

## A Discussion Paper from Barnardo's CANDL Project

*This is the first of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes quite deliberately blunt and to the point, but do not necessarily represent the policy of Barnardo's.*

### The Victoria Climbié Public Inquiry

#### **Does the Church have a responsibility towards the protection of the child?**

The Victoria Climbié public inquiry has uncovered inadequacies and failings in British child protection services with the question of where the blame lies remaining unanswered. Social workers blamed doctors, frontline staff blamed management who blamed the councils, the councils blamed the government for lack of funding. As an institution with aims and objectives to "serve", the question might be asked, who does the Church blame?

Of the twelve missed opportunities where individuals or organisations might have saved Victoria's life the Church was included. How does the Church respond to this? Is the Church's only priority the saving of the soul with little concern for the physical life or does the church view protecting children to be someone else's job?

Child protection is everyone's responsibility. Most children lead happy, contented lives and are well looked after and are protected by the people with responsibility for their care. However, a significant minority are not.

The inquiry into Victoria Climbié's death presents an opportunity for the Church to evaluate its policies, practises and procedures regarding children and its attitude towards protecting children.

#### **What can the Church aim to achieve?**

- The church could aim to become more open in acknowledging child abuse both within the Church and society at large. The Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) has expressed concerns about the lack of training in Roman Catholic institutions despite the recent spate of child abuse scandals.
- More training in child protection and the implementation of good and workable procedures for reporting suspected child abuse. The CCPAS submitted evidence in the Victoria Climbié inquiry stating that just 21% of the 99 theological colleges surveyed had specific policies relating to child protection. A church attended by Victoria's great aunt Marie-Therese Kuo failed to report signs of abuse to the authorities. The Mission Ensemble Pour Christ had no guidelines for dealing with child abuse, and Pastor Pascal Orome admitted to the inquiry that "with hindsight" he should have raised the alarm after he saw Victoria (BBC report 12/2/02).
- Better support and training for church youth workers and leaders in children and youth ministry. Individuals, particularly those working in areas of children's ministry, should be additionally trained to observe and communicate with children. Churches should ensure youth workers are properly assessed and equipped with the skills and resources to

develop trusting relationships with children. Training should be ongoing and provide an opportunity for workers to gain a clear understanding of how to follow child protection procedures.

- Promote a culture where children's voices can be heard, and create an environment where children can confidently express their needs. Victoria attended a church where her native French language was spoken. The Pastor recognised a peculiar relationship existing between what he thought was mother and child. He noticed scars on the child's face and hands, yet failed to make any communication with Victoria as he felt this was not his place.
- Have appropriate tools and resources to deliver a service which will provide support and protection to children and their families. Churches should develop stronger working relationships with social services and local child protection agencies and be ready to participate in dialogue with Inter-agency Child Protection teams. In the light of the inquiry the NSPCC has drafted a discussion paper *An Effective Child Protection System for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The paper highlights the need to pull together all the relevant local agencies responsible for planning and delivering community based protection and family support services. The chief executives of local authorities should be placed under statutory responsibility to convene the Area Child Protection Committees (ACPC), which should comprise of representatives of the authority's social services and education departments, the police and voluntary agencies.

### **What are the Challenges?**

David Pearson, the director of CCPAS, has said that the charity was particularly concerned by the lack of child protection training in non-denominational colleges. He is quoted as saying that it is these churches who have failed Victoria. It would be helpful to determine whether non-denominational churches agree with this statement and whether there any lessons to be learned from the inquiry?

- With more and more Churches developing community initiatives and seeking credibility from outside agencies, clarity is needed on the accountability and structure of non-denominational and independent churches. Churches could inspire more confidence in the services provided if clear directions for engaging in inter-agency working, statements of beliefs, values, roles and responsibilities were produced. This would provide a framework for information-sharing, collaboration and better understanding between child protection agencies, social services and the Church. It would also help bridge the gap between the Church, social services and other public services and address some of the misconceptions and stereotypes currently held.
- The protection of children and their families should be accepted as the responsibility of the whole Church.

*"Children and young people need someone to turn to for advice, support and protection. They need someone they can trust: someone who will encourage them to speak out, provide help, give them control over the process of telling and choice over what happens to them consistent with their best interests. Children often need time and space to work through their troubles without being catapulted unwillingly into the system.*

NSPCC - Someone to turn to

- The church community has much to contribute to providing a child-focused support service to children and families. With total participation of a congregation this could provide invaluable resources such as volunteers, buildings and many more in kind. With additional support and training Christian professionals could function as inter-sectoral collaborators in social services and primary health care and play a vital part in the better understanding and integrating of medical and social services with spiritual health care.
- If spiritual healing is to be a part of Church ministry then a well-structured programme should be developed. A service needs to look at the whole person, identifying needs relating to homelessness, alcoholism, substance abuse, sexual conflicts and family disputes. The Spiritual healing ministry should include support in prayer, spiritual direction and referrals to an outside agency more qualified to deal with specific needs. Church members involved in this ministry should have training in interpersonal skills, theology and some anthropology. The Church will need to regularly update its biblical research, making sure it has good knowledge of the changing world with understanding of the people it seeks to heal.
- Churches are encouraged to consider working with agencies such as CCPAS and CANDL (Church and Neighbourhood Development in London) to develop support programmes and to produce specific information and materials for child protection training which could be used within church settings.

## **The way forward**

If protecting children and their families is to become a priority for your church and the services it provides, the following should be considered:

- Create a more child-focused environment;
- Open up discussions around children and families in need of protection, creating opportunity for inter-church dialogue;
- Ensure adequate training and support mechanisms exist;
- Be willing to participate in inter-agency working;
- Recognise the need for changes.

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If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the proposals made, please do get in touch with us at CANDL.

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