

# A Theology of Safeguarding

As a Christian safeguarding organisation, thirtyone:eight has worked with an underpinning theology of safeguarding for many years. In 2020, following our rebrand and renaming to thirtyone:eight, we commissioned respected author and theologian Dr Krish Kandiah to work with us to develop a revised theology of safeguarding that succinctly articulated our reason for being and inspired the way in which we work. The following is the result of that work.

## Part 1 – Theological Background

Safeguarding must never become synonymous with an obligatory bureaucratic tick-box exercise. Theology must never be perceived as a dusty, irrelevant pastime. If these unhelpful stereotypes are accepted, then a theology of safeguarding risks becoming detached from reality and irrelevant to our day-to-day lives.

Theology is as vital to the church as a compass is to sailors in a storm. Safeguarding is the true north of all the helpful service the church has to offer. Together they must set the direction of all Christian ministry: grounding it with a mandate, a motivation and a mission.

Scripture tells us that in order to stay true to its divinely directed course, the church needs the word-based ministry of apostles, teachers, pastors, prophets and evangelists (Ephesians 4:9-15). Amidst the storms of distraction and winds of unhelpful trends and fads, the church charts its way forward first and foremost by holding on the word of God, rightly understood and properly applied through vitally relevant theological reflection, discernment and insight.

Woven throughout Scripture the Holy Trinity commends to God's people a trinity of God's special concern: widows, orphans and strangers. There are more direct and indirect references to helping these vulnerable groups than there are to tithing, communion and baptism. In fact, there are over 2,000 references to matters of justice and injustice in the Bible; of which the principles of safeguarding are included. Care for those in distress is included in the Mosaic law in the Old Testament (Exodus 22:21-22), and in the New Testament becomes the definition of authentic religion (James 1.27). Genuine fasting involves sharing food with the hungry and acceptable worship has to include providing shelter for the wanderer (Isaiah 58). Even more starkly, in Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats, hospitality towards the vulnerable

is the signifier of being saved (Matthew 25:31-46). Even this very brief theological survey shows safeguarding to be at the very heart of Scripture.

Since caring for vulnerable people is at the heart of our Scriptures, it is a disgrace that not only has the church often failed to adequately care but has also allowed abuse and neglect to take place on our watch. Jesus himself gave the sternest of warnings to those who fail to care for those who are vulnerable. It would be better for us to have a large millstone hung around our necks and to be drowned in the depths of the sea than to cause those little ones Jesus cares for to stumble (Matthew 18:6). The church has to do everything it can to heed this warning and to remove stumbling blocks for children and other vulnerable people experiencing Christian compassion. It must engage purposefully and wholeheartedly with theology and safeguarding, ensuring they underpin all our ministry to all people and the creation of the safer places that they expect and deserve.

A robust theology of safeguarding is a gift to the church. Like an unbreakable compass in a storm, it keeps us travelling safely in the right direction without deviation or distraction.

## **Part 2 – Our Mandate, Motivation and Mission**

Thirtyone:eight as an organisation has tied itself to the biblical command of Proverbs 31:8 to advocate and care for those who are or may be vulnerable. The mandate, the motivation and the mission of the organisation is clearly founded therefore, on the Christian faith and on Scripture.

The book of Proverbs has been designed to offer pithy aphorisms and memorable phrases to help transfer God-inspired wisdom to the reader. However, there is merit in checking that this verse reflects the wider frame of chapter, book and the grand narrative of the Bible in terms of its foundation as a theology of safeguarding.

Proverbs 31:8 forms part of the advice given by a mother to her royal son at the end of the book of Proverbs. There is symmetry here, as the book of Proverbs begins with advice from a royal father to his son. This beautiful bookending depicts both the family and the workplace as the classroom for the passing on of wisdom, shows that both men and women are to take the lead, and identifies wisdom's mandate, motivation and mission relating to safeguarding and the creation of safer places. Let's look at these three elements of *Mandate, Motivation and Mission*...

## **1. THE MANDATE: EVERY GENERATION must play its part in caring for vulnerable people**

We believe that there is a clear Biblical mandate offered to us in the book of Proverbs. It ends as it began with wisdom being passed on from one generation to the next. This model is preserved in Scripture to authorise us to teach wisdom afresh for every generation. There are three important considerations for a theology of safeguarding based on this intergenerational mandate. Let's look at these in turn...

### **a) Spiritual and Familial Connections**

King Lemuel's mother addresses her son as the fruit of her womb, but also as the answer to her prayers. He is referred to as "my son", but his name 'Lemuel' means "belonging to God". This double parallelism is instructive. Children are both a gift of nature and of divine providence. We have both a human and a divine origin story. All human beings have important familial connections and spiritual connections.

Too often familial connections are under-valued. For example, it is not unusual for well-meaning Christians to support the unnecessary institutionalization of children in orphanages or children's villages severing their links with birth families. Sometimes youth and children's ministry pay scant attention to the priority of responsibility given to parents in the formation and wellbeing of their children. The spiritual connections can be under-valued too. Ministry to vulnerable people can often focus exclusively on practical help: providing food for the hungry, or social support for the lonely for example rather than adopting a holistic approach which includes spiritual well-being and protection from harm. Wellbeing and safety are therefore essential ingredients within our ministry to all people.

### **b) Victim/Survivor and Voice Considerations**

The teacher in the Proverbs encourages her son to listen. Elsewhere in the book, children are exhorted to resist folly and pursue wisdom for themselves. Children are entrusted with a role to play in discerning and pursuing wisdom and justice for themselves. It is to be understood that children are not just passive receivers of education and information but active participants in transformation. Children have agency. Children's views are to be heard and respected just as much as adults.

This is an important consideration for a theology of safeguarding. Those who are vulnerable are not to be seen just as victims (or even survivors) but as those with a voice that deserves to be heard. Victims and survivors have their own decision-making opportunities and indeed with their unique and personal experience can be effective advocates for others and pursuers of justice in their own right if empowered to do so. Safeguarding with this intergenerational understanding from

Proverbs is a partnership: not something done to the vulnerable, or about them, but with them and for them. Speaking up for them and alongside them is therefore a deeply Biblical principle.

### **c) Prohibitive and Positive Concerns**

King Lemuel's mother takes responsibility for instilling a concern for those who are vulnerable, oppressed and poor into her child's conscience and imagination. She offers a critique of negative behaviours but also offers positive pursuits to aspire to as a solution-focused approach to their needs.

Safeguarding policies and procedures can often be seen as negative documents listing all the things that should and shouldn't be done and seeking to minimise risk. This is important, but can be one of the reasons that safeguarding has negative associations in many people's minds. Proverbs, by balancing out the prohibitive and the aspirational, offers a helpful model for framing safeguarding conversations.

Safeguarding is not just about ensuring people are not mistreated, but should inspire the church to engage in constructive action on their behalf to reduce vulnerability and any risks to them. We need protective factors against harm and against the negative treatment of all people, but we also need positive factors that seek to find ways to pursue justice and wellbeing for all concerned. Both aspects can have a formative influence and should be key factors in intergenerational ministry. In this we see both the need for preventative and responsive efforts towards creating safer places for all.

## **2. THE MOTIVATION: EVERY LEADER must pursue God's purpose and priorities for vulnerable people**

The wisdom given in Proverbs to a King challenges all leaders. The Bible's unequivocal articulation of God's concern for vulnerable people should motivate Christians to take safeguarding responsibilities very seriously, especially those who are in positions of power, influence and responsibility. There are three important implications for leadership that comes from this theology of safeguarding.

### **a) The nature of leadership**

King Lemuel is reminded by his mother that leadership brings with it the temptation to forget or take advantage of the vulnerable. Instead, he is to use that position of power to speak up and act on behalf of those who are vulnerable. This is a common theme in the Bible's teaching on leadership: it is often explained in terms of servanthood. For example, Jesus after criticizing the way that many leaders use their

power for self-aggrandisement argues that for his followers, leadership is about serving others, even to the point of laying down their lives for the sake of those they care for (Mark 10:45).

The expression of authenticity in leadership also requires that leaders have a desire to search for and achieve a deep understanding of themselves; their personal faults and challenges as well as their skills, gifts and motivations (Psalm 139:23-24). Any areas of one's character that may become negative or harmful towards others must be dealt with such that their interactions with others encourage selflessness and human flourishing for all.

### **b) The priority of leadership**

King Lemuel, like the other Kings of the Old Testament were supposed to represent and emulate God. In Psalm 68, God is described in terms of his power and majesty, but this description doesn't stop there. It goes on to include his concern for the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable people: he is a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, and he sets the lonely in families. (Psalm 68:4-6). This is the model for all in positions of power: nobody is too important to care for the vulnerable.

Godly, authentic and just leadership will follow God's priorities and demonstrate a commitment to pursue a duty of care for the lonely, destitute and vulnerable.

Because biblical leadership calls for power to be used on behalf of those most in need, safeguarding and justice more broadly, must be fundamental motivational factors for all Christian leaders, reflected in the way they use their time, develop their policies, treat those around them, and build their churches, organisations, businesses or communities.

### **c) The focus of leadership**

King Lemuel's mother makes some stringent demands on her son. He cannot live like others around him. The temptations for a powerful man in a patriarchal society, here indulging in women and alcohol, are not appropriate for his kingly station. They would be distractions from his primary focus and calling to care for those who are vulnerable. Lemuel's mother calls him to demonstrate a shift in leadership style and focus that breaks from the norm and creates a new way.

While safeguarding is often seen as merely a necessary administrative function, Proverbs 31:8 challenges leaders to give greater significance to its role in their lives and ministries. Placing the needs and interests of vulnerable people at the heart of our ministry and mission ensures that safeguarding becomes an integral and essential element of our wider activities rather than an add-on that can be met with a wide variation in commitment.

Keeping the focus on good safeguarding practice in ministry can enable leaders to withstand temptation, pursue God's priorities and get stuck into the business of caring for all people, especially those who are vulnerable.

### **3. THE MISSION: EVERY MEANS must be employed to keep vulnerable people safe, heard and noticed**

The wisdom given throughout Proverbs is very practical and has universal application. When instructing Christians how to put faith into practice, the Bible reiterates these practical steps of caring for vulnerable people and those in distress. There are three important functional aspects of the outworking of the theology of safeguarding.

#### **a) Advocacy for vulnerable people**

King Lemuel is commanded to speak up for the voiceless. This theme of advocacy for the vulnerable is repeated throughout the book of Proverbs. (Proverbs 29:7. Proverbs 22:22-23. Proverbs 21:13). The destitute, vulnerable and oppressed must not be forgotten or ignored. Their cause is our cause.

Throughout the Bible, God is attentive to the cries of the poor. He heard the blood of Abel that cried out from the earth, and the cries of his people when they were in captivity or exile. God commands that his people are similarly attentive to the cries of the poor. But this must lead to action. Advocacy is about giving voice to others and their concerns. One way we do this is by making good use of our opportunities and using our own voice to speak up on behalf of others. Another way is to give a platform to others, enabling and empowering their voice to be heard.

#### **b) Defending the rights of vulnerable people**

King Lemuel is instructed to make sure due legal processes are applied to the marginalised, oppressed and vulnerable. His position as King at the time meant he was uniquely placed to expedite this, but engagement with judicial and legal processes is available to all in a democratic society. Proverbs, like the rest of the Bible, refuses to allow for a sacred-secular divide between a leader's responsibility before God to care for the needy and to engage in civic legal processes. Therefore, engagement with legal or political processes is no less spiritual or important than other ministries. Indeed, it is imperative they go hand in hand. Where there are safeguarding policies in place in a nation there is good reason to engage with them and where these systems are not adequately protecting vulnerable people we must seek to reform them through active and purposeful engagement with policy-makers.

### **c) Dignify the destitute**

King Lemuel is to speak up for and defend “all” who are vulnerable. The goal must surely be that all in our communities receive fair treatment and protection. We cannot pick and choose between people or groups of people based on our own preferences or prejudices. The Bible teaches we are to treat all with equal dignity: old and young, male and female, black and white, family and enemy. We are not to distinguish between the so-called deserving and undeserving. All children, all widows, all homeless people, all those in poverty, all those without status in our country, all those with disabilities, all those victim to systemic and societal discrimination, all those who cannot feed or speak for themselves – whatever the reasons and situations for their vulnerabilities - must be safeguarded and the basis for their vulnerability understood and where necessary, actively challenged.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible gives us a clear mandate, motivation and mission to ensure that those who are or may be vulnerable are heard, defended, and treated appropriately, effectively, fairly and compassionately. In our ministries, education, leadership, families and communities and in the attitudes and actions that underpin our systems and structures, we must speak up for them. Our theology must be worked out in best safeguarding practice for all – and in a way that models a justice-driven heart and the very nature of God as a just God.

With special thanks to Dr Krish Kandiah  
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