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OPENING STATEMENT

-METHODIST CHURCH-

IICSA: MONDAY 16 MARCH 2020

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The Methodist Church is the fourth largest Christian denomination in Britain. It has approximately 173,000 members and it is estimated that 27,000 children and young people attend Methodist Church services and activities each week. Fundamental to the Church's principles is its obligation to protect these children and young persons from harm, to create safe spaces and to ensure that for them, going to Church and to Church events is a positive, uplifting and above all, safe experience.

The Church takes this Inquiry very seriously and welcomes its part in it and the assistance it will derive from it. From the beginning, the Church has sought to cooperate with the Inquiry. In 2015, the President of the Conference, the Reverend Ken Howcroft, with the Reverend Canon Gareth Powell, along with leaders of the Church of England, met with the then Home Secretary, the Rt Hon Theresa May, and the Home Office's Director of Safeguarding, Mr John O'Brien, to discuss the scope of the proposed independent inquiry and to discuss the learning points from the Church's mistakes. In 2016, the Church self-reported to IICSA and repeated its willingness to cooperate.

The Church recognises that like so many other religious institutions, it has made mistakes in the area of safeguarding. It has placed the reputation of the Church above the interests of the victim or those hurt by abusive behaviour, mishandled complaints and acted with insensitivity and therefore not lived up to its fundamental principles.

For all of its wrongs and lack of understanding, the Church unreservedly apologises. In 2015, speaking on behalf of the Church, the Secretary of the Methodist Conference and General Secretary, the Revd Dr Martyn Atkins, issued the following apology to all survivors and victims of abuse who have suffered within the Church:

"On behalf of the Methodist Church in Britain I want to express an unreserved apology for the failure of its current and earlier processes fully to protect children, young people and adults from physical and sexual abuse inflicted by some ministers in Full Connexion and members of the Methodist Church. That abuse has been inflicted by some Methodists on children, young people and adults is and will remain a deep source of grief and shame to the Church.

The Church has not always listened properly to those abused or cared for them, and this is deeply regrettable. In respect of these things it has, as a Christian Church, clearly failed to live in ways that glorify God and honour Christ."

That apology was and always has been heartfelt and sincere. The Church recognises that this does not mean it has managed to deal with every case to the standard to which it would aspire.

The Church understands that an apology means nothing unless it is followed up with concrete actions and what follows is a very brief outline of its work in safeguarding over the last nearly 30 years.

During this time, the Church has continued to listen, learn and act to make it a safer place.

In 1993, after lobbying Government to introduce police checks on youth workers, the church brought out its first guidance and policy in this area. In 2003, the Church appointed a Connexional Safeguarding Adviser and introduced safeguarding training for all those working directly with children and young people. Record keeping of safeguarding concerns commenced and relationships were forged with statutory agencies. This was followed by a Presidential Inquiry in 2011, a fact finding and lesson learning exercise which made various recommendations, including looking at how a culture change could be effected, at the resourcing of safeguarding staff and responding to serious incidents. In 2012, the Church announced a Past Cases Review of all safeguarding cases and concerns going back to 1950. That Review reported in 2015 and it was a pivotal moment in the development of safeguarding within the Church. It sought to recognise the full extent of past abuse and to embark on a programme of change which continues to this day.

This was followed by a further review in 2017 based on a series of sample audits and other reviews have followed.

Within the witness statements of the Secretary of the Conference Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler and the Director of Safeguarding Tim Carter there is clear evidence of not just good intentions but good practice in safe recruitment, training, policy development, reporting and the establishment of close relationships with statutory child protection authorities.

A Survivors' Advisory Group was set up in response to a recommendations from the PCR to engage with and learn from the perspectives of survivors. Some of the outcomes of this group include drafting a publication giving a survivor's perspective on current Church mission work, producing a leaflet welcoming survivors in every church and creating seats on the Church's Safeguarding Committee and the Safeguarding Training Group for survivors. The Church is grateful to the members of the group for their courage and their commitment to safeguarding.

The Church's commitment to safeguarding is clear but that does not mean that it always gets it right. The Church knows that the only credible way to move forward is through listening to feedback and regularly reviewing procedures and practice.

This afternoon, the Inquiry will hear from witness PR-A10. The Church deeply regrets the hurt that this witness has experienced. The Church has failed her twice in the handling of her complaints: first at the time of her abuse over 20 years ago when she reported it to the police. Second, in much more recent times, when she reported the Minister who responded to her complaint at the time to a Church Disciplinary Panel.

The Church is saddened that PR-A10's experience of the complaints and discipline procedure has been such an overwhelming disappointment to her and apologises for the ways in which she has been hurt during that process. The Church will work to ensure that it does not happen again.

In the summer of 2019, before PRA-10's statement was received, the Methodist Conference resolved to undertake a review of the complaints and discipline process. What the Church has heard from PRA-10 has reinforced the urgent need for that review.

Her comments and recommendations will be put before the reviewing body for consideration. This is consistent with the statement in an earlier hearing of this Inquiry that survivors are to be considered as an asset to a religious institution and not an embarrassment. The Church knows from the invaluable work of the Survivor's Advisory Group that survivors can offer considerable help to faith groups.

The Church has sought to be transparent from the start of this Inquiry and genuinely hopes that the recommendations of the Panel will help it to better protect children and look after the interests of survivors.

The Methodist Church is committed to the highest standards of safeguarding. It is working hard to prevent failings and to create a culture in which all of its members know that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. It understands, however, that it must demonstrate its good intentions in its actions: from its day to day handling of complaints and its treatment of survivors to the example set by the leadership of the Methodist Conference. There is still much to learn, above all from those whom the Church and those who serve it have hurt, and the Church is willing to listen.