

Sarah Montague.

The board or ISP and was set up after the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse found that the church had created a culture where abusers could hide. To have those sacked board members, Jasvinder Sanghera and Steve Reeves, had recently claimed the church had been obstructive and interfered with their work. The church said relations between them and senior bishops had broken down. The bishop of Birkenhead Julie Conalty, is the deputy safeguarding lead for the Church of England, and I asked how she felt about the sackings.

+Birkenhead

I think what I'm concerned about is actually how survivors and victims feel about it. Because they had built many of them have a good degree of trust in the members of the ISP, particularly just vendor and Steve. And so this decision obviously causes them distress and anger and makes them fearful, because they see that a body that was supposed to be independent and provide robust scrutiny of the church's actions has seemingly disappeared before their eyes, as it were.

Sarah Montague.

And why do you think it has?

+Birkenhead

I think the Archbishop's Council have issued a statement explaining very carefully their reasoning for taking this decision, they wouldn't have taken it lightly. And clearly, there was some sort of intractable dispute that was getting in the way of this scrutiny and the work of the IASB. So I think that is why it has happened.

Sarah Montague.

Did you trust this panel to be providing robust scrutiny? Or are they were they being unfair?

+Birkenhead

I did trust them to provide robust scrutiny. scrutiny isn't always easy to accept, it isn't easy to hear criticism to accept criticism. Sometimes it can seem harsh or unwarranted. But it's necessary.

Sarah Montague.

So the situation we're in now, is the church less safe? Is it less accountable?

+Birkenhead

Right at this moment, it is less accountable. I genuinely believe there is a commitment to move forward to have an effective independent safeguarding body. But right now, we have definitely taken a step back at the moment. And if

Sarah Montague.

a new panel is set up, we'll survivors will those who have been affected? Will they trust it?

+Birkenhead

I think trust has to be earned. And the difficulty here, of course, is that the panel members had been earning some trust.

Sarah Montague.

And so a new panel, can they can it be trusted? Or will there be a suspicion that, well, if the church trust them, and then they're not? Then they may not be providing the robust scrutiny necessary?

+Birkenhead

I think that would be I think that would be understandable. And I think it's right to be suspicious. We all would like our scrutiny to be comfortable. But the necessity is that it's actually only uncomfortable. And if things are too easy for us, then is that true scrutiny. I think there are a lot of survivors who were very angry. I'm sure that's not all of them. But there were a significant number who had trust and faith in this board that has now as far as they can see been dismantled.

Sarah Montague.

You have a role, of course, as deputy safeguard and lead in the Church of England. Do you trust the situation?

+Birkenhead

That's a really interesting question, isn't it and I trust that the Archbishop's Council will have carefully looked at it. I think culturally we are resistant as a church to accountability to criticism. And therefore I don't entirely trust the church, even though I'm a key part of it and a leader within it. Because I see that the way the wind blows as it were is always in a particular direction. And that's true of most organisations. But yeah, I think it is particularly true within the church.

Sarah Montague.

I mean, that's an astonishing thing, given the history of what we're talking about here that the person who has a role in responsibility for safeguarding doesn't trust the church.

+Birkenhead

I think that's why I have a role in responsibility for safeguarding actually, I think my trust is in God. All institutions are flawed because people are flawed. That isn't an excuse. It's a reality. Trust has to be earned. As I said earlier, we don't have a good record with regard to safeguarding we've got a huge amount of work to do. And we need to get on with it particularly around establishing independent, effective, uncomfortable scrutiny.

Sarah Montague.

The Independent safeguarding board was set up because the independent inquiry into child sex abuse found the church had created a culture where abusers could hide. Is there still a culture where abusers can hide? I think we've become increasingly aware of First, I

+Birkenhead

think a lot of are on the ground safeguarding has improved enormously. I think we are still finding it difficult to learn, though.

Sarah Montague.

And the action in sacking this panel reflects that.

+Birkenhead

No, I think that's a different question. I think you asked a question originally about do I trust the church. And I think the way in which it is slow to learn we are slow to learn makes it harder to trust church.

Sarah Montague.

Bishop Julie Conalty. Alison Coulter is a lay member of the Archbishop's Council and asked her to respond to Bishop Conalty's comments.

Alison C

She said that she trusted the Archbishop's Council had looked very seriously at this. And I just want to reassure everyone that we spent a long time talking about this and deliberating about this and it was not a

decision that was taken lightly or easily. And we do recognise the huge amount of pain, particularly for victims and survivors and we are really committed to hearing their voices. I agree that historically the church has been resistant to accountability and criticism, just as bishop Julie has said, and we need to do better. But Sarah, what I suppose I really want to say to you is that the Archbishop's Council is absolutely committed to ensuring that the Church of England is a safe place for everyone. We're committed to developing fully independent scrutiny of safeguarding, and being transparent and accountable. And I want to say again, we are really committed to hearing the voices of victims and survivors.

Sarah Montague.

Why did you sack the panel? What was going so wrong?

Alison C

There was a breakdown in our working relationship, which is really, really regrettable. I don't want to blame anyone. But we the Archbishop's Council felt we have no choice, there had been a dispute and the counsellor had been seeking to resolve to act in good faith. But the two board members were reluctant to engage in those discussions. So we had had some stance 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 the two Council the two panel members who are referring to have previously told The Telegraph that that the church had refused to share data with them had denied them their own computers that there had been clear interference with their work. And they describe working with church officials as an uphill battle. Now their job is to be independent and scrutinise how the church are handling things. How do you respond to what they said about that?

Alison C

I don't I there is... I'm really sorry, I don't want to get into the details of who said what. And when we we have been doing our best to work constructively. And as I said, there has been a breakdown in our working relationship. And I mean, this is something that happens from time to time. And I do believe that everyone has been well intentioned, but that we haven't found compatibility within this framework.

Sarah Montague.

The reason I asked you, though, and I understand, you know, there will be some nervousness about, you know, making comments about what individuals have said when they're when they're not here to respond. But anything that you replace this with the questions, you're going to be asked whether they are a patsy to the church, rather than providing the independent scrutiny of this panel.

Alison C

So I think our priority looking forward from here is that we need to move to the next phase of setting up a fully independent board. And it does need to be fully separate and independent from the church. And I can assure you and the listeners that the Archbishop's Council is fully committed to that,

Sarah Montague.

Do you think the church is resistant to accountability and to criticism and to the level of scrutiny that this panel thought was necessary?

Alison C

I think that there have been times and I have also experienced that. But I suppose speaking for myself and my colleagues, we really want to do better and we want to be accountable. And we are being criticised. And I am speaking to you on this programme in response to that, and we know that we need to do better.

Sarah Montague.

Right. So the church is still resistant to accountability.

Alison C

Well, I think saying that the whole church, I think that's a bit of a broad brush. It's a it's a complex organisation. I think that there are parts of it. And our duty and our role as members of the Archbishop's Council is to see where that's happening and to make sure that we shine a light on that so that we can do better.

Sarah Montague.

When the independent safeguarding board was set up of taking Sir the independent inquiry into child sex abuse found the church had created a culture where abusers could hide. Is it Is there still are they still places in the church where abusers can hide?

Alison C

I can only say that we need to keep working to make sure that the Church of England is a safe place to everyone that it's not The place where abusers can hide, and I give my time and my effort to make sure that is the case along with my colleagues.

Sarah Montague.

I'm noting that you didn't what felt you couldn't say. There isn't a place where abusers can hide in the church.

Alison C

I Sarah... I listen, I can't put my hand on my heart to say that there isn't but I do know that we as the Archbishop's Council, I'm speaking as a member of the Archbishop's council that we we want the church to be a safe place to everyone. And we want to work really hard and I hope with Bishop Julie as well to make sure that that is the case.