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Staying safe during the Covid-19 pandemic: religious organisations and the safeguarding of young people on the island of Ireland

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Religion Emerging From Covid-19

Staying Safe during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Religious Organisations and the Safeguarding of Young People on the Island of Ireland

MARCH 2024

Queen's University Belfast
Dr. Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill

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1. Executive Summary

Introduction

The island of Ireland has gone through a reckoning regarding both the magnitude of clerical sexual abuse, and the related cover-up by the Catholic Church. The Church itself has had to make significant changes, addressing past wrongs and implementing safeguarding procedures in order to begin to address the pain caused. Other Christian churches also have recognised historic abuses.

During the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions, religious organisations continued to address the legacy of childhood abuse. This report examines the responses to, and discussions around historic abuse and safeguarding, as well as the importance of online safety at a time when most social interaction moved online.

Methods

The research for this report involved conducting an analysis of public documents published by four religious/spiritual groups across the island of Ireland: The Catholic Church, the three largest Protestant churches (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist), Humanists and Islam, between March 2020 and February 2023.

Findings

Addressing historic wrongs

Discussions around safeguarding in Ireland, particularly as this relates to religious organisations, are grounded in the legacy of historic clerical abuse. The revelations about the extent of abuse by clergy in Ireland, and the cover-up by those in positions of power have done significant damage to the Catholic Church (in particular). The public documents by the Catholic Church reflect this, as they discuss the difficult legacy of the past.

Specific instances of abuse are related, in detail, in both Catholic Church documents and, to a lesser extent, in the Church of Ireland documents. Rather than avoiding media scrutiny, as had been done in the past, the Catholic Church documents openly discuss specific criminal acts of abuse, and include details of attempting reporting to senior Church leadership, which was ignored. It could be argued that this is an attempted penitential act, openly acknowledging and admitting failure.

Historic abuse is also discussed due to the importance of learning from the past, and informing the future to prevent these situations from reoccurring. Policies are discussed as being in place to centre safeguarding and protection of the vulnerable.

Much of the discussion around addressing historic wrongs centres on the Catholic Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors of Abuse. Around this day there are a number of publications addressing historic abuse, usually including a message with an apology from the Primate of Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin.

Safeguarding

All of the groups had detailed safeguarding policies for working with children and vulnerable people, usually on a dedicated website or section of a website. All policies are openly available to download for any visitor to the sites. All training given to anyone working with young people is available also.

There are legal requirements for having clear safeguarding policies in place in both jurisdictions (the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland), and this certainly is one reason as to why safeguarding is so prominent. However, it is important to note that both the Catholic Church and Church of Ireland relate that good safeguarding practice exists specifically because victims of abuse came forward, telling their stories, which forced introspection and change.

Theology of safeguarding

In a faith-based context, the failures of some church officials to protect children cannot simply be seen as a failure of human rules. Documents acknowledge that in acting as representatives for God on earth, members of the clergy should be held to the highest moral standard. They admit that the failure to act in the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children is a particularly egregious moral failure.

The Catholic Church discusses the importance of centering the protection of children and safeguarding in a theological basis, publishing videos on the theology of safeguarding for nine consecutive months leading up to a conference on this topic in 2022.

Impacts of the pandemic and the associated restrictions

The global pandemic was a time of significant change for most people, and the public documents of the four groups reflect this. They give some focus on the particular difficulties faced by young people during the pandemic, including school disruption, social disruption, loss of youth groups, and a general fear and anxiety around a global event relating to health. The documents signpost parents and young people to support groups that may be able to assuage some anxiety, and advise age appropriate ways of discussing the pandemic with young people.

Finally, some work relating to digital safeguarding is included in public documents. As young people had to move most social interactions online, there was an understandable concern among parents

about the dangers of online activity. Some documents discussed the importance of digital safeguarding, with Muslim documents referring to training made available for parents.

2. Introduction to RECOV-19

The role of religion has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, taking on renewed significance in many societies, including those experiencing secularisation. RECOV-19 is a three-year research project that compares the changing role of religions in four secularising global north contexts: Canada, Germany, the Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland, and Poland.

In these contexts, it analyses religions' role in three key areas:

1. Constructing discourses around health, illness, and science, including promoting the observance (or not) of lockdown restrictions and public health measures like vaccines
2. Lobbying and liaising with governments and policymakers, including how religious groups have contributed to debates emerging from the pandemic, like addressing inequalities and mental health issues
3. Incorporating digital innovations like blended online/in-person approaches to religious practices

The project utilises a mixed-methods approach, including analysis of public documents produced by religious groups, analysis of media sources, questionnaires, and interviews. It features a multi-disciplinary team with researchers from Queen's University Belfast, the University of Montreal, the University of Bremen, and the University of Warsaw.

RECOV-19 is funded through the Trans-Atlantic Platform (T-AP) for the Social Sciences and Humanities,¹ a collaboration between humanities and social science research funders. It was awarded under T-AP's 'Recovery, Renewal and Resilience in a Post-Pandemic World' programme.

Further funding in support of Recov-19 was awarded by Porticus in December 2022.

¹ AHRC Funding Project Code: AH/X001369/1

3. Context

The revelations about child abuse in the Catholic Church sent shockwaves throughout the island of Ireland. This was further compounded with the revelations about Mother and Baby homes. The ramifications of this have been far reaching, moving beyond the Catholic Church, with other religions on the island considering their own positions, putting safeguarding in the centre of much of their work. The 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, and the related lockdowns added new elements to safeguarding. Focus moved to online safety, safeguarding training online, and the particular mental wellbeing issues relating to young people losing out on education and social interactions. This report discusses the role of safeguarding among three religious groups in Ireland: Catholics, Protestants (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, and Methodist), and Muslims. A fourth group is the focus of the Recov19 research project: Humanists. There is no discussion about safeguarding in Humanist documents. This is likely for two reasons. Humanists, as an organisation, represent non-religious people. As such, they are somewhat inoculated from the abuses committed by those in roles of responsibility in religions. Secondly, in Ireland, Humanist organisations do not tend to have the same access to children as religious organisations do. Humanist organisations do not run schools (although there is some school outreach), they do not have equivalent groups to guides or scouts, and most of their events and gatherings are aimed at adults.

While this report focusses on the time around the emerging Covid-19 pandemic and the related restrictions to social contact, it does provide further insight into how religious organisations (churches in particular) have responded to the abuse crisis and improved safeguarding practices. It is notable that apologies and admissions of responsibility have been more regular and specific in their detail from religious leadership during this time than previously, although public awareness of this may be limited. It is also important to note that religious leadership has much more open communication about their safeguarding policies and practices which they discuss as being in response to their past failures in protecting young people. While this certainly may be an important factor for religious leaders, it is important to note that such safeguarding policies are a legal requirement for all who work with young and vulnerable people in both jurisdictions in Ireland.

The report also highlights concerns around digital safeguarding and online safety, an area of particular importance due to the context of the pandemic when much social, work and educational contact moved online.

4. Sample

The sample of documents for the Recov19 project were retrieved between March 2020 and February 2023. They were public documents from recognised authorities or representative bodies from the religious groups. Documents were retrieved if they were official statements or positions relating to Covid-19, Government restrictions and guidance, or digital media, excluding publications or reports which did not fall under this remit (for example, a publication announcing that a specific priest/Bishop has contracted Covid). These articles were not specially related to safeguarding, however due to the wide nature of topics covered in official documents, safeguarding and youth mental well-being were discussed in many of the documents.

In order to capture narratives about safeguarding, additional documents were selected from the organisations. All four Christian churches have dedicated safeguarding sections on their websites, with articles and statements on safeguarding which were also selected. The Catholic Church has a semi-regularly published newsletter on safeguarding, in which there were twenty articles relating to child safeguarding. The Church of Ireland had eleven articles on safeguarding on their website. These articles from The Catholic and Church of Ireland were included in the analysis. The safeguarding sections of the websites also had policy documents on different aspects of safeguarding and reporting abuse. These are discussed at a later point in this report.

The first group chosen was Catholicism, with 69% of the population of the Republic of Ireland identifying as Catholic, and 42.3% of the Northern Irish population. For the Catholic Church, our sample included the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, and four regional dioceses: Dublin, Down and Connor (in Northern Ireland), Limerick, and Derry, which straddles the border. Dublin and Down and Connor are the primary dioceses in each jurisdiction; the other two were chosen to represent regions with (potentially) more and less socially liberal or conservative viewpoints. Using the county breakdown in the two dioceses, Limerick recorded a 'Yes' vote which was above the national average on the abortion and same sex marriage referendums. The diocese of Derry contains part of the only county in the Republic (Donegal) to have voted 'No' in the abortion referendum, and which had a 'Yes' vote significantly below the national average in the same-sex marriage referendum. It also includes County

Derry and parts of Counties Tyrone and Antrim in Northern Ireland. Social attitudes in Northern Ireland are generally more conservative than in the Republic.

- The second group selected was Protestantism. In Northern Ireland, 43.5% of the population identify as Protestant, as do 6% of the Republic of Ireland’s population. Church documents were selected from four sources: the Irish Council of Churches, which represents the main Protestant Churches across the island, along with documents from the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and the Methodist Church in Ireland.

- The third group selected was Islam. Muslims make up less than 1% of the population of the island, although the population is slowly growing. Documents came from the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland, an umbrella organisation representing Muslims across the island, and encompassing the Irish Council of Imams.

- The fourth chosen was Humanists. Humanists position themselves as representing all those with no religion in both jurisdictions. Those stating ‘No Religion’ has risen significantly in both areas, with 17.4% of the Northern Ireland population identifying as having No Religion in the 2021 Census, and 14% of the Republic of Ireland in the 2022 Census claiming the same. (Of course, not all people who choose ‘no religion’ would also identify as Humanists.) Humanists are represented by two groups – the Humanist Association Ireland in the Republic of Ireland and Humanists UK in Northern Ireland. The sample was taken from these organisations.

Recov19	Number of public documents for Recov19	Additional articles on safeguarding
Majority 1: Catholic Church	108	17
Majority 2: Protestantism	56	8
Minority 1: Islam	11	1
Minority 2: Humanists	10	1
total	185	27

5. Findings

5.1 Addressing historic wrongs

The historic context of clerical abuse is crucial in understanding how centralised and focused safeguarding has become in the Christian churches in Ireland. The revelations about the extent of clerical abuse against children and the associated cover-up sent shockwaves through much of Irish society, and forced the Catholic Church in particular to face a very difficult past. This is reflected in the discussions about safeguarding in Church documents. While, naturally, this is most common in the Catholic Church Documents, discussions around the impact historic abuse are apparent in Church of Ireland documents also.

Some specific examples of historic abuse were discussed in some detail within the documents, usually due to the fact that a legal decision or investigative report had been published on specific individuals and incidents. These were not necessarily based in Ireland. One example in the Catholic Church documents is Theodore McCarrick, a former Cardinal from the United States. McCarrick is discussed in great detail, focusing on who knew about his abusive behaviour and when. The acknowledged failures of Church leadership, at parish level, regional and beyond are discussed in detail in this document.

The Church of Ireland raises a few examples of abuses also, describing failings of the Church of England to protect children, choosing to protect their reputation, and creating a culture where ‘abusers could hide’, after the publication of a report following an independent investigation in the UK. They also relate news about John McClean, a former teacher and rugby coach in Terenure College, a Catholic school in Dublin, being sentenced to 11 months imprisonment due to sexual abuse of pupils.

These specific stories feature in the documents primarily because they are concurrently in the mainstream media. Stories of abuse by members of the clergy are, unfortunately, not new in the media, however the heads on approach taken to them by the Catholic Church, in particular, does show a change in approach to these reports. The Catholic Church acknowledges that these specific stories will mean that focus on historic abuses will be inevitable. Rather than rejecting the attention brought by media scrutiny, the Catholic Church faces this and uses the attention as an opportunity to show progress.

The Catholic Church, in particular, faced heavy criticism for knowing about and ignoring, or actively hiding, cases of abuse, adding to the harm caused to victims. Being very open about cases of abuse that have now come to light is being used to show the change apparent in the church. It is used to indicate

that there is no more hiding, or cover-up. This could be seen as a penitential act, with those articles discussing specific cases giving significant detail about the abuses themselves, and any responses to them. For example, on the article on Former Cardinal McCarrick, both the abuses were detailed, along with attempts by the mother of the involved child to raise this issue with Church leadership, and acknowledgement that this was ignored.

Historic abuse is also discussed due to the importance of learning from the past, and informing the future to prevent these situations from being able to reoccur. The fact that these abuses and cover ups happened in the past is not offered as an excuse. Abuse in the past was abuse; it was known to be abuse then and is known to be abuse now.

Culture evolves constantly and it is argued that you can't judge behaviour in the past by how we understand things today. That is not a reasonable argument in relation to abuse. What is considered abuse now, was abusive in the past and should not have happened. (Church of Ireland, Sometimes safeguarding means standing up to power, 07/12/21)

The failures of the Catholic Church to protect children from abuse is acknowledged as being painful and unrepeatable, and with this acknowledgement of failures, the church promises to create a culture in which this would be impossible to happen in future. Policies and procedures are promised so that people can report abuse safely, and importantly, that their reports will be listened to.

'Finally, we are reminded – as we have been on countless occasions – of how powerful, abusive men (and it usually is men) can get away with sexually abusive behaviour because those they harm, or those who witness the harm they do, are disempowered. This is why it is so important for us to have services and structures in place for those who wish to voice their concerns and complaints' (Diocese of Dublin, Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, 01/02/21).

Although the examples found in the Church of Ireland documents do not actually involve abuses by Church of Ireland clergy, staff or volunteers, they have highlighted them for the same reasons as those of the Catholic Church – there have been cultures created in mainstream religion which has allowed horrific abuse. Lessons from the past must be learned to prevent it from happening in any religion.

'The nature of paedophilia and the types of impacts described above are the reasons why, in both jurisdictions, the Church of Ireland has in place its safeguarding policies and procedures' (Church of Ireland, "He ruined my life when he was supposed to be protecting me.", 30/03/21).

The Catholic Church acknowledges that reporting is not always easy for individuals, but that this is exacerbated by the fact that historically reports of abuse were ignored or hidden by church officials, so there is an understandable concern among people, particularly victims about reporting abuse. The open acknowledgement of historic abuse in the official church documents is meant as a sign that there is change in the church, and that abuses will not be ignored in future.

Our practice is to be open and to share information wherever possible. However, sometimes we cannot share information because we simply do not have it. People can find this difficult to accept. Given the history of cover up of abuse in the past, this is understandable. Child sexual abuse is a profound breach of trust, the trust that a child places in an adult to care for her, nurture and protect her. The impact lasts a lifetime. (Diocese of Dublin, CSPA'S work with victims/survivors of abuse, 01/04/21).

Discussions of historic abuse in the Catholic Church are often reported alongside apologies from senior church officials. These apologies do not offer excuses or create scapegoats. They are usually very detailed, with acceptance of full culpability on behalf of the church, acknowledging that forgiveness is not expected from victims. This shows some learning on the part of the Church as to what constitutes an appropriate apology, as previous apologies relating to institutional child abuse were often seen to have fallen short; being seen as performative; using 'non-apology' language, using terms like 'we are disappointed in the failure to protect children', rather than accepting responsibility; or using passive language such as 'we are saddened by the hurt caused', rather than direct, active language (Bryson et al, 2018).

'No wonder so many people who have been abused find it so very difficult to forgive or to trust the Church any more. They need to hear from Church leaders like me, that we realise the harm that has been done to them, that we are sorry for that, and that we want to make atonement. And I repeat that to them today. I am sorry for what happened to you. I am sorry for the terrible failures and crimes that happened in your Church, and I want to do my best to ensure that no one else suffers in the way that you did' (Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference, Archbishop Eamon Martin publishes message for Day of Prayer for victims and survivors of abuse, 01/02/21).

As a part of attempting to reckon with the past, a consultation with survivors of abuse was undertaken throughout the Catholic Church as part of the Irish Synodal Pathway. The Synodal Pathway was announced in March 2021 by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, and will lead to a national synodal

assembly of bishops or series of assemblies within the following five years. This process focuses on the question ‘What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?’, with the role of survivors of clerical abuse being one part of this programme. In organising this consultation the church leadership in Ireland wanted survivors’ voices to be central to any discussions and particularly recommendations made. The document relating to this consultation, however, acknowledges the difficulty that some survivors had with being involved in any way, due to past experiences with the church.

‘Their experiences of these processes were not always positive. The Church, they said, is good at listening but not so good at hearing. By this they meant that the Church listens to people when they say that things have to change in the manner in which it deals with abuse in the Church. All too often, however, the Church fails to follow through and make the necessary changes’ (Irish Catholic Bishop’s Conference, The Survivors and the Synod, 01/07/21).

The Catholic Church in Ireland, and indeed internationally, has had to make significant changes to reckoning with the past, and safeguarding for the future. The official documents of the church in Ireland discuss three major means of addressing these issues: Prayer and repentance; apologies and support for victims; and protecting and safeguarding for children and vulnerable adults in the future.

The role of prayer and repentance is discussed annually in documents relating to a Vatican implemented Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors of Abuse. This is an initiative by Pope Francis and was first marked in Irish dioceses and parishes in 2017. It takes place on the first Friday of Lent. Long articles appear annually about this event every year during the period of the pandemic. The articles are very similar in nature, with much of the detail seemingly copied from one year to the next. The description of the lighting of a Candle of Atonement, and suggested prayers to be said for victims and survivors of clerical abuse are given. The Candle and Prayer of Atonement are Irish additions to the day and were introduced by Irish Bishops in 2019. Statements from Archbishop Eamon Martin are included, which remain focussed on apologies and acceptance of culpability by the church and its leadership.

While the acknowledgment and acceptance of responsibility are important and may give some solace to some victims, it is important to note that the church leadership does make clear that words without a marked and notable change in behaviour will likely not be enough for most. There is a definite need for policy changes to guarantee protection for young people in the care of the church.

‘Today is a day that belongs to survivors. It is also an opportunity for everyone, in Church and society, to express our sincere admiration for all survivors of institutional abuse who have uncovered the

enormity of harshness and brutality that they experienced. The courage, perseverance and determination of survivors has helped bring to light the truth about what happened in the past and ensure that lessons are learned so that these awful things are prevented from happening again'. (Irish Catholic Bishops Conference, Archbishop Eamon Martin comments on today's public apology to survivors of historical institutional abuse, 11/03/21).

This is not an idea expressed exclusively by the Catholic Church. The Church of Ireland acknowledges that safeguarding comes about specifically because victims exist and have forced change.

'Good safeguarding practice has developed over decades because of the bravery of victims/survivors to speak out about the abuse they experienced, often in the face of fierce and powerful opposition. Victims/survivors have to navigate their own self-doubts and inner critic and can then be faced by organisational or cultural resistance that seeks to deny, minimise or hide their experiences' (Church of Ireland, Sometimes safeguarding means standing up to power, 07/12/21)

5.2 Communication, Policy and Training

Each of the four Christian churches have dedicated safeguarding sections on their websites, which include policy documents or guidance on safeguarding. The policy documents for each church are:

Catholic Church

National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland	Policy Documents
	Creating and Maintaining Safe Environments
	Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Suspicions, Concerns, Knowledge or Allegations
	Care and Support for the Complainant
	Care and Management of the Respondent
	Training and Support for Keeping Children Safe
	Communicating The Church's Safeguarding Message
	Quality Assuring Compliance with the Standards

Church of Ireland

Republic of Ireland	Child safeguarding policies (by section)
	Introduction and Context
	Areas of Responsibility
	Recruitment, Selection and Management of Staff/Volunteers
	Code of Behaviour
	Working Safely with Children
	Sharing Information and Record Keeping
	Responding & Reporting Child Protection Concerns

Northern Ireland	Child safeguarding policies (by section)
	Introduction and Context
	Areas of Responsibility
	Recruitment, Selection and Management of Staff/Volunteers
	Code of Behaviour
	Working Safely with Children
	Sharing Information and Record Keeping
	Responding to Issues

Presbyterian Church Ireland

The Presbyterian Church relaunched 'Taking Care,' its Safeguarding Policy and Programme, with a Newsletter written in October 2023. This date is outside the scope of the research. It replaces the previous programme which had stopped in 2016. Despite being outside the timeframe of the research itself, it remains important to include the safeguarding guidelines themselves.

Taking Care	Safeguarding Guidelines
	Why does the church need a Child Protection Policy?
	What is Child Abuse?

	How do I Respond, Report and Record a child protection accident, incident or concern?
	What is the Responsibility of Kirk Session, the Designated Person and the Taking Care Office?
	What is the Appointment Process for new leaders and what training is available?
	What is the Responsibility of leaders and parents?
	What are the standards of Good Practice?
	What is the church's policy on the Internet, Social media and Mobile phones?
	What are the Risk Assessment requirements for organisational leaders?
	What Legislation is relevant to child protection?

Methodist Church Ireland

MCI Safeguarding	Policy documents
	MCI Child Protection Policy
	MCI Child Protection Policy (ROI Chapter)
	MCI Adult Safeguarding Policy
	Security Policy
	MCI Safeguarding Statement (NI)
	MCI Safeguarding Statement (ROI)

The content of safeguarding policies and guidelines across the four Christian churches tends to be similar in terms of focus. The documents are contextualised acknowledging of the history of failures to protect and safeguard vulnerable people, and/or in discussion around 'rights of the child', enshrined in European and UN policy. All policies are very detailed, explaining all key terms relating to abuse, providing links to forms for reporting concerns, safeguarding, risk assessment, monitoring etc. Key contacts in each organisation's safeguarding team are introduced, and clear guidance for how to contact the safeguarding teams are also given for members of the public. Significant aspects of the policies give practical details and advice about behaviours with young people – for example,

recommending a high-five over a hug or ensuring that an adult is never entirely alone with a young/vulnerable person.

There is a very clear desire to ensure that all members of each church community, and indeed any interested or invested member of the public can easily access and understand the policies and procedures set out by the safeguarding teams. This is replicated in the newsletters of the Dublin diocese safeguarding website, where the members of the team are introduced and interviewed.

'Kirsten Mahon, Gerard Hanley, Siobhan Tighe and Cilla Farrell (pictured above) make up the youth ministry team based at St Paul's Church on Arran Quay. They work with teenagers and young adults to provide opportunities for them to explore, express and share their faith. The majority of those they work with are minors (under 18 years old) so safeguarding is a key concern for the team. (Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, Safeguarding in Youth Ministry, 01/03/20)

While these types of articles appear more than once, and have a tendency to be quite light in nature, with personal quotes from team members, they still keep focus on policy and protection. Importantly, as well as explaining how the policies are implemented, these articles also describe how the safeguarding team themselves, and their approach are evaluated.

'Their approach to safeguarding was examined by the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI), as part of their review of the Archdiocese of Dublin (see below) and it was found to be good' (Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, Safeguarding in Youth Ministry, 01/03/20)

The importance of the visibility of safeguarding policies at all levels is emphasised, with the role of communicating these to the public seen as crucial.

'For that reason the Safeguarding Committee consider that communicating our safeguarding message has to be a priority as we go forward into the future. This Newsletter is part of that, as is Safeguarding Sunday which has now become an annual event on the fourth Sunday in September. In the future, we would like to explore other ways of highlighting the work we do to safeguard children and vulnerable adults'. (Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, Building Hope, 01/07/21)

The communication about safeguarding is published for the benefit of members of the church and the wider public, coming from the safeguarding team, but it is also important to note that it is also integrated into the general communications of the Catholic Church. The regular statements from the General Meetings of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, which were usually published twice per

year throughout the pandemic, always contained a section on safeguarding, with an update to the church in Ireland's current policies.

At all stages when describing a project or activity involving young people, there is always mention of safeguarding policies as a matter of form. This was emphasised when discussing return to in-person youth work, where the policies were reemphasized. In a cautionary approach, the Catholic Church requested that all workers and volunteers who had been working with young people pre-pandemic should be re-vetted and receive updated training before restarting in-person youth work, even if their vetting or accreditations had not lapsed over the time of the pandemic.

The importance of training for safeguarding and protection of young people and vulnerable adults remained an important focus of the churches during the pandemic, and online training for safeguarding was provided throughout. The Catholic safeguarding newsletter from the Dublin diocese, for example, published an article in every issue simply describing how many people had gone through safeguarding training, along with the names and accreditation levels of said training. This consistent communication about safeguarding is an important tool for the church to reassure members of their commitment to safeguarding for vulnerable members of the community.

The open communication about safeguarding is available through the websites of the different churches. The churches emphasize that safeguarding should also be explained in detail to both young people and their parents, who may be in significant need of reassurance about their children and safety.

'Siobhan spoke about the importance for her of doing things correctly and how this is understood and viewed positively by the parents of the young people with whom they work' (Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, Safeguarding in Youth Ministry, 01/03/20)

Communication to parents is a priority for the Catholic Church, and they do acknowledge that the history of abuse in the church has created a level of trepidation in some parents which is to be understood and sympathised with.

'The Committee would like to address the concerns some parents may have about the involvement of their children in parish activities. Acknowledging that we live in a more secular society now than in the past and that many parents do not wish to raise their children in the Catholic faith, the Committee is also aware, based on feedback from some young parents who have attended safeguarding training, that some parents worry about whether or not it is safe to allow their children to be involved in activities

run by the Church. Given our past failings in this area, such worries are understandable'. (Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, Building Hope, 01/07/21)

The visibility of safeguarding policies and practices is useful in showing a commitment to change, could be a deterrent to any potential offenders, and aims to create a safe space for young and vulnerable people to thrive.

'The analogy of the presence of the Gardai in a neighbourhood was offered. Knowing that they are there gives people the freedom and confidence to go about their business, knowing that they are safe' (Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, Safeguarding in Youth Ministry, 01/03/20).

Recommendations are given for those who had been victims of clerical abuse, whether they came forward in the past or were preparing to make a complaint. There are assurances that they will be believed and supported, something which was an acknowledged failure in the past. There are also recommendations for supportive services for those who have lived through clerical abuse, with contact information included. These recommendations are most commonly seen in Catholic public documents and safeguarding literature, but are available in the documents of the other religions also.

The majority of this section, and indeed this report lies with the Christian churches (and very particularly with Catholicism). This is due to the historic abuses which were perpetrated by that organisation in particular, and their focus and commitment to creating a protective space for young and vulnerable people in future. The other Christian churches, in terms of their relative influence in politics and society, and in terms of their role in education and with youth ministry have also shown dedication and commitment to communicating their safeguarding message. This should not be taken to mean that the Muslim and Humanist communities in Ireland do not have focus on safeguarding or child protection – but they do not have the same historic or cultural influence in Ireland to have the same need for the level of visibility of the safeguarding conversations as their Christian counterparts.

It is further important to note that there are much more stringent requirements demanded of all organisations which involve working with young and vulnerable people than had been the case in the past. In the Republic of Ireland, Children First Act 2015 lays out legal requirements of those working with young people, including requirements regarding safeguarding and policies, risk assessment and requirements for Garda vetting checks on any person working directly with children. In Northern Ireland the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 legislates for strict requirements on people working with vulnerable groups, including DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service)

checks, and rules regarding safeguarding policies required by all organisations working with vulnerable groups.

The annual report of the Islamic Foundation of Ireland described the various meetings that had been held during the year, which included discussions on charity governance code policies including code of conduct for the staff, health and safety and child safeguarding policy. There is no more detail on this in the report itself, however, it does show that the requirements of the Charities Regulator in Ireland, which includes mandatory standards for safeguarding, are being met.

Humanist organisations in Ireland and Northern Ireland do have short safeguarding policies. For example, in the safeguarding policy document from Humanists UK (which includes Northern Ireland for the purposes of policy) includes the following:

‘Safeguarding children duties apply to any charity working with, or coming into contact with, anyone under the age of 18. Safeguarding children means:

- *Protecting children from maltreatment;*
- *Preventing harm to children's health or development;*
- *Ensuring that children grow up with the provision of safe and effective care; and*
- *Taking action to enable all children and young people to have the best outcomes.*

Child protection is part of the safeguarding process. It focuses on protecting individual children identified as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. This includes child protection procedures which detail how to respond to concerns about a child’ (Humanist UK, Safeguarding Policy: Safeguarding commitment at Humanists UK, 01/09/20).

Humanist organisations in Ireland do not tend to have as much contact with young people as religious organisations. In general, young people may be brought up without religion, but are not necessarily brought up as ‘humanist’ in the same way that children who are raised as Catholics, Protestants or Muslims are, i.e. participating in religious rites of passage ceremonies, attending regular worship services, being taught to pray, etc. Most events organised by Humanist groups tend to be geared towards adults, such as talks by university lecturers, for example. While Humanist groups certainly don’t ignore their duties relating to safeguarding, they do not have significant numbers of young people under their care. There is some focus on schools outreach work, and some policy does exist here. The policies around safeguarding in schools relate to ensuring that all Humanists who are active in schools work will have a (mandatory) background check completed, and will follow safeguarding policies in

each school, never being left with young people without another adult, for example. They do require that Humanists engaging with schools receive extra training on safeguarding, to heighten understanding of the importance of child protection.

5.3 Theology of safeguarding

The policies discussed above explain the practical and legal requirements which these groups have implemented, including throughout the pandemic. The practical and legal aspects are important, however, the revelations about clerical abuse in Ireland led to a deeper conversation about where child protection and safeguarding should fit in a religious or theological community. In a faith-based context, the failures of some church officials to protect children cannot simply be seen as a human failure of human rules. The failure to protect the most vulnerable is a moral and religious failing, which contravenes God's law, as well as human law.

Apologies presented to the victims/survivors of clerical abuse were contextualised in biblical language, showing the abject failures of leadership to have met with the requirements of Christ. Archbishop Eamon Martin issued a number of apologies during the research period, coinciding with the Annual Day of Prayer for victims and survivors of abuse. Archbishop Martin is Archbishop of Armagh, Apostolic Administrator of Dromore and Primate of All Ireland. Coming from the highest clerical position in Ireland indicates the seriousness with which the apology is taken.

'As a Church leader, I am truly sorry that such abuse occurred in Catholic institutions which often failed to show the face of Christ to children and young people who were much in need of love and care. Jesus had a particular care for little children, for the poor, and for those who were on the margins of society. Jesus asked His followers to reach out in tenderness and mercy, especially to those who were vulnerable and who felt rejected. Looking back, there is no doubt that many in positions of leadership within the Church did not live up to the Gospel message by their failure to intervene, or to prevent the circumstances which led to physical, sexual and emotional abuse of the "little ones", so beloved of Christ. The misuse of power and status within the Church; the prevailing culture of judgement, guilt and shame surrounding sexuality; and, a lack of Christian empathy and compassion towards the poor and those less fortunate, blinded many in the Church to the shocking neglect, sins and crimes being perpetrated in their midst. Shame on us'. (Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference, Archbishop Eamon Martin comments on today's public apology to survivors of historical institutional abuse, 11/03/22)

Similar apologies were issued in February 2021, again to coincide with the Day of Prayer for victims and survivors of abuse. A further important public comment was made, confirming that diocesan land, including the Bishop's house in Newry would be sold to make financial recompense to the victims of one particular abuser, Malachy Finnegan, again by Archbishop Martin (McGonagle, 2021).

It is also acknowledged that the scandal of child abuse was particularly egregious. There is a further acknowledgement that there is a specific problem in failing to live up to those morals the Church itself requires its members to meet.

'We strive, but inevitably fail, to live up to the ideal of relationship that is based on love, humility, and self-sacrifice. The Church itself, the family of God, is also very conscious, that it has sadly failed in its responsibility to provide safe shelter for or to protect its own members. Instead of reflecting the love that is at the heart of the Trinity, it has sometimes failed to live up to the values it stands for and professes' (Irish Catholic Bishops Conference, 7,000 survivors of institutional, clerical, and religious abuse and members of their families have availed of the Towards Healing counselling service, 31/05/21)

Part of the process of redressing the issues exposed by the clerical abuse scandal in the Catholic Church was to reflect on a theology of safeguarding. The pandemic allowed many people to have some time for self-reflection, and the Catholic Church in Ireland itself also chose to take some time to reflect. Every month for nine months which began in January 2021, the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland produced videos on the theology of safeguarding, leading to a national conference on the theme 'The Theology of Safeguarding' in May 2022.

The reporting of this conference discusses the theology of safeguarding as it relates to the justice-centric message of the Second Vatican Council, and adopting a rights-based approach to understanding childhood.

'Since the Second Vatican Council human rights has emerged as a major theme in the social documents of the Church but the Church's credibility in this area has been undermined by failures in the responses to the victims of abuse within the Church. Dr Regan [Lecturer in Theology and Philosophy] reflects that the recent history of the Catholic Church might have been very different if it had implemented the Convention it ratified in 1990. Dr Regan reminds us that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. She argues that a rights-based approach can help us to address the harm that was done to people who were abused in a Church context and to challenge the

barriers to the well-being and flourishing of children in the Church. (Diocese of Dublin, Theology of Safeguarding, 01/07/21)

Safeguarding is not an add-on aspect to faith leadership; it is a necessary aspect of faith leadership. Creating a safe and loving environment is acting in the image and likeness of God.

‘Our work and ministry with children, and with adults who may (for whatever reason) be ‘at risk’, is a privilege but also a trust. We cannot betray that trust in any way if we are to fulfil our responsibilities as followers of a Saviour who came into the world that all may know safety and find salvation’ (Church of Ireland Safeguarding, He ruined my life when he was supposed to be protecting me, 30/03/21).

There is an acknowledgement that the abuses that people lived through caused multiple harms, physically, emotionally and psychologically. There is some discussion in the documents about the impact of spiritual harm; the disconnection that a person may feel from God and faith, due to the harm caused by leaders in that faith. While there had been support services for psychological and emotional support available through the Catholic Church for some time, in 2021 the Dublin Diocese directed survivors to a newer organisation to help with spiritual support needs. ‘Towards Peace’ is a Catholic Church based organisation which was created to work with survivors of abuse, to discuss their emotional and spiritual needs.

‘Towards Peace is a newer organisation. It is a response to the needs of those whose spirituality has been damaged through abuse in a Church context. (Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, Supporting victims and survivors of safeguarding, 01.04.21)

The impacts of this spiritual damage, along with the concerns of parents in sending their children to Catholic Church organised events may have longer term impacts on the Church as a whole. There are concerns discussed about the damage to the potential future of the Church as some people may be lost and may never return.

‘Acknowledging that we live in a more secular society now than in the past and that many parents do not wish to raise their children in the Catholic faith, the Committee is also aware, based on feedback from some young parents who have attended safeguarding training, that some parents worry about whether or not it is safe to allow their children to be involved in activities run by the Church. Given our past failings in this area, such worries are understandable.

It is difficult to see any future for the Church in Dublin unless children are encouraged to become involved in it from an early age. That can only happen when we provide assurance for parents that their

children will be looked after and protected from harm when they are participating in Church activities’.
(Dublin Diocese Safeguarding, Building Hope, 01/07/21)

5.4 Youth mental well-being and the Pandemic

The pandemic presented challenges for people of all ages and parts of society. Religious organisations provided support for people who were vulnerable to loneliness, illness and other difficulties related to the pandemic itself and the associated restrictions. Much of the focus around vulnerability was related to age and health, with older people and those with underlying health conditions receiving significant attention. However, younger people met serious disruption to their education and social lives during the pandemic. At the later stages when easing of restrictions was announced, it was noted that young peoples’ lives were entirely disrupted with essential life experiences being missed, and that anxiety, worry and sadness were a prominent feature in many lives.

‘People who are utterly exhausted by the experience of worry, loneliness and stress over two long years cannot be left behind. Children and young people who have missed out on experiences which simply will not come round again need to be nurtured and encouraged’. (Church of Ireland, A joint message to the members of the Church of Ireland, 15/02/22).

The impact of disruption on young people’s lives was repeated several times, particularly around education. Parents and family were advised to try to create as much routine as possible in the home. The documents recognised that it was a very difficult task to keep a calm and relaxed home, especially where families were working from home and supporting home schooling. No documents recognised the disproportionate impact that the demands of working from home and homeschooling placed on women.

The difficulty and stress of the pandemic was discussed, in terms of how this could manifest at home. The nature of restrictions did mean that people were living with a small group of the same people every day, without any real outlet or opportunity to see other friends and family. Even in the best relationships, this can cause stress and arguments may be inevitable. Followers were reminded that children can and do pick up on stressful atmospheres, and to be mindful of them when dealing with tough situations at home. This can be exacerbated by concerns around illness of family members, missed friends, and general concerns about the ongoing global situation, which are hard to process at any age.

“Maybe there are difficulties and tensions in the family. But perhaps we can appeal to each other for an amnesty at least for the coming weeks, that we try for the sake of the children to put our hostilities on hold and be there for them.

They, too, are worried and they need you now. Perhaps we don't appreciate how this is probably a nervous time for them. They are picking up all kinds of signals that they may find hard to process. They may be trying to cope with the worry that their grandmother or grandfather, or perhaps their mother or father, is going to get seriously ill or worse.

So, we really need to make the effort for the sake of our children to surround them with a caring environment that speaks to them of protection, safe space and time to talk, common activities. (Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference, We must prepare for what's coming, 22/03/20)

The documents discuss how to sensitively introduce conversations about the pandemic, with some emphasising advice from the Northern Ireland Executive to limit the amount of news programming that children can see, as it could cause real alarm.

There were support services made available for younger people through the religious organisations. All organisations signposted young people to phone and online support for issues relating to loneliness. Young people and their families were directed to both church based support services, and secular ones which may be able to support their needs.

Youth services and outreach were generally suspended during Covid-19, however, recommendations for activities that could be taken at home by families were suggested by different organisations.

Some youthwork did move online, especially when it became evident that the restrictions would take a longer amount of time than was previously hoped. This is evident in Muslim documents, where there is a focus on Ramadan for young people. Descriptions of youth events for Ramadan are written about by young people themselves, showing their centering and importance in the community.

5.5 Digital safeguarding

There was exploration of the potential dangers and risks for young people of reliance on the internet itself. Naturally primary concerns for young people were disruption of education and social activities, along with risks of loneliness and isolation. Like much of the rest of society, significant amounts of educational and social activities could be replicated online. However, this did lead to concerns about youth reliance on the internet, and the inherent risks there are in the digital world. There has been significant concern about youth reliance on screen-time, and on the importance of Internet safety since

the proliferation of smartphones and tablets, which younger people have increasing access to. The impacts of the pandemic did increase the amount of time all people were spending online, generally, for work and communication. This led to concerns for parents. This is discussed in religious documents, where parents are encouraged to talk to their children about digital safety, limiting access to the Internet where possible, and educating themselves on the various apps and programmes their children might be using. There was online training provided on this for parents of Muslim children, allowing them space to ask questions and learn more about online safety. The main questions raised for this training were:

'Do we know as parents:

- 1. The many Challenges we and our children are facing?*
- 2. The acceleration of the digital communication and the known and unknown of the internet?*
- 3. Who or how – we can help ourselves and our children to overcome those challenges?' (IFI, Youth Club: Parents AGM 2020, 14/10/20)*

6. Concluding thoughts

There has been a reckoning around the legacy of abuse and cover-up by the Catholic Church in Ireland. This has had far-reaching consequences, beyond the Catholic Church alone. This is evidenced in how the historic legacy of child abuse is discussed in public documents by the Catholic Church and the three largest Protestant Churches also. The repeated, fulsome apologies by representatives of the Catholic Church are important. At the same time, it is likely that the impact of these apologies has not been particularly significant, because they have not garnered widespread media attention.

The Covid-19 pandemic became a time when many people, due to restrictions on many aspects of life, were forced to slow down and reflect. In some ways, this is mirrored in the ongoing discussions around the Theology of Safeguarding in the Catholic Church which were able to take place over a relatively long period of time.

The importance of open safeguarding policies and practice are evident in the documents of all groups. On the one hand, this is unsurprising because safeguarding is a legal requirement. On the other hand, it is important to emphasise that these safeguarding policies have become mandatory because of the bravery of victims speaking out, their testimonies forcing religious institutions to change and – hopefully – helping to prevent future abuses.

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