

# STATUTORY INQUIRY INTO THE DEATH OF VICTORIA CLIMBIE

## PHASE 2: SEMINAR ON IDENTIFICATION

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 I am the Director of the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS). I also act as a freelance consultant on child care issues and between 1986 and the present time have served as a Children's Guardian (formerly Guardian -ad-Litem). I have represented the Guardian service on an Area Child Protection Committee. I have over 30 years' experience in social work and social work management and specialised in child care matters for the whole of that time. Between 1979 and 1987 I was employed by the London Borough of Lambeth as Area Social Services Manager in Central Brixton. I am the author of numerous articles and publications on issues relating to child protection policy and practice.
- 1.2 I filed Statements on behalf of CCPAS on 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> February 2002. The first addressed issues relating to the role of churches in the events preceding the death of Victoria Climbie and generally in child protection. Amongst other matters, I acquainted the Inquiry with details of a survey being carried out by CCPAS to discover the extent of child protection training in theological colleges. The Second Statement served merely to file a copy of the survey's final report published on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2002.
- 1.3 CCPAS is the only Christian professional child protection organisation providing independent specialist advice, support and training across churches and parachurch organisations throughout the UK. Where requested, we also seek to provide support to religious leaders of other faiths and to secular organisations. Information about CCPAS as an organisation and the services we provide is contained in some detail in my First Statement to the Inquiry. This submission seeks to specifically address issues related to the planned seminar on identification. However, we would not wish this contribution to be seen in isolation from our comments on the wider picture contained in the Statements referred to.
- 1.4 As detailed in our first submission, CCPAS workers have extensive experience in statutory child protection agencies. However, this response examines specifically the role of the Christian church, though we recognise that much of what we say will have a relevance to other faith communities, places of worship and community groups.

1.5 It may be stating the obvious, but the church is not one organisation, but a diverse collection of different groups and independent entities operating across the spectrum of society. Umbrella bodies such as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the Free Church Federal Council, the Evangelical Alliance and so on, represent churches of particular constituencies but none speak on behalf of all. The strength of CCPAS is that as an independent charity we owe no allegiance to any particular set of doctrines or structures. We seek to work with all, but some churches will more easily use our services than others. As in other communities, there are churches and sects which are exclusive in the way they operate and appear to be entirely closed to the outside world. Such institutions, of course, raise particular concerns when it comes to identifying children at risk as there will be a reluctance to involve outside agencies in any way.

## **2.0 THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IN CHILD PROTECTION**

2.1 Apart from schools, the church, collectively, probably works with more children than any other organisation. In this sense, as a service provider, the church has a duty to ensure the protection of children in its care. Additionally, leaders and workers will be working with vulnerable children and young people, some of whom will be victims of abuse, or children regarded as being "in need" under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

2.2 It should be recognised that churches can be extremely dangerous places for children. After all, the church is probably unique in working with children, and those who abuse children, within the same four walls. CCPAS are aware of reports which would suggest that in some areas between half and three quarters of known sexual offenders monitored by police and the probation service attend a place of worship on a regular basis. Sadly, there have also been many cases of children being abused by church leaders. Churches therefore should be in the forefront of child protection and many have highly developed child protection policies and procedural guidance, with training available for workers, taking the issue very seriously. At the other end of the spectrum there are many others who are extremely lax and in some cases irresponsible in their approach to child protection. CCPAS sees part of its mission as continuing to raise an awareness of child protection issues throughout the church and beyond. This involves helping leaders and workers identify children in need of protection and to respond appropriately where there are concerns.

- 2.3 Churches also have a “social service” function. In many communities people will seek help, guidance and support from churches and this will often be the first contact an individual will have with a helping agency. In other cases individuals will turn to the church when health and social care agencies appear not to have an answer to a need. In particular, black majority churches have an excellent track record in this area of service. Help from churches is also available evenings, weekends, Bank Holidays, when other places are closed. We know that churches are used in this way because leaders will ring our out-of-hours helpline, seeking advice on child protection and related issues.
- 2.4 Some people approaching churches for help do so because they do not trust the statutory and other voluntary agencies. This will be particularly true of churches serving ethnic minorities and those on the margins of society. What this means in practice is that churches will often be serving vulnerable children and their carers who may have limited or no contact with the formal agencies. The role of the church is essentially a supportive one. In the majority of family circumstances, churches will be providing support from their own resources and encouraging parents and young people to make contact with voluntary and statutory agencies where appropriate. The responsibility of the church is to pass on any child protection concerns to the appropriate investigating authorities. Churches should consider themselves and be considered as part of the local child protection network and maintain close links with the statutory agencies.

### **3.0 CHURCHES AND IDENTIFICATION**

- 3.1 As related in my First Statement, churches can and should play a part in raising an awareness of child protection, both within their congregations and in society at large. They can do this by modelling positive relationships within their community, by supporting those who are parents and by teaching about child welfare and children's needs. The ethical teaching of the Christian church is a powerful incentive to individual citizens to take their social responsibilities seriously. For example, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan urges compassion for those in need (especially when they are different from ourselves) and argues against walking by on the other side.
- 3.2 At CCPAS we constantly stress that child protection is “everybody's responsibility”, not just that of leaders, children's workers and others with designated responsibilities within the church or group. We place an emphasis on involving the wider church in child protection training programmes and strategies. To this end,

we have produced a half-hour video "A Duty to Care", which can be used to raise awareness of the issues, in addition to a three-part training video workpack or face-to-face seminars for workers. An awareness of child protection needs and responsibilities across any community is perhaps the most important ingredient in identifying children who may be victims of abuse.

- 3.3 Children and young people should be included, too, in awareness-training programmes in a way that is sensitive, taking into account their age, understanding and needs. Materials produced by this agency and others such as Kidscape have been used to help children develop personal safety skills. Children should also be made aware of policies for protecting them within the church or organisation and know that there are adults and helplines available to them should they want to discuss concerns. Preparing children in this way will assist them in identifying and reporting abusive behaviour in relation to themselves or others. Within a particular faith community there is a natural trust in the leadership on the part of the parents and the churches are therefore in an ideal position to provide such programmes.
- 3.4 Developing effective child protection policies, good practice guidelines, child protection training, safe recruitment, staff training and support, and access to specialist help and support is vital in any organisation serving children, especially churches. CCPAS produce a comprehensive child protection manual, "*Guidance to Churches*", recommended in "*Working Together to Safeguard Children*", which contains a model policy and forms which can be easily adapted by local churches. We suggest that churches then submit draft policies to ourselves and their local Social Services Department for comment. Again, it is our experience that as churches develop such policies, they grow in their capacity to identify and respond to the needs of children at risk. We are aware of this because as a result of our input in all these areas, churches start to contact our helpline about concerns which have not previously been identified or reported.
- 3.5 The benefit of telephone helplines cannot be underestimated. Churches and other groups serving children often will not phone the statutory services in the first instance. Maybe this is because they lack confidence in the services which exist, fearing over- or under-reaction, (sadly, Inquiries of this nature do not assist in this respect), they may lack confidence in themselves or their judgement of a situation or fear raising issues officially. People like this ring us every day and, where appropriate, we help the individual to report the concerns appropriately and, if needed, remain in the background to provide on-going support to the leader through the process. We encourage churches to advertise helplines widely, to include details of their denominational child protection officer (if they have one),

Social Services, the Police child protection team, CCPAS, NSPCC and ChildLine numbers etc. This breadth of choice is, in our view, vital.

- 3.6 As mentioned in 3.2, it is also important to stress the role of the individual and the wider community in child protection. Although we encourage churches and other organisations to have child protection policies, in particular naming specific individuals who will co-ordinate concerns and ensure appropriate action, we accept that some policies will sometimes fail. It is therefore important to stress the role of the individual, ensuring there is appropriate follow-up. In our model policy we state:

*It is, of course, the right of any individual as a citizen to make direct referrals to the child protection agencies or seek advice from CCPAS, although we hope that members of the church will use this procedure. If, however, you feel that the co-ordinator or deputy has not responded appropriately to your concerns, then it is open to you to contact the relevant organisation direct. We hope by making this statement that we demonstrate the commitment of the church to effective child protection.*

Unfortunately child protection policies can be misused to keep "the lid" on things. No policy should rely upon the performance of a single individual or agency. Access for children and adults to multiple points of help and support is therefore important.

- 3.7 Child protection policies and procedures are only as effective as the people who operate them. The danger is, that churches can acquire policies because the denomination, government, Charity Commission and insurance company all say it is a good idea but lack any real commitment to their implementation. Policies and good practice guidelines should be living documents and regularly monitored and reviewed. As such items regularly feature on staff meeting agendas and workers are involved in developing good child protection practice, then they are more likely to become aware of children in need. Where these things do not exist, the converse is likely to be true.
- 3.8 There has been a tendency to develop policies in churches and other organisations from the top down, where the over-riding drive has come from the need to protect the organisation rather than the child and workers have not felt understood or supported. Over the years we have structured a model child protection policy based on the needs of children and workers in the local church or group and sometimes, in larger organisations, developing this from the bottom upwards. This is the emphasis in our training in both face-to-face seminars and the video workpack material as well as other resources. It is our submission that such an

approach enables workers to identify needs more readily and to understand their own role in child protection.

3.9 We know from contacts we receive on a regular basis that some denominations and groups with the most sophisticated child protection policies have in effect no training at all on the ground. This coupled with the information we have previously filed concerning the lack of training of prospective ministers and clergy in their theological colleges raises very serious issues in terms of appropriately equipping the church in these areas. Having said this, many of the same points could be raised in regard to workers in other fields, because in our church-based training sessions teachers, doctors and others often bemoan the lack of training in their own professions.

3.10 Child protection is, of course, just one of the many issues with which children's workers inside the church have to deal. In all the complexity of child protection guidelines and other things, workers need simple readily available information which is easily understood. The pocket guides we have produced are one means of helping leaders to work safely with children and respond appropriately when there are concerns. An example of a laminated worker's pocket guide was attached by way of an appendix to my Statement of 6<sup>th</sup> February. This guide contains information relating to the church or organisation's child protection co-ordinator and contact telephone numbers for Social Services, Police Child Protection Team, and other agencies mentioned in para 3.5 above. It is our view that such aids contribute to the identification of children in need and perhaps have a wider application.

#### **4.0 FACTORS WHICH MIGHT INHIBIT IDENTIFICATION**

4.1 Clearly the opposite to a lot of what we have been presenting in this paper inhibits the identification of children in need. Some examples are given below:

- Sects or groups which lack accountability and which are exclusive by nature, not relating to the rest of the community
- Christian groups which promote a mistrust of the secular authorities and the corresponding reluctance to work in partnership for the sake of children's welfare with some believing that allegations of abuse should be dealt with internally
- An unbalanced interpretation of Christian doctrine which is used to justify the subjugation of women and children, a denial or minimisation of their rights and, in extreme circumstances, the demonisation of such individuals

- An over-emphasis on the control of children which can be associated with harsh discipline
- A lack of awareness of the risks to children based on naivety about people's good nature
- Dangerous assumptions such as *people in our community would not abuse children* or that a display of repentance and granting of forgiveness following acts of abuse means that an adult no longer poses risks to a child
- A lack of priority given to the protection of children and a reluctance on the part of some leaders to get to grips with the challenges of implementing sound child protection policies and practices
- Lack of child protection awareness, guidance and training

4.2 Other inhibiting factors are common to other agencies and community groups. One of these, in our view, relates to an interpretation of child protection requirements which have effectively distanced children from adults – eg children should not be touched, seen on their own, etc. This can be a greater problem outside the church, for example infant school teachers report at seminars not being allowed to hold the hands of five year olds and restrictions on the use of essential medical treatments. In our view this can be counter-productive, making it less likely that abuse will be discovered. Over the years CCPAS have developed guidelines for safe physical contact with children, seeing them on their own when necessary etc.

4.3 Another example is the apparent effect of the new emphasis on data protection and human rights. We have received numerous reports of individuals not reporting child protection concerns either because they feel they have to acquire the permission of the parent or carer, or to tell them in advance of contacting Social Services or the Police Child Protection Team. At training seminars we advise that where a child could be placed at physical risk or in all cases of alleged sexual abuse, advice should be sought from Social Services before the parents are informed (probably by the authorities). This view is constantly challenged by teachers who say they have been advised to inform a parent first, regardless of circumstances. It has not been possible to track down the source of this advice; a frequent explanation is that the head teacher was informed of this at a conference. *Working Together to Safeguard Children* sets out the key principles involved when sharing information (Section 7.27 – 7.46), but in our experience this issue is widely misunderstood and needs to be addressed by Area Child Protection Committees with possibly further guidance from government.

4.4 *Working Together to Safeguard Children* emphasises the fact that it is only when information from a number of sources has been shared and is then put together that it becomes clear that a child is at risk or suffering harm. CCPAS have encouraged churches to share concerns with Social Services, emphasising this fact and that their information could, in effect, be the missing piece in a jigsaw. However, information from local authorities recently has suggested that Social Services now feel inhibited about keeping generalised information on their files, given requirements of the Data Protection Act. Balancing child protection needs with the rights of individuals in relation to information on official records, is not easy and may well benefit from further clarification and guidance.

## **5.0 CONCLUSIONS**

5.1 In final submissions to Phase 1 of the Inquiry, Counsel for Victoria's parents listed statutory regulations for churches in a list of concerns. Margot Boye told the Inquiry, *"Having heard the evidence from several churches, it cannot be left to the churches to take on a welfare and child care role..... if some sort of statutory regulation is not looked at there can be little doubt that some churches and religious institutions will continue to act in a manner that is totally at odds with the child's welfare."*

5.2 As already stated, all churches should have policies and safe practice for working with children which are fully implemented, and regularly updated and reviewed. Any encouragement from any source to this effect is to be welcomed. However, in our view, it is doubtful that statutory regulation would be effective. Sadly, the statutory procedures which exist already did not save Victoria. The major principles of the church's role in child protection are understood. The challenge for churches is to implement them at local level. This would not only involve having sound child protection policies and procedures in place but also having workers and volunteers who are competent in carrying them out. This Inquiry offers the opportunity to underline the importance of churches taking child protection seriously.

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