

Archbishop Justin Welby said today: Following a letter sent to Lambeth Palace and also to the Telegraph newspaper by a group of academics, I felt it important to send a considered, personal response and this statement reflects the essence of my reply.

I cannot with integrity rescind my statement made after the publication of Lord Carlile's review into how the Church handled the Bishop Bell case. I affirmed the extraordinary courage and achievement of Bishop Bell both before the war and during its course, while noting the Church has a duty to take seriously the allegation made against him.

Our history over the last 70 years has revealed that the Church covered up, ignored or denied the reality of abuse on major occasions. I need only refer to the issues relating to Peter Ball to show an example. As a result, the Church is rightly facing intense and concentrated scrutiny (focussed in part on the Diocese of Chichester) through the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). Our first hearing is in March.

The Diocese of Chichester was given legal advice to make a settlement based on the civil standard of proof, the balance of probability. It was not alleged that Bishop Bell was found to have abused on the criminal standard of proof, beyond reasonable doubt. The two standards should not be confused. It should be remembered that Carol, who brought the allegation, was sent away in 1995, and we have since apologised for this lamentable failure; a failure highlighted by Lord Carlile.

I wrote my response with the support of both Bishop Peter Hancock, the lead bishop for safeguarding, and Bishop Martin Warner, the Bishop of Chichester. We are clear that we accept all but part of one of the recommendations Lord Carlile makes and we are extremely grateful to him for what he has done and the help he has given the Church.

He indicates that in his judgement, a better way to have handled the allegation would have been for the Church to offer money on condition of confidentiality. We disagree with this suggestion. The confidentiality would have been exposed through the IICSA process, and the first question we would have faced, both about Bishop Bell and more widely, would have been "so what else are you concealing?". The letter from the historians does not take into account any of these realities, nor the past failures of the Church. But we will go on considering how we can make our processes better and more robust, as pointed out by Lord Carlile.

As in the case of Peter Ball, and others, it is often suggested that what is being alleged could not have been true, because the person writing knew the alleged abuser and is absolutely certain that it was impossible for them to have done what is alleged. As with Peter Ball this sometimes turns out to be untrue, not through their own fault or deceit, but because abuse is often kept very secret. The experience of discovering feet of clay in more than one person I held in profound respect has been personally tragic. But as I said strongly in my original statement, the complaint about Bishop Bell does not diminish the importance of his great achievements and he is one of the great Anglican heroes of the 20th Century.

3 min read

