

The last 30 years have shown the importance of taking allegations of abuse seriously, whether in the Church or any other institution. As a society we have awoken, albeit shamefully late, to the insidious nature of abusers and the profound damage caused by abuse of all types. We have learned of the way that such acts of profound evil and cruelty are committed in places of trust and vulnerability. Each time we have looked away, made excuses, or failed to act, we have sinned beyond measure – and the Church is on a journey of thoroughgoing repentance, not just through words, but in all the practical measures we have taken and are putting in place to protect the most vulnerable among us and bring abusers to justice.

This is why the posthumous allegations made against Bishop George Bell were taken seriously and investigated fully. I do not apologise for that, but as I have said before, we did not manage our response to the original allegation with the consistency, clarity or accountability that meets the high standards rightly demanded of us. I recognised the hurt that has been done as a consequence, and I have apologised unreservedly for the mistakes made in this process.

What I say today that is new and should have been said sooner is this: I do not consider there to be a ‘significant cloud’ over Bishop George Bell’s name.

Previously I refused to retract that statement and I was wrong to do so. I took that view because of the importance we rightly place on listening to those who come forward with allegations of abuse, and the duty of care we owe to them. But we also owe a duty of care to those who are accused. I apologise for the hurt that my refusal to retract that statement has caused to Bishop Bell’s surviving relatives, colleagues and longstanding supporters. They have all raised this issue, often powerfully, and I have recognised my error as a result of their advocacy.

Bishop Bell was and remains one of the most courageous, distinguished Anglican bishops of the past century, committed to the peace and hope of Jesus Christ in a time of conflict and war. The debt owed to him extends far beyond the Church that he served and is one that we share as a society. I am delighted that the statue to him that was planned will be erected on the west front of Canterbury Cathedral, where he served as Dean, as soon as the extensive repair and maintenance works are complete.

This does not detract from my commitment to and support for victims and survivors of abuse and especially the person abused in this case. All allegations must be taken seriously. We must remain a Church which strives for openness, transparency, care, and honesty in our dealings with sexual abuse. This includes, with paramount importance, instances where we have failed.

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