also recognize his commitment over the time of his tenure as Archbishop to really having tried to change safeguarding. I think there's still an awful lot to do, but I do think that builds on some of the changes that we have seen over the last 10 years.

Edward Stourton

Yeah, I'm just interested that you can't give me a straight yes or no to that question.

Bishop Joanne Grenfell

As I said, I support the Archbishop's apology. I'm glad that he's made it.

Edward Stourton

All right. Well, let me ask the same question in a slightly broader way. What about accountability? Isn't one of the lessons of this report, and of this episode, that senior church leaders, not just him, but all the others who we heard from Andrew Graystone, were responsible for sitting on information they should have used properly? Isn't it essential that they should be held to account in some way?

Bishop Joanne Grenfell

I fully understand that this case is not only about truly dreadful abuse, and it truly is. It is also about the choice to cover up and the failure to reveal what should have been revealed, and I absolutely think that people need to take responsibility for that. This is a really serious failure across the Church of England to do the right thing, and we have to change.

Edward Stourton

But what does taking responsibility mean? I mean, as you say, Archbishop Welby has used that phrase, but it's got to be more than just saying that, hasn't it? It has to come with some consequences, particularly if, as in this case, it led, the failure to be straight about all this, led to more children being abused in southern Africa.

Bishop Joanne Grenfell

The Makin report brings all of that into really sharp focus. It goes into detail, more than some of us have known previously. The job of colleagues in the National Safeguarding Team is to look and see what is new in that, and to work out if that changes their view on things, and therefore what needs to happen next. But I do agree about the wider point, which is about responsibility and how that's held in the church. And I think I agree with what Andrew Grayston was saying earlier about the need for different structures, for independence of thinking, for audit, for scrutiny, for complaints, for how we do safeguarding at its very foundations. And I agree absolutely that that has to change, and that is the work that we're doing at the moment.

Edward Stourton

All right, let's pursue that thought for a moment or two. Did you recognize the picture he painted of a system which was overwhelmed by the number, in this case, of complaints about bishops?

Bishop Joanne Grenfell

I recognize the sense of overwhelming cases, not only the Church of England, but in other institutions, because of a greater openness to talk about abuse, and I welcome that. Yes, of course, it's hard, but it's nowhere near as hard for the institution as it is for the victims and survivors. I think we took really decisive action by inviting Professor Alexis Jay to come and offer her views on where we are with safeguarding and what needs to change. Now she gave us some strong recommendations and a hard-hitting report, which I and others have welcomed. What we have to do then, and I really disagree with Andrew Graystone. This is about implementing the right thing. We know from the past that we've not got things right, when we've done them too fast, and we're absolutely clear that we need a fully independent structure that looks at audits, complaints, the kind of scrutiny and governance end of things. But we also need to look at then, and there are very mixed opinions about this, from safeguarding professionals and governance experts across the board - so not just the church trying to give it itself, but wildly divergent views on what the right thing is to do? And so we're looking really carefully at how you handle cases, how you connect that to good policy work and to good training. It's about knowing what the function is that you want to achieve in order to get the right form to do that. And we're doing that really carefully at the moment. We expect to report back to the church's General Synod in February. It's important that the whole church owns this, discusses it, really understands the changes that we would be proposing making. And so that's what we will be doing next.

Edward Stourton

The Bishop of Stepney.