



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

The Impact of Christian Theology on Child Protection Practices in the Church

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BACKGROUND

Why Theology & Safeguarding

- Professional background alongside Christian faith
- Interest in the intersect between theology/faith and safeguarding practice
- Lack of existing research in this field
- Research that can be of use and applied to existing and improving practice

TERMINOLOGY

- **Child protection & safeguarding:** Terms used interchangeably, in acknowledgment of the integration of child protection into wider safeguarding practices.
- **Faith & theology:** Terms used interchangeably, referring to the 'belief framework and religious ideologies of practicing Christians'.

EXISTING RELEVANT LITERATURE

- Dinham (2017) – ‘Religious Literacy’ for professionals
- Parkinson, Oates & Jayakody (2018) – Teaching on forgiveness in relation to offenders
- Humphries & Kandiah (2020) – Theological mandate for protection of vulnerable in churches
- Oakley, Kinman & Humphries (2018) – Describing spiritual abuse
- Oakley (2016) – Boundary issues in Christian faith context

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS



Diocese of Gloucester

Potential participants contacted within the diocese, using existing communication channels



PSOs & Parish Clergy

PSOs and clergy selected due to expectation of existing engagement in safeguarding



40 people via survey

Online survey with a short series of questions, to enable establishment of themes from larger pool



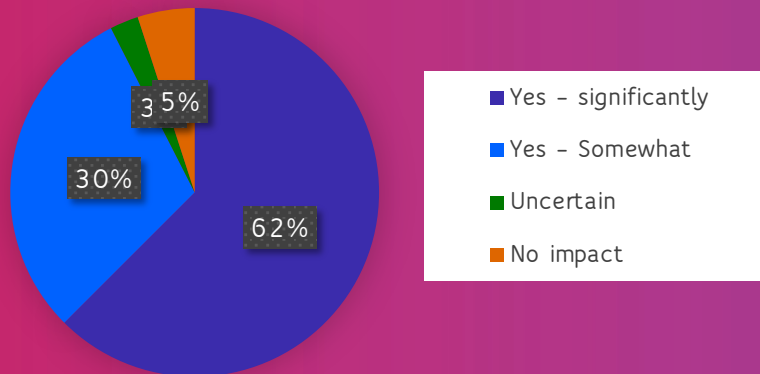
6 via interview

6 semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed, with more in-depth questions

QUESTIONS ASKED

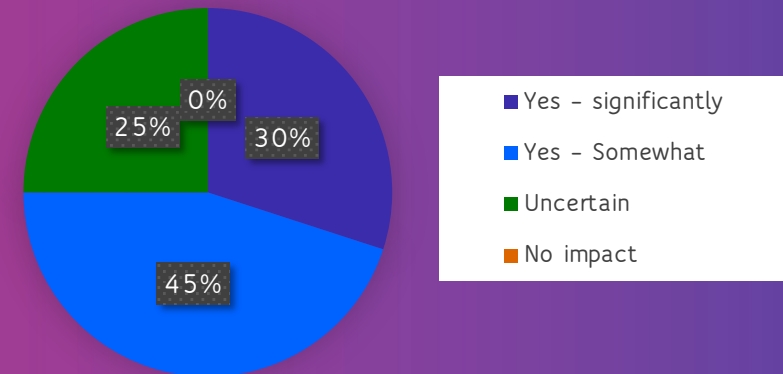
Do you feel that Christian theology personally impacts your child protection and safeguarding practice in the Church?

Responses



Do you feel that Christian theology impacts child protection and safeguarding practice collectively in the Church?

Responses



QUESTIONS ASKED

- In your survey, you indicated that your theology (does/doesn't) impact your practice. Could you say a bit more about this please?
- In your opinion, how does Christian theology influence the principles guiding child protection practices in the Church of England?
- Are you able to share a specific instance where Christian theology played a significant role in decision making related to child protection/safeguarding? (this could be about policy, proactive approaches or response to a specific issue)
- To what extent do you believe that Christian theology should be integrated into safeguarding training for clergy, PSOs and others with leading roles?

QUESTIONS ASKED

- What challenges, if any, have you encountered in aligning Christian theology with modern child protection standards and practices?
- How do you navigate potential conflicts between theological beliefs and contemporary child protection practices and/or policies within the Church of England (this could be your beliefs or those of others)?
- In your view, how does the overall Christian culture of the Church (locally or nationally) contribute to or hinder robust child protection practices?

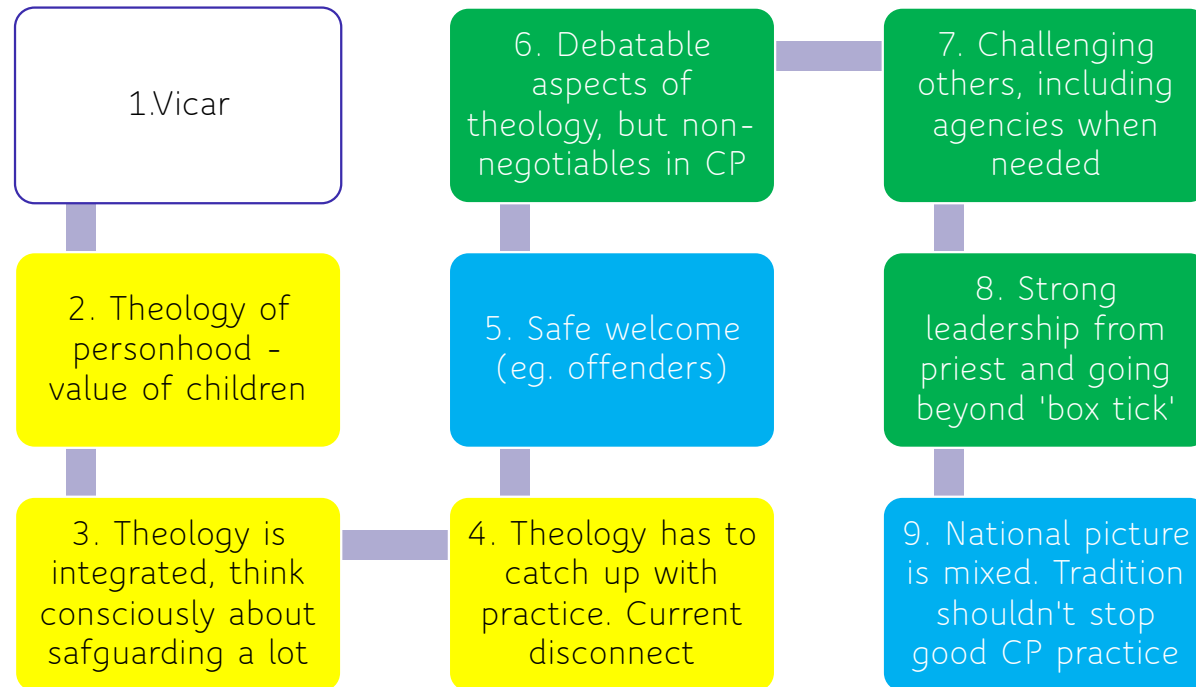
1. *INTEGRATING* theology and practice.
2. *BALANCING* church priorities and child protection responsibilities.
3. *LEARNING* from the past as well as in the present.

THEMES FROM THE DATA

Research Presentation

CONCEPT MAPPING

Example



 INTEGRATING

 LEARNING

 BALANCING

INTEGRATING...

- Theology with child protection practices
- Whole-family approaches into safe practice
- Professional practice into pastoral and spiritual care

“On the surface level, we talk about being a family and therefore people coming in with their children and all being involved together. And that intergenerational thing actually is theological and is what church should look like. But then, as a safeguarding lead, there's also the kind of flip side, in the back of my head, which is this also helps us to keep our children safe.”

LEARNING...

- From the past abuse and mistakes of the Church
- To be open to new ways of safely working with children
- That there are clear boundaries for safe practice

"We can often have a culture which is conservative, which is very traditional. Which doesn't like change of any sort... you can make the mistake of thinking that you've got it all sorted."

BALANCING...

- Church priorities with child protection requirements
- Open welcome for all alongside keeping children safe
- The national church agenda alongside local church action

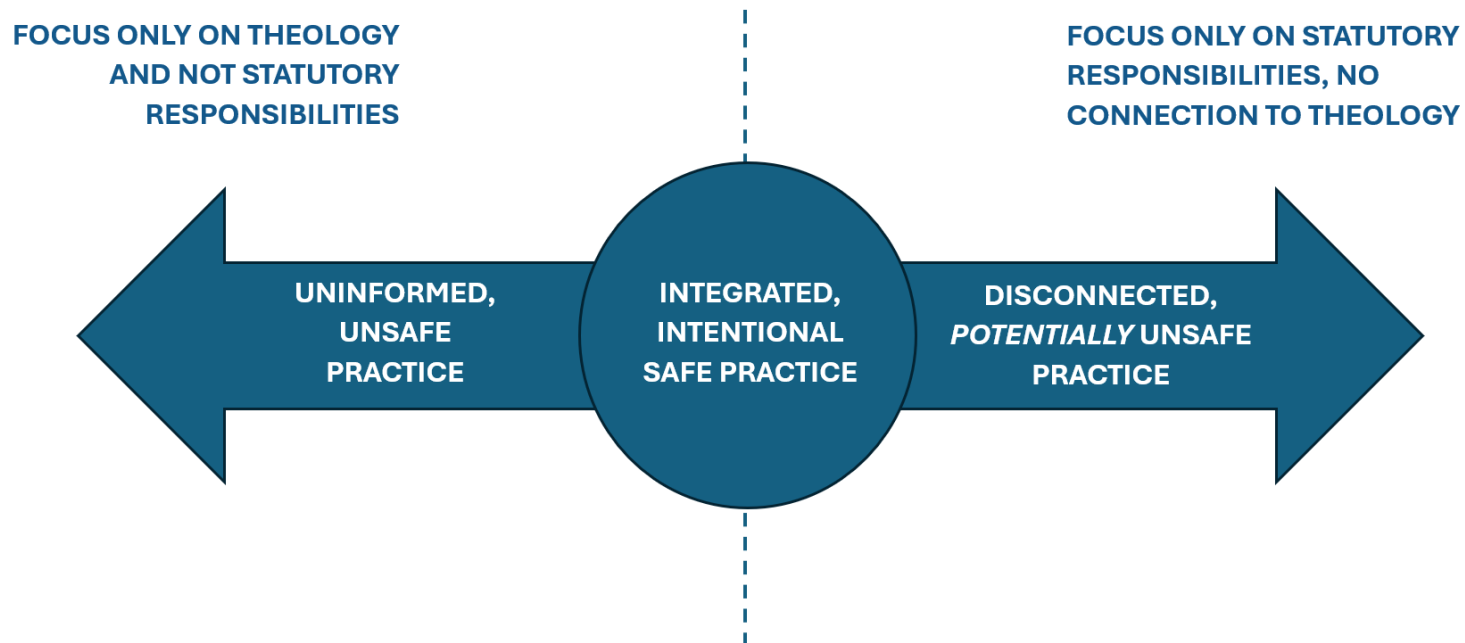
"I hold a very strong theology of church is there for everyone for all people...At the same time as holding that tension of if you welcome everyone, then actually someone is implicitly - or explicitly - going to be unwelcome. And so, it's kind of how you balance your spaces so that everyone has an opportunity to engage, but maybe with a space that is appropriate to them."

QUESTIONS

- Have you consciously considered theology (yours or that of the Church) in relation to safeguarding practice before?
- What questions does this raise for you about how safeguarding is and/or should be practiced in worshipping communities?

MODEL 1

2025



HIGHLIGHTED THEOLOGY...

Theology that leads to the unhelpful belief that the
Church can be all things to all people

*"I have become all things to all people so that by all means possible I might save some. I do all this
for the sake of the gospel..." 1 Corinthians 9:22-23*

HIGHLIGHTED THEOLOGY...

Theology that leads to welcoming all, without question or considering safety

"...the crowds heard about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke about the kingdom of God..." Luke 9:11

"Accept one another, then, as Christ has accepted you" Romans 15:7

HIGHLIGHTED THEOLOGY...

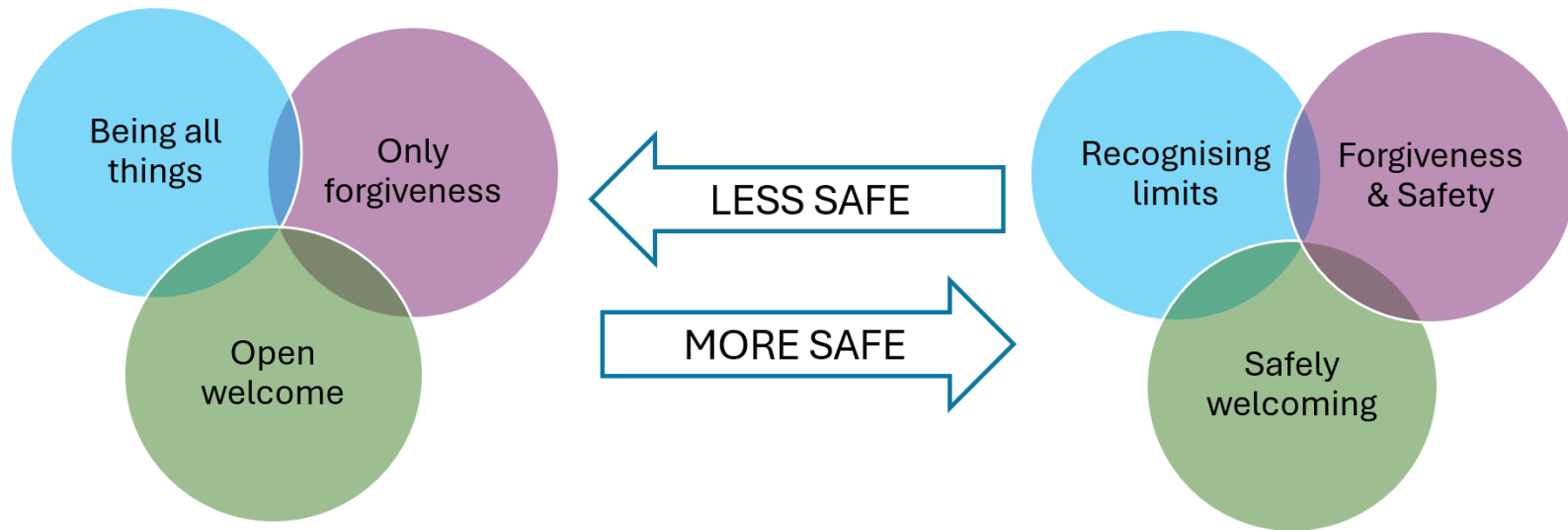
Theology of forgiveness (without any consequence)
superseding theology of protection

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" Luke 23:34

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" Romans 8:1

MODEL 2

2025



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. GUIDANCE to be produced by the CofE relating to theology and its role and influence on child protection practices. To be integrated into existing practice guidance or to sit alongside.
2. SUPPORT to be reviewed for parish clergy and PSOs in light of the pressure and responsibility they hold, particularly with those in churches who are resistant to change or whose theology could lead to unsafe practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. TRAINING for leaders including discussion on where the integration of theology can be helpful and where there are potential areas of risk or 'blind spots' in practice.
4. TEACHING materials for congregations in churches to be developed (in addition to *Safeguarding Sunday* resources) to more overtly connect theology with safeguarding and to talk about strengths and potential risks.
5. REITERATION at every level of training and in relevant other communications across the CofE that theology may vary, but that parameters for safe practice are not debatable.

DISCUSSION/QUESTIONS...

- How might this research inform our safeguarding practice in the Church?
- What might be the barriers to sharing, learning from and building upon the research?
- Does it reinforce anything for you in relation to strengths and/or 'blind spots' when it comes to safeguarding in a Christian context?



THANK YOU

REFERENCES

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