

Radio 4 Today Program 11 Nov 2024

Presenter

Should Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, resign? A growing number of the clergy say yes. It follows the sickening revelation of massive sexual abuse by John Smyth, going back to the 1980s. He died in 2018 but not before abusing over 100 children while working for the Church of England, and a report published last week says there was a massive cover up by the Church of England. Aleem Maqbool is our religion editor, and joins us now. Aleem, how tenable, in your judgment, is the Archbishop's position?

Aleem Maqbool

It's looking increasingly difficult, frankly. There are now petitions that have been started. A major petition has been started by a group of members of the General Synod, the church's National Assembly. And what's interesting to me is that while there's been a huge amount of infighting of the church in recent years, it is people of different factions who are coming together in calling for Justin Welby to resign. No bishops have broken ranks as yet. Those are the upper echelons of the church. But without breaking any confidences, some have told me they do think the Archbishop of Canterbury should step down. The man himself said last week he had considered resigning over the issue, but he been persuaded by advisors to stay.

Presenter

And his argument, of course, it is worth being really clear. He was that he says he had no awareness or suspicion of the allegations before he was told in 2013 and therefore he has reflected on it, but feels that given he had no awareness or suspicion, he's better off staying in post.

Aleem Maqbool

But the issue here is, what happened after 2013. Because he was told in 2013 - this report that came out last week said that in black and white, but the abuse continued until 2018 when John Smyth died, having ended up, as you rightly say, abusing more than 120 people. And we also now know from that report that when Archbishop Welby was interviewed about all of this about five years ago, he also didn't tell the truth about when he found out about John Smyth abuses. He didn't acknowledge until this report came out that he knew the extent of John Smyth's abuses back in 2013. His supporters say he's done a lot of good, and what matters is that there is serious reform. But for those reasons, the fact that after 2013 others were abused So what happened ultimately was that this was all brought to light by journalists, by a Channel Four documentary that came out in 2017. He was asked after that, and he was interviewed about it, and he didn't let on, basically, that he had known years earlier. He was talking about what had been brought to light through the journalism, and at that stage, hadn't, did not say that he had known before. In fact, he said he didn't know before. We know now that he did, and it wouldn't have been just another case sort of in his inbox, that he wouldn't have known about - one would suspect - because he had known John Smyth a very long time. So when something like this comes across his desk, it would have been something that stood out, because he'd known John Smyth for decades. He does say that he regrets that he didn't follow this with as much rigor as he should have done. But for a lot of people, including survivors of John Smyth's abuse, they say that is just not enough, and any reform is better happening under leadership with, well, in their words, more integrity.

Presenter

Aleem, sorry, when you say he didn't tell the truth, what could you spell out what you mean exactly? We will return to this story at half past seven. As Alan mentions there, John Smyth, since the 1980s may or did abuse over 100 children and young men, usually in a sound-proofed shed at the end of his garden. It may have been the most prolific abuse scandal in the modern history of the Church of England. What's more, senior leaders of the Church of England knew, they weren't just negligent in dealing with allegations, which have been rumored for decades, but actively covered it up, according to a report published last week by Keith Makin. One person who knew Smyth but says he didn't know about the abuse is the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. Many members of the clergy are calling on him to resign, but he is resisting. John Smyth died in 2018 so he never met with earthly justice, at least. This is the Right Reverend, Joanne Grenfell, the Bishop of Stepney, speaking yesterday on Radio Four. My colleague Edward Stourton asking if she thought the archbishop should resign. Pressure is building on Archbishop Justin Welby as members of the Church of England's governing body have started a petition calling for the Archbishop of Canterbury to stand down over his handling of an abuse scandal.

Edward Stourton

I welcome the fact that the Archbishop made a statement on Thursday personally apologising for what he described as his failures after 2013 to really ensure energetically enough that this was following through. He was also very clear that he wasn't aware of the abuse before 2013 and I believe and trust that's correct. But do you think he should resign?

Bishop Joanne Grenfell

As I said, I really appreciate that the Archbishop has wholeheartedly apologize for what he could have and should have done differently in 2013. I also recognize his commitment over at the time of his tenure as Archbishop to really having tried to change safeguarding. I think there's 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

I'm just interested that you can't give me a straight yes or not to that question

Bishop Joanne Grenfell

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

Presenter

Let's speak now to Giles, Fraser, Vicar of St Anne's Church in Kew. So in an article published on the website Unherd, I think it's been published this morning, you detail how you abuse the church at the age of seven, though not by Smyth, so you've got harrowing personal experience with these issues more broadly. Let me ask you, first of all about Justin Welby, has he lost the confidence of the clergy he?

Rev Giles Fraser

He has. It's a terrible situation. I mean, there you just heard a clip from the Bishop of Stepney, who is the church's lead safeguarding officer. She's asked three times if she thinks that he should resign, and she can't say no to it. There's a petition going around now, which many people are signing, and this is from all parts of the church. I'm afraid he's really lost the confidence of his clergy. He's lost the confidence of many of his bishops, and his position is completely untenable.

Presenter

There's, there's two different things going on here, isn't there? First of all, there's a general view. And I wonder what you think about whether it seems plausible that someone, like Justin Welby, as

he says, didn't know anything about these allegations before 2013 and then there's a second bit, which is, what on earth did people do after 2013? So let's take it in turns. Is it possible that some not just will be didn't know about Smyth? Let's take them in rotation?

Rev Giles Fraser

Well, make the Makin report uses the word unlikely. It said it's unlikely he didn't know in the 1980s, and that seems to me to be right. He was in the circle of trust of this group of conservative evangelicals. It was an open and not very well kept secret in this area. A report was published that was circulated amongst conservative evangelicals in 1982. Now this is extraordinary, and the Archbishop, you know, was on the Christmas card list, exchanged Christmas cards, continued to fund his mission, even when this ghastly man went to Africa and continued to abuse children and young men. It really is. It really doesn't add up.

Presenter

It is worth saying that the Archbishop says he absolutely did not know, he had no awareness or suspicion of the allegations before 2013. That's his view. And what do you think about what happened after 2013? Because the striking thing is that we know these allegations were surfaced. It became widely known. They were formally declared, as it were. But it was after 2013 that Smyth continued to abuse, as you say, Giles, in South Africa

Rev Giles Fraser

And the Makin review says the word, quote, 'that's unlikely'. And nothing was done about it. I mean, very not enough to stop it. I mean, this is, this is, I mean, when, you know, when the Archbishop was interviewed on Channel Four News, he accepted that he'd been incompetent about this. But I do think it's worse. I think there's a degree of cover up that's going on here. And it's not just the Archbishop of Canterbury. There's six other serving bishops that are, that are indicated in this report, there's many senior clergy. This is an absolute crisis for the Church of England. And, you know, public representatives like the church, like myself and those who've been on the receiving end of something not dissimilar. In my case, it actually wasn't in church, it was at school. But I know what it's like to be in the company of as a child, in the company of a sadist on your own, and the idea that the church is just actually not really doing very much about this is horrendous. And I'm afraid the Archbishop is too culpable. And clearly had knowledge about this, even if we argue about it, before 2013 when he was, quote, unquote, 'formally told' he still, he still did very little, and certainly insufficient to stop Smyth after that period.

Presenter

Well, thank you for the clarification about your particular experience, and you've spoken very openly and powerfully. As I say, people can read your writing about this on the website, Unherd. A lot of victims don't actually tell anyone, do they? They live with this forever, and the trauma haunts them until their final moments.

Rev Giles Fraser

I find it very difficult. I actually find it very difficult to talk about. I mean, I saw a newspaper article the other day as I was coming back from a meeting, and I sat down, and I just had it laid out on the dining room table, and I had a glass of whiskey, and I looked at it, and I cried for two hours. And I find, I find it... I have to be careful, because I'll cry on the program, but it's, it's very, very traumatic, and it stays with me. This happened to me when I was seven, eight, I am 60 in a few weeks time, and this is over half a century ago, and this stuff stays with you, and the idea that people will continue to be abused after church knew about what is happening is disgraceful.

Presenter

What is it about the culture of the Church of England? Which, of course, does extraordinary work, extraordinary good work, in so many communities across the country, we shouldn't tar it all with the same brush. And people on Radio 4 will know of your reputation as a hugely valued priest. But what is it about the culture of the church that allowed so many God fearing figures to cover up this abuse, this rampant abuse for so long?

Rev Giles Fraser

There's a number of things. Bishops are too busy. They're too busy spending their time doing a whole range of things, and they've really got to prioritize the Church of England, the needs of the Church of England, rather than swanning around the world, doing things that feed their egos. I think that's terribly important. They need to concentrate on what's on their desk. I also think there's a sense of sort of banding together and not wanting the reputation... all this dreadful stuff about reputation management, which is always going to come back and bite you. That's, that's, that's a terribly, sort of, like, sort of dangerous thing. And people just, I mean, and there's also something in the church, there was a very creepy, one of the things that's really there, and it's a particular side of the church, I think it is conservative evangelical side of the church, the sort of creepy association between violence and sex. And John Smyth was obsessed with the sort of masturbation of young men. And this, this idea that this is sin, this is a sort of great sin. It's, it's frankly laughable, but it's also sort of twisted. And this really needs to be faced, because there is something, there's something that we really need. This needs to be our sort of like watershed moment in the church, where we look at what's happened. We look at the culture of deference, the way in which, when which many of our senior leadership play out and rally with each other to defend each other the way in which you don't 'know' quotes unquote, until you've got a report written on it on your desk. There's so much that's wrong here, and the people who suffered. I mean, just the idea that the Archbishop knew in 2013 at the very most generous interpretation, and still people were abused around the world. It's absolutely appalling. And I think the Archbishop has got, I think he really has to go.

Presenter

Giles Fraser, really good to talk to you. Thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning, speaking so openly. Let me just before I give you the Action Line number in case these issues are affecting you personally, let me just reiterate the view from Lambeth Palace. They've released a statement saying that the Archbishop reiterates his horror at the scale of John Smyth's egregious abuse, as reflected in his public apology. He has apologized profoundly, both for his own failures and omissions and for the wickedness, concealment and abuse by the church more widely. As he has said, he had no awareness suspicion of the allegations before he was told in 2013 and therefore, having reflected he does not intend to resign, he hopes the Makin review supports the ongoing work of building a safer church here, and around the world. If what Giles was talking about there has affected you, if you want to talk to anyone about these issues, give the BBC Action Line a call. bbc.co.uk, forward slash action line for the website. Or the number is 0800 110 100.