

EDITORIAL

John Smyth, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the crying need for mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse

During the 1970s and 1980s, John Smyth QC helped to run camps in Dorset for young evangelical Christians. He brought boys from leading public schools, including Winchester College, to his home near Winchester where he carried out lashings with a garden cane in his shed. Eight of the boys received a total of 14,000 lashes, while two more received 8,000 strokes between them over three years. A total of about 30 boys and young men were abused in the UK and some 85 in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

John Smyth's ability to abuse cannot be separated from his involvement with the Church of England. In 1974 he qualified as a Lay Reader at Christ Church, Winchester, and in the same year he became Chair of the Iwerne Trust, which ran evangelical Christian camps for children and young people at private schools. What is without doubt is that ordained members of the Church of England were aware, at a fairly early stage in Smyth's abusive career, of the threats that he posed to children and young people and chose to do nothing to stop him.

In 1982, one of John Smyth's victims attempted to take his own life and was hospitalised as a result after taking an overdose and cutting his wrists. One of Smyth's victims approached the Rev Mark Ruston, who interviewed a total of 13 young men and also spoke to Smyth. Ruston prepared a detailed report which was sent to seven individuals, six of whom were ordained Church of England clergy and all of whom were members of the Iwerne Trust. The report states explicitly that Smyth's actions were 'all criminal offences'. Mark Ruston describes the abuse as 'horrific'. Victims recounted how they were bleeding 'on most occasions' and others fainted during the beatings. Not only should this information have been given to the police, but with Smyth's eldest child only 13 years old, the local authority should have been involved to protect them. This was not what happened. The recipients of the report decided that the information should be kept secret. Without any discussions with the victims, or ascertaining their views, a positive decision was made not to report matters to the police or anyone else and to cover up the crimes. It is clear that the protection of the reputation of the Church was regarded as more important than the safety of children and young people. Rather than being reported to the police, Smyth was supported and financially assisted to relocate to Zimbabwe where he continued to abuse.

By 2013, the Church of England, at the highest level, was aware of Smyth's abuses. The Bishop of Ely's Safeguarding Adviser was in contact with one of Smyth's victims. The Archbishop of Canterbury's personal chaplain and the Bishop of Ely were all made aware of the abuse. Around August 2013, Justin Welby, in his capacity as Archbishop of Canterbury, became aware of the abuse that had taken place in the 1970s and 1980s. There is also evidence to suggest that, on a couple of occasions, before he became an ordained minister, Justin Welby had also been told

something of Smyth's behaviour. Still, no action was taken to report matters to the police. The *Makin Review*, which, in October 2024, led to Justin Welby's resignation, describes 'a distinct lack of curiosity shown by these senior figures and a tendency towards minimisation'.

The matters would have remained a badly kept secret had it not been for a Channel 4 investigation which led to Hampshire Police opening a criminal case against Smyth. Unfortunately, Smyth died in 2018, before he could be brought back to the UK to face justice.

This whole shameful saga might have been largely avoided had there been a mandatory duty to report abuse along the lines recommended by Professor Jay in her final report, *The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*. Had the recipients of Mark Rushton's 1982 report been under a duty to report matters to the police, backed by real criminal sanctions, their decision to cover up the whole affair might well have been very different. Had someone been able to say 'You do realise that we could all go to prison if we don't tell the police?', future events might have taken a very different direction. Likewise, had the Archbishop of Canterbury, in 2013, thought that he could be facing arrest and imprisonment, it is likely that he would have been highly motivated to ensure that the information reached the appropriate authorities.

The difference is that, without a realistic sanction, leaders of organisations can say 'I don't want to get involved'. With an enforceable duty to disclose, those who receive the information *are* involved, whether they want to be or not. They have something valuable and personal to lose from inaction, which should be sufficiently powerful to overcome the desire to protect their organisation.

This month, the government has finally announced that it will include a mandatory duty to report child sexual abuse in the forthcoming Crime and Policing Bill. That has to be welcomed, even though the provision's sudden announcement after its conspicuous absence in the King's Speech suggests that the government is being forced into action rather than taking control of the agenda. As with so much, the devil will be in the details.

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January 2025

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