

# 08/11/24 BBC Radio 4 News interview Bishop Julie Conalty

## **Presenter**

There is anger tonight with Church of England after the release of a damning report revealing horrific details of the nature - prolific, brutal and horrific nature - of one man's abuse of children and young boys over decades and across continents. It is alleged that John Smyth, the British barrister, attacked more than 100 boys and young men he met at a summer camp, a Christian camp in Dorset during the 70s and 80s. And he continued to do so when he was moved to Zimbabwe and South Africa. Mr. Smyth himself died in 2018, but questions remain about how he was allowed to continue working with the Church of England for so many years, and who knew what and when. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, gave an interview to Channel Four News last night about what he did and didn't know about the decades of John Smyth's child abuse. Speaking to Channel Four's Cathy Newman, he admitted that he had been listening to survivors calls for him to resign.

## **Archbishop Justin Welby**

I've been giving that a lot of thought for actually, quite a long time. There's nothing over the last 10 years that has been as horrible as dealing with not just this one, but innumerable other abuse cases, as you will see from the IICSA inquiry and other things. I've given it a lot of thought, I've taken advice, as recently as this morning, from senior colleagues, and no, I'm not going to resign for this. If I'd known before 2013 or had grounds for suspicion, that would be a resigning matter then and now. But I didn't.

## **Cathy Newman**

But you considered it as recently as this morning.

## **Archbishop Justin Welby**

Yes.

## **Presenter**

Well, let's speak to our Religion Editor Aleem Maqbool, about this. First of all, just how damaging is this report?

## **Aleem Maqbool**

Extremely damaging. I mean, reading it is very tough in terms of the descriptions of the kind of abuse that went on for nearly five decades. But what is startling is just how many people within the church knew about the nature of the abuse that was being perpetrated by John Smyth, as you rightly say, at these Christian summer camps. And then in Africa. We know now that there was a report that was handed to church officials as early as 1982. The report talks about an active cover up then, but we also know that by 2013 people at the very top of the church, including the man who still leads it, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, also knew about the nature of the abuse. And the point about that is, after 2013 the report also talks about the fact that there was further grooming, further abuse that happened in South Africa. Not only that, of course, you had lots of survivors who were still living through that period after those at the very top of the church knew about it and didn't bring it to light, who were also not being helped. Also feeling like they weren't being believed. Eventually, Channel Four did a documentary in 2017 that exposed all of this. And again, at that time, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said he hadn't previously known about the extent of the abuse. We now know from this

report that actually he did - in 2013. For those reasons, yes, there are lots of people over the years at the top of the church who've got lots of questions to answer about why they didn't do much more, but that's why there's pressure on Justin Welby right now.

**Presenter**

There's so much in this report that's going to be devastating to survivors of John Smyth's abuse. You've been speaking to some, haven't you? Yes,

**Aleem Maqbool**

One in particular, Mark Stibbe who, who said he thought he'd be able to read this report and feel detached from it, but he said it was utterly re traumatizing. And the fact that so many people in the church knew, of course, is an added trauma. It's, it's the second track of his trauma is how he described it. But I asked him as well about the fact that Justin Welby, in fact, said that he had thought about resigning. He asked others, and they told him not to, and so he didn't. I asked him how he'd felt about Justin Welby's response to the report.

**Mark Stibbe**

We need to remember that the reason why the victim, known as Graham, went forward and reported in 2012/2013 in the Ely Diocese, was because he was first and foremost, deeply concerned that John Smyth might still be abusing in Africa. So he went forward, and I think was dealt with appallingly by Ely Diocese, by the Bishop of Ely and by the Archbishop of Canterbury. I think my own view is Justin Welby is right to yesterday apologize, but I think he's wrong not to resign. I don't know any victim of John Smyth's abuses who believes he should stay in post. The church needs to be an institution that believes in accountability and in integrity. And in fact, I would argue that if it is still, in some sense, conscience of the nation, if it's going to speak out on moral issues, then it better have its own house in order to begin with. And I think if it was going to speak with integrity and with any kind of volume on issues, then it makes sense for its own leadership to be, I think, what we used to call holy.

**Presenter**

Abuse survivor Mark Stibbe speaking to Aleem Maqbool a little earlier. The Archbishop of Canterbury did say the pain Smyth victims endured was unimaginable, and the Church of England has said there is never a place for covering up abuse. Bishop Julie Conalty is Bishop of Birkenhead and Deputy Safeguarding Lead for the Church of England. I asked her for her response to this report.

**Bishop Julie Conalty**

It's taken a long time. It's a long time waiting, but I am pleased with the quality of the report. I am grateful for the work that Makin has led here, and I think it is a very helpful report.

**Presenter**

What is the responsibility of the Archbishop of Canterbury and all of this?

**Bishop Julie Conalty**

Well, the Archbishop of Canterbury clearly does have responsibility, because he's the Archbishop of Canterbury and the head of the church. In that sense, I think that's interesting question. It's clear that he wasn't responsible for the abuse, nor the original cover up at all. He became Archbishop in 2013 I think. And but of course, in leading an organization, you do have responsibility for failings during your time in leadership, and it is clear from the report that we have not put victims and survivors front and center.

The Archbishop has apologized for that, quite rightly so. But that is a really important aspect of this report.

**Presenter**

I suppose there are more questions than answers now. He gave an interview to Channel Four where he said, look, I wasn't aware of the extent of the problem until 2017 although this report suggests he knew back in 2013 that this man, John Smyth, was a problem.

**Bishop Julie Conalty**

Yes, the report does make it clear and whether that is knowing the full extent another matter. I think for many people, much. I think for many people, they won't really understand the full extent till they read this report. But it is clear that he had some knowledge and some responsibility, of course.

**Presenter**

Would you go as far as to say he should have done something about it in 2013?

**Bishop Julie Conalty**

I think what Keith Makin says in the report, he highlights a couple of areas in which more should have been done since 2013. So one is clearly around the engagement of survivors by the church, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the promises that were made to them, and that's that's clearly highlighted as a failure in the report. And but the other area is around South Africa, actually, where John Smyth was was living prior to his death, and whether or not the Church of England did enough to ensure that young men and boys were protected from John Smyth in South Africa. Whether we did enough in communicating with the church and the authorities in South Africa. And I think that's a really serious issue for me. I'm quite angry about this, because if the Anglican Communion means anything other than a hangover from colonialism, and I believe that it does, then we have a duty. We have a responsibility to work with primates and bishops in other countries.

**Presenter**

I suppose you know, it's an issue of trust, isn't it? If you say that, and you go as far as the Makin report does, suggesting that this not only hurt survivors of abuse, but also those who went on to be abused by this man in South Africa...

**Bishop Julie Conalty**

And that is a serious failure. And I think I say that seriously, I'm really angered by that, because we've known for a long time now about the the original abuse, about John Smyth, and indeed, about the original cover up, while we haven't quite seen it laid out in written form in this way before. We are serious about trying to improve things in the church. And I do believe some improvements are made. But this really is frustrating, because it is, it does undermine the trust for people. How can people trust us?

**Presenter**

If in any other organization I can think of, somebody would be fired. The person at the top would be fired, particularly if they had an inkling of the kind of danger this man posed. Therefore, doesn't that make the Archbishop's position untenable?

**Bishop Julie Conalty**

That's a really difficult one for me to answer. I think. I think partly because I'm angry, so I'm angry, so I'm not sure I'm seeing it entirely clearly, to be honest, right now, but also because I always feel that when it's easy to say from the outside, and then you don't, there are always things you don't know. But if I read Makin he very clearly states that Justin Welby be held a personal and moral responsibility to pursue things further, particularly in relation to South Africa. And so yes, that's a failure for which the Archbishop has apologized. And I think that's absolutely genuine. I think the question for me is whether words are enough.

**Presenter**

Grateful for your candor. Finally, this is not the first review into abuse cases in the Church of England, and we have heard before, you know, that we are going to do things better, we are going to be more transparent, we are going to be more accountable. And I suppose the most awful thing about this is that abuse could have been prevented.

**Bishop Julie Conalty**

Yes. I think that's the bit that makes me most angry. Indeed, it's too comfortable to simply point the finger at the things that happened in the 1980s and 90s. This report also raises issues about recent time, where we did have opportunity to have greater influence for good. We absolutely could have done more as a church to ensure that people were safer in South Africa.

**Presenter**

And just finally, would you feel less angry if the Archbishop said, I will step down, because somebody has to take responsibility for this, and I was in charge?

**Bishop Julie Conalty**

Maybe. But it isn't just about the Archbishop. I think you have to look at that perspective as well. I would feel less angry if we changed, continued to make improvements, so that the next report was going to be more positive, was going to say that we got much more right than we got wrong. That would make me feel less angry, real change, real consistent, sustainable change.

**Presenter**

That's Bishop Julie Conalty speaking to me a little earlier. If you've been affected by any of the issues raised in that interview, you can contact the BBC action line.