

The World at One 26/06/23

Sarah Montague

Jasvinder Sanghera and Steve Reeves were sacked by the Church of England last week from their role on the Independent Safeguarding Board or ISB, which oversees how the church deals with abuse. If you were listening to us last Thursday, you would have heard Alison Coulter of the Archbishops' Council explained what happened.

Alison Coulter

There was a breakdown in our working relationship which was really, really regrettable. I don't want to blame anyone, but we, the Archbishops' Council, felt we had no choice. There had been a dispute and the Council had been seeking to resolve that, in good faith. But the two board members were reluctant to engage in those discussions. So we had had concerns for some time about how this had been working. And so with great regret, we felt this was the only way forward.

Sarah Montague

Now that is not how the two former board members see it. They think they've been sacked because the church is not prepared to accept scrutiny. And they claim it's prevented them doing their job properly. Since the board was set up 19 months ago. They were sacked after issuing a dispute notice to the Archbishops' Council. Jasvinder Sanghera contacted us on hearing our report last week.

Jasvinder Sanghera

I was angry about the fact that Alison portrayed it simply as a breakdown in relationship. The dispute is clearly that we are not able to do our work of independent oversight, proper regulation and scrutiny because at every point, the Archbishops' Council has frustrated our capacity to do this.

Sarah Montague

Your role was obviously to oversee and ensure that the church was properly safeguarding people within the church. Can you give us an example of the kind of information that you wanted and you were being frustrated in getting to?

Jasvinder Sanghera

One of our roles is to conduct reviews for those victims and survivors. We need an information sharing agreement. Now we have been ready to sign this information sharing agreement for months, the Archbishops' Council have not signed it. So the National Safeguarding Team, when we are requesting information for reviews, refused to give us critical information for us to conduct our review scrutiny role.

Sarah Montague.

Well, I want to put to you something that the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said on the Sunday programme yesterday, and we can play a clip from him. His point was that the relationship between both sides had got so bad, and he made this point as well.

Archbishop of York

We must move towards proper independent scrutiny as soon as possible. I think there's been a huge amount of misunderstanding over what's happened this week. If I could just quickly try and set the record straight. The Church of England needs full, independent safeguarding scrutiny. Ironically, until recently, the letters I tended to get from survivors and survivor advocates was about how the ISB in its current form wasn't fully independent. And actually they had a point. Because when we set this up last year, it was always going to be a two stage process, of which this was stage one, and it would lead to the fully independent scrutiny and fully independent safeguarding scrutiny in stage two.

Sarah Montague

The Archbishop went on to make the point that actually two of you on the ISB panel were thwarting that move to the second stage process. How do you respond to that?

Jasvinder Sanghera

It's not true. Yes, there is a phase one because it is not a completely independent body. That is what we are working towards. And what I really struggle with is - what about the work we have been doing for the 19 months which will contribute towards phase two? I conducted my very first report, into the church and their engagement with victim survivors, over six months. It has clear recommendations. So is he saying we will wipe all that work clean and jump into phase two? We agreed, through a process of dispute notice, that we would get on with phase one, while other people got on with phase two. And, may I just add Sarah, because the dispute is clearly talking about our frustrations and what they were doing with tying our hands behind our backs, literally, we requested independent mediation. We have not been given that. We do not see the Archbishop of York or the General Secretary as independent members. I would like to put to them, why have you not given us independent mediation, because our contracts says that we can have that.

Sarah Montague

The working relationship between the two sides has broken down so much, hasn't it? And I wonder, you know, as Alison Coulter and the Archbishop were saying yesterday, that what they're trying to do is protect the survivors and victims of abuse. Do you accept that that actually, it's clearly not working in the way that it's currently, or at least was formatted and actually, it is time to move to something new?

Jasvinder Sanghera

I agree that the Independent Safeguarding Board did not have independent status - that is what we were working towards. Their decision has impacted critically on survivors. It has demonstrated a total disregard for those victims and survivors who were engaging very confidently with the ISB. And in fact, my inbox is full of emails from them. And what was said to me this morning was let me quote, 'what the church has done is the embodiment of the death of hope for so many people'. Now, my concern as survivor advocate is this - our role was to inspire confidence and trust in that very community that had been harmed by members of the clergy. Today, they were watching this and not feeling confident about reporting.

Sarah Montague

If a victim came to you, would you say you can trust the church to sort it out?

Jasvinder Sanghera

Absolutely not. Not today. The church lacks independent oversight and proper regulation. And it is a culture that I have experienced. I've advocated for three decades of victim survivors. My experience has been that it is wholly resistance to scrutiny, transparency and accountability.

Sarah Montague

Jasvinder Sanghera. And a spokesperson for the Archbishops' Council said 'While we're grateful to members of the ISB for the work they've carried out on phase one, we reluctantly concluded there was no choice but to proceed to a fully independent board, while ensuring independent management of cases can continue uninterrupted, in the meantime. The Council doesn't recognise the points raised here by Jasvinder Sanghera as reflective of the interview with Archbishop Stephen Cottrell, which was on Sunday yesterday. But it says that they had been concerned the twtyo board members hadn't met with the acting chair since March, and the impact that would have on the capability of the board to carry out their work.