# Independent Safeguarding Culture Review

**July 2021**

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1.  **Background**

In May 2020, Mission Church Morriston (MCM) received a number of formal complaints from past members and attendees. These complaints were handled internally, but the complainants felt silenced and shut down, adding to the hurt they had already experienced. In due course, this resulted in a report by the church to the Charity Commission, who contacted the church, raising a number of concerns. A complaint was also received by the charity commission. The interaction with the Charity Commission exposed significant deficiencies in the church's governance and the basic understanding of the governance and management of a charity and the legal duties of trustees.

Ongoing interactions with the Charity Commission further highlighted the deficiencies of both understanding and practice within the church. By early 2021, the trustees had started to understand their responsibilities but lacked the knowledge to be able to resolve the issues before them and to satisfy the requirements of the Charity Commission. At this point, the church could see no way forward other than closing altogether and accepting the legal consequences of the failure.

In February 2021, MCM approached Christian Safeguarding Services (CSS) to seek advice. An initial conversation, followed by a meeting with all of the trustees, resulted in the commissioning of CSS to examine the situation in hand, establish what action needed to be taken to move MCM to a place of full compliance with the Charity Commission regulations, including addressing the complaints received in May 2020.

By this stage, it was clear that the scope of the work was extensive. The previous complaints raised needed to be examined fairly and transparently, and identified issues needed to be addressed. It was clear that a simple investigation into the complaints would not be sufficient to address the problems robustly, mainly because of the lack of knowledge within the trustee board.

This led to the commissioning of this activity. It needs to be emphasised that this is not a simple investigation into the complaints raised in May 2020, although this certainly forms a part of the required work. We are referring to this activity as a Comprehensive Safeguarding Culture Review. In broad terms, what this means is that it will include:

- understanding the context in which the events described in the complaints arose
- an examination of the complaints received in May 2020
- a review of the church's response to those complaints
- a review of the policies, procedures, codes of conduct, etc. of the church
- an examination of the culture within the church, including, but not limited to, the leadership culture and the culture of safeguarding
- the conduct of the leadership, not only concerning the complainants but also seeking the views of both past and present members
- establishing lessons that need to be learned from the past
- developing a plan of action to address the issues identified and the issues raised by the Charity Commission
- supporting the church leadership to implement the plan rigorously and to establish a culture of ongoing reflection and improvement

CSS wish to express our thanks to all who have been involved in the process thus far. This is a complex situation that has required input from numerous people. Firstly we would like to thank the complainants, who have contributed openly and extensively, despite the obvious difficulty and pain talking about events and circumstances that many of them wish to forget. Secondly, we would like to

thank all those who took the time to complete the questionnaire and, in some cases, to engage with follow-up interviews that have helped us to gain a greater understanding of the situation. Thirdly, we would like to thank the leadership of MCM for the way that they have cooperated with us throughout this process.

It is clear that many people have been adversely affected by the circumstances and events under consideration. As might be expected, there has been a range of reactions and emotions, and it is clear that for some, participating has involved significant personal emotional and psychological cost. We are indebted to all who have taken the time to engage with us. We are aware that engaging with this process has involved painful memories, thought processes, and responses. It is also clear that the hurts that have occurred continue to impact the lives of those involved in the present. Although not the prime purpose of this review, it is our prayerful hope that this will bring some closure that will allow those involved to move forward and contribute to the process of healing.

For the church and its leadership, this process is far from complete. It is hoped that the report will give some clear direction, however, the leadership must follow through on their commitment to carefully and rigorously considering the report content and recommendations and engage in an ongoing process of improvement. Based on our current interactions, we believe that the leaders are taking seriously the issues raised here.

We understand that for some of the complainants, the report recommendations will not go so far as they wish, however, CSS want to emphasise that the resulting work for the church will be extensive and will take some significant time. Initial steps to implement the recommendations will be taken over the coming months, however, it must be understood that these recommendations aim to produce genuine culture change within the church and that some aspects will take a considerable time. Following the full implementation of the recommendations, there will be a need for ongoing evaluation and monitoring to ensure that the church continues to move in a positive direction. In terms of these broader implications, it should be anticipated that this process will probably take in the region of 3 to 5 years before a fully embedded response can be verified. CSS will continue to support MCM beyond the end of the formal culture review process.

While we are grateful for the expression of commitment by the leaders to real change, these positive and encouraging expressions of commitment will require extensive work to implement. The measure of the commitment of the leadership to implementing the recommendations will not be in the initial response to the review recommendations, but rather the long-term commitment to learning from the past and ensuring that the response is not restricted simply to implementing the letter of the recommendations, but rather to driving real change, including adopting a culture of continual self-examination, reflection, and ongoing improvement. This will require patience on the part of both the complainants and the church.

## 2. Review structure and approach

This culture review combines  a number of elements and consists of a number of stages; however, the overall approach is based on the whole system approach developed by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)[1]. This approach is well established, and although it was developed as an approach to multi-agency reviews, it is helpful in situations such as this.

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[1] https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide24/files/guide24.pdf

The strength of this approach is that it seeks to establish a deep and broad understanding, not just *what* happened but *why it happened as it did*. As such, it provides a clearer, deeper, and more dynamic understanding of the events. The main focus of the approach is on learning lessons to improve future practice rather than contenting itself with a simplistic analysis that aims to attribute blame. This should not be taken to mean that it ignores aspects such as accountability and responsibility, but rather that the approach aims to understand, learn, and improve future practice rather than focusing on blame and punishment.

Where a situation meets the threshold for the involvement of statutory services such as the police or safeguarding services in a local authority, referral would be made to the appropriate agencies, and their investigations would take priority. Other than in exceptional circumstances (with the explicit consent of the relevant statutory services), a review such as this will not commence until the statutory processes have concluded and the outcome is known.

The complaints raised at MCM do not reach a threshold for statutory reporting to the police or the local authority; however, they do reach the threshold for referral to the Charity Commission. A serious incident report has been filed, and MCM is cooperating with the charity commission on an ongoing basis. The church leaders have acknowledged that they have failed in their responsibilities under Charity Commission regulations and guidance, albeit out of ignorance rather than intent, and that they have caused hurt to the complainants. They have committed to accepting and rigorously implementing all changes recommended by CSS. This will be addressed further in the recommendations section of the report.

As previously indicated, the scope of work included here is extensive, and the entire process will take some time. CSS will be supporting MCM on an ongoing basis as they seek to address these issues over the coming years. The basic structure of the process is as follows:

- Full audit of safeguarding policies, procedures, processes, and systems
- Review formal complaints that have been received
  - Review handling of formal complaints to date
- Conduct interviews with all complainants to fully understand all concerns (including any not currently articulated)
- Conduct interviews with leaders and key staff
- Develop a questionnaire for current and past members/attendees etc., drawing from issues identified in the audit and the interviews with the complainants
- Receive and analyse data from questionnaires
  - Any respondent who wish to arrange an interview with CSS will be encouraged to do so
  - CSS will identify from the questionnaires parties that they would like to interview concerning the complaints or issues raised in the questionnaire
- Analyse all data gathered, report findings to leadership
- Support leadership in developing an approach to safeguarding that is both Biblically faithful and legally compliant
- Support leadership to develop fully compliant policies, procedures, and systems
- Provide safeguarding training to leaders and DSLs
- Develop implementation plan
- Support implementation of agreed changes

A status report on these is provided at Appendix B

3. **Context and history**

In order to understand the matters under review here, it is necessary to look, not just at the history of MCM, but also to understand something of the interconnections and history before the establishment of the church. While these will not be explored in detail here for the sake of confidentiality, they are relevant and include:

- The relationship between Mark Skinner and Ian Fearn is long established, dating back to when Mark was a youth leader in a group that Ian attended. Mark was very much a mentor to Ian, even being described as a "father figure".
- Some of the early members and leaders (including some of the complainants), knew each other from previous involvements in different churches that they had attended.
- Mark and Ian were in leadership in another church previously. There were difficulties at this church and Mark and Ian were asked to leave.

Key events in the life of the church can be seen on the MCM website[2]

The Mission Church Morriston was established in 2011. Mark and Ian had been told by their previous church that their services were no longer required. A small group started to meet to pray about whether a new church should be established. Arising from these times of prayer, the group concluded that God had provided leadership (Mark and Ian), a building, a vision and work, and a group of people who were committed to the work. In August 2011, the church started with approximately 20 adults and 10-15 children.

By February 2012, a further Elder had been added, and by 2013 a fourth Elder had been appointed, progress had been made with policies procedures and systems, the church was registered with the Charity Commission[3] and a fuller Leadership Team had been established, consisting of both Elders and Deacons. In line with the church's theology, Elders are all male, but Deacons can be, male or female.

The year 5 update document on the church website indicated that during 2016, a significant number of people left the church.[4] This included one couple who were in the leadership at the time and in 2017 a further couple who were involved in leadership also left the church. This reduced the number of Elders back to two (Ian Fearn and Mark Skinner) and also reduced the Diaconate by 2.

With hindsight, this was an indicator of the issues that form the substance of the complains, however, at the time, this was not apparent, and it appeared as though each person or family that moved on did so independently, and for different reasons.

In February 2020, some of the complainants saw an article in Christianity Today relating to abusive leadership within the Acts 29 network. This caused them to consider their experiences at MCM and led them to the conclusion that they too have been victims of abusive leadership.

In March 2020, the church received the complaints from past members / attendees. Over a period of time, a number of these past members had unintentionally come into contact with each other. Resulting conversations indicated that there were common themes in their experiences, and it became apparent that while each individual or family had concluded that their experience was unique at the time, this was not in reality the case. As they shared experiences, it became clear to them that there were both systemic and cultural issues that had contributed  to the hurts that they experienced.  This gave rise  to the series of complaints.

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The complaints were predominantly in relation to the character and conduct of the pastor, Mark Skinner, who stepped back temporarily from active involvement in the church, and Ian Fearn, the other Elder examined and then responded to the complainants. The process of investigating and responding to the complaints was inadequate and that it failed to acknowledge and address the concerns raised. The mishandling of those complaints added further to the hurt and distress of the complainants.

MCM is firmly rooted in the historic evangelical theological stream. This particular tradition places a high value on the authority of Scripture as the rule and guide for both personal and corporate life. While we recognise that the use of the terms such as "Historic Evangelicalism" and "Conservative Evangelicals" are in themselves extremely broad and contain many variations, we use them here to identify that the doctrine and teaching fits within the range of beliefs that the Christian Church has adopted throughout the millennia.

Theologically, MCM fits within a broadly reformed understanding and interpretation of Scripture, and within this range of belief, the church could be described as culturally relevant and theologically conservative.

There are particular theological perspective and distinctives that are relevant to this review insofar as they impact and inform some of the decisions and actions taken. These would include:

- A strong view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture
- A strong view of the nature of the Christian faith and the importance of discipleship and ongoing spiritual growth
- A strong view of the responsibility of members to use their God-given gifts within the life of the church (sometimes referred to as "Body Ministry" which alludes to the metaphor used in 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31).
- A complementarian view which sees men and women as equal in the sight of God, both equally made in his image, but with a differentiation of role, established by God at creation
- A strong view of sin, and the judgement of God, including the notion of eternal judgement
- A strong view of a future (eternal) hope, that shapes the understanding of life in this world
- A strong view of spiritual gifting and calling, including, but not limited to, the role and authority of elders
- A strong view of the responsibility of leaders and their accountability to God for the way that they use their God-given authority and discharge their duties to care for the eternal souls of those in their care

The church serves an area of social deprivation and has had some success engaging with members of the community. They continue to be involved in the lives of people with a variety of vulnerabilities and challenges and so safeguarding is an important aspect of the work and ministry of the church. Some of the complainants themselves do have vulnerabilities, however, none of these would meet the statutory threshold for an "Adult at Risk of Abuse", although some may be regarded as "Adults with Support Needs".

4. **The broader context**

Before proceeding further, it may be helpful to comment on the broader context and how this is relevant, both to the complaints, and also to this review.

In 2016, the "Me Too"[5] movement gained prominence across society, and in 2020, the "Everyone's Invited"[6] movement added further helpful insight into the realities of life in current day society. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) also started to release its findings and as time passed, lessons from churches across the theological and denominational spectrum were also produced.

Within the Christian community, there have been a range of high-profile cases of moral failure, abuse, exploitation, bullying, and harassment; some of which have hit the mainstream media, others of which have received less extensive coverage which in some cases has been largely restricted to Christian media outlets.

Over the last decade, the work of Dr Lisa Oakley[7] in the UK, which reflects significant work in the USA, has started to explore the phenomenon of "Spiritual Abuse". The terminology for this phenomenon is debated and the concept itself is inadequately defined. Even within the Christian context, the definitions used, and understanding applied, are extremely broad. When we then look out into the broader society, the use of the term "Spiritual Abuse" has so many meanings that it is virtually useless without clear definition of what the speaker is intending to convey by the use of the term. For this reason, the term "Spiritual Abuse will not be used in this report, however, it should be noted that the terminology used here is intended to convey some aspects of what has come to be called "Spiritual Abuse". The framework that we will be using in this review is explained in section 5 below

A further factor that must be understood is the trend over more recent years towards a subjunctivisation of the understanding of harm. To clarify this point, the emphasis has shifted from a relatively rigid framework by which harm is assessed towards the view that seeks to recognise the experience of harm may vary from person to person. It is certainly important to acknowledge that individuals have differing resilience in the face of challenging and difficult circumstances, and that one person may feel harmed while another experiencing similar circumstances does not. If however this approach is not handled carefully, it can become an unhelpful barrier to effective safeguarding practice. We need to hold in balance the need to take seriously any allegations that are made, while at the same time recognising that in some situations, and for a variety of reasons, the allegations may not represent fully or accurately the circumstances encountered. This principle forms the very basis of, for example, the Local Authority Designated Officer LADO [8]process, that takes allegations seriously and examines them carefully, while also upholding the principle of innocent until proven guilty.

There are many more principles and factors that are relevant to this review, however for now, it may be helpful to list a few of these. Some of the challenges that churches are currently facing would include:

- understanding within churches of governance and trustee responsibility and the relationship between these and organisational structure/legal status
- understanding within churches of the impact and effect of trauma and ways of dealing with people who have experienced abuse or other trauma in the past

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[5] https://online.maryville.edu/blog/understanding-the-me-too-movement-a-sexual-harassment-awareness-guide/
[6] https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/ which prompted a review by Ofsted https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges#_conclusion

[7] https://www1.chester.ac.uk/departments/psychology/staff/lisa-oakley
[8] https://national-lado-network.co.uk/the-role-of-the-lado-local-authority-designated-officer/ and Working together to safeguard children - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

- understanding amongst church leaders of the dynamics of power and authority
- clear understanding of legal/statutory thresholds
- a clear framework for dealing with sub threshold complaints.

## 5. The framework used in this review

In the absence of any clearly agreed definition of process for dealing with allegations or complaints which fall below the threshold for statutory reporting to either the police, or the local authority, this review needs to establish a framework of its own.

The framework that we use draws on many sources, including the LADO process, best practice guidance and the charity commission requirements and guidance in relation to safeguarding. Principles that shape our approach would include, but are not limited to:

- The responsibility of trustees to ensure that they act in accordance with the charitable aims of the organisation
- the responsibility of trustees to ensure that all who come into contact with the charity are protected from harm including bullying, harassment, abuse, neglect, and exploitation
- ensuring transparency, both in terms of the process and the underlying values and perspectives

CSS have developed, and are continuing to refine the following approach which will be used throughout this review. Looking at allegations, we seek to establish where on a spectrum of concerns the particular issue rests. The spectrum would include the following:

1. criminal activity which needs to be referred to the police or the local authority.
2. breaches of regulatory requirements that reach a threshold for reporting to a regulatory body such as the charity commission.
3. abusive behaviours that do not meet the threshold for reporting to statutory or regulatory bodies.
4. morally sinful behaviour, which may require discipline according to the organisation's own policies and procedures, but which are neither legal matters, nor abusive behaviours.
5. unacceptable behaviour, that needs to be challenged, but which does not meet a threshold for internal discipline.
6. genuine mistakes that need to be identified and corrected.
7. genuine disagreements, for example related to a theological position, a practice within the church, or an understanding of a particular situation or principle.
8. genuine misunderstandings that can be resolved through open and honest communication.
9. false or malicious allegations which have no substance or foundation.

Different definitions of the term "Spiritual Abuse" span various tiers of the framework above. It is our view that although much further development is needed, this more precise and nuanced approach provides a much more helpful framework to consider allegations and complaints such as those that are the subject of this review. We will therefore be using this framework throughout as we seek to understand the events at MCM.

6. **Understanding the complaints and CSS's approach**

A more detailed profile and description of the complaints can be found at Appendix C.

The original eight complaints have been examined and the complainants interviewed to ensure clarity of understanding of the concerns. Having examined the complaints carefully, a number of statements can be made.

- None of the complaints meets the threshold for reporting to the police or the local authority
- As described above, the nature of these complaints does trigger threshold for reporting to the Charity commission
- The major concern in relation to these complaints is the pattern of conduct that they present rather than the individual detail of each complaint, or the individual level of concern in relation to each situation
  - If each complaint was treated in isolation there will be little hope of resolving the issues for a number of reasons including, the time that has elapsed since the incidents, the lack of effective record-keeping, the variations in memory of what happened, etc.
  - Treating the complaints in this way would simply result in an "unsubstantiated" outcome, which would be unsatisfactory for both the complainants, and the church.
  - the most effective way of dealing with the concerns that have been raised is to view them as a whole, identifying common patterns and trends, and seeking to identify issues that need to be addressed, rather than simply taking the concerns either individually or together as a sum of the parts.

The approach that CSS have adopted for this review has therefore been to focus less on the individual complaints, and more on the pattern that the complaints illustrate, since this will maximise the identification of problems that need to be addressed. A more in depth, but nonetheless still anonymous analysis of the individual complaints is provided at Appendix C.

This approach also addresses an additional problem.

- There is significant polarisation of views, which range widely between the following extremes:
  - There is nothing wrong with MCM or the leadership; everything is positive,
  - There is nothing right about MCM; it is a cult that destroys people and those who think otherwise will at some point come to see this
- Although there were those who held a middle ground, the majority of people would sit relatively closely to one extreme or the other.

So, in summary, the approach that we will use throughout this review is to examine the themes that recur, rather than looking at individual complaints and seeking to establish their veracity. It is our view that this will be the most effective way of addressing the problems identified.

We understand that for the complainants, this is not ideal, in that this report will not address their specific issues. In addition to the reasons stated above, this protects the anonymity of those who have raise concerns.

The trustees of MCM have indicated that they wish to be able to make this report publicly available, and therefore it is important that individuals are not identified. This report will contain summarised information about the individual complaints (see appendix C), however CSS are happy to provide feedback on the individual complaints confidentially to the complainants.

Generally, this report will seek to maintain anonymity with the exception of the elders, Mark Skinner and Ian Fearn, and a reference to the group of the trustees will not be individually identified (with the exception of the elders) other than as "the trustees".

Before progressing to the themes raised within the complaint, attention needs to be given to the preceding internal examination of the complaints when they were received in 2020.

7. **Initial response to the complaints**

At this point, it is not going to be particularly helpful to engage in in-depth analysis of the initial response. When the complaints were received, Mark Skinner stepped back, and the complaints were dealt with by Ian Fearn as the other elder.

This initial examination of the complaints was inadequate. It did not give sufficient weight to the issues that were raised and consisted of a relatively superficial rebuttal of the claims made. It is understandable that the complainants felt dismissed and that this added to the hurt that they were seeking to highlight.

In seeking to understand this decision, several factors must be understood.

- At this chronological point, the leadership of MCM had little understanding of their responsibilities under charity regulations and guidance
    - While this is not acceptable, it does form part of the context of the decision
- Due to their ignorance of the Charity Commission requirements, they miscategorised this as a "pastoral" issue, meaning that it should be dealt with according to the principles of Matthew 18: 15-35, rather than considering wider regulatory and biblical principles
- This resulted in the leadership concluding that the complainants were failing to follow biblical principles; a conclusion which further coloured their thinking
- Ian Fearn consulted with 2 other local church leaders who offered perspectives that reinforced this misimpression
    - These discussions took the form of an anonymous outlining of the broad issues and a consideration of the biblical principles
    - Their understanding of the issues discussed was inadequate to make a balanced decision, however, this is unsurprising given the lack of understanding at MCM
    - Given the informal nature of the discussions, and the focus on biblical principles, it seems unreasonable to expect them to have identified and take action upon the issues

**Recommendation one**: The trustees should consider acknowledging the poor handling of the complaints in the early stages and articulating their response to that failure.

**Recommendation two**: The review of the church's policies and procedures must include an effective process for handling concerns and complaints, whether raised internally, or by external parties. This policy must provide a robust structure to ensure that concerns are investigated fairly and transparently and that the person responsible for handling the complaint is competent to do so and able to examine the issues in an unbiased fashion.

**Recommendation three:** The leadership must ensure that the updated policies and procedures are supported by a culture that listens to, takes seriously, values and responds appropriately to concerns or complaints that are received.

## 8. Key recurring themes

This section outlines more fully the concerns that were raised both by the complainants and also by those who completed the questionnaire and/or were interviewed as part of the process.

It should be emphasised that a range of views were expressed. While these were heavily polarised, there were a number of submissions that acknowledged both strengths and weaknesses within the church. These responses were received both from current and past members of the church.

Strengths of Mission Church

Many strengths were identified, and it is important that these are acknowledged. Areas of strength that were repeatedly identified included:

- Biblical faithfulness
- Clear and accessible teaching
- Welcoming and friendly environment
- Acceptance and support
- Passion for gospel work
- Friendships formed
- Prayer fullness
- Godly examples
- Well-organised
- Caring for each other reaching out to the community

Areas of concern identified during the review

1. **Governance and management**
   The area of governance was the first to be identified by CSS. Even prior to the commissioning of the work, the trustees themselves acknowledged the weaknesses in this area. In particular:
   a. the trustees had no clear grasp of their responsibilities as trustees
   b. the church policies and procedures are inadequate from a governance perspective
   c. although safeguarding training had been accessed previously, it is clear that this has not resulted in competence
   d. lack of effective accountability structures
   e. lack of effective challenge and diversity of views
   f. one person expressed concern that some people are not challenged when they should be

   While it is important to remember the context of MCM, which is a small church, and ultimately any recommendations have to be realistic and proportionate, the area of governance does need to be addressed effectively. Many of the concerns that have been raised can ultimately be

traced back to poor governance, lack of accountability and a lack of effective measures to ensure that matters are dealt with effectively.

**Recommendation four:** The Trustees must attend training to ensure that they are clear about their responsibilities in relation to governance and Charity Commission requirements

**Recommendation five:** The review of the church's policies and procedures must provide effective processes to ensure that governance and management of the church is effective and legally compliant

**Recommendation six:** the trustees must implement processes for ensuring that governance, safeguarding, and other arrangements are understood, fully implemented, and that the effectiveness of the arrangements, and the competence of those who hold roles are all monitored and assessed on an ongoing basis

**Recommendation seven:** the trustees must ensure that there is effective accountability, challenge, and respectful handling of divergent views. Ideally, the trust board would be more diverse both theologically and with a wider range of skills and personalities, however, ultimately the church is a small organisation and at the present time such diversity will be difficult to achieve. In the circumstances, it is vital that the processes and procedures are robust, and that a culture that listens to divergent views is established

2. **Decision making processes**
Concerns about the decision-making processes were raised by three individuals in the course of the review, however, these comments were made by people who have not been in attendance for the church for five years or more. Processes and procedures for decision-making appear to be well managed, proportionate, and effective.
The main area of concern lies not in relation to processes followed, but rather in the culture and the lack of diversity of views within the church. Some have suggested that there is a culture within the church whereby people who disagree become frustrated and leave. If this is the case, the lack of current evidence may point to the lack of diversity rather than fundamental change to the way that decisions are made.

It should be emphasised however that the processes and procedures are clearly laid out and appeared to be followed consistently.

**Recommendation eight:** the trustees should ensure that the lack of diversity (which is currently unavoidable) is consciously managed. In particular, the trustees should seek to ensure that mechanisms are in place to ensure that every view is heard including contrary views and that the culture not only encourages, but also values differences of opinion that strengthen the decision-making processes.

**Recommendation nine:** the trustees should consider ways to ensure that those who find it difficult to make their voice heard have both formal and informal mechanisms for expressing their thoughts and raising concerns

**Recommendation ten:** the trustees should consider a process for gathering views from people who leave the membership or the leadership team. This should actively encourage honest

expression of concerns and any information gathered should be considered so lessons can be learned.

3. **Safeguarding**

One person raised specific concerns about mishandling of safeguarding issues. A number of people raised concerns about safeguarding from the perspective of "Spiritual Abuse". Clearly, safeguarding is high priority for all trustees when examining the safeguarding arrangements, no significant concerns were identified.

In relation to the specific concern that was raised, advice was sought from specialist safeguarding provider and there was evidence that their advice had been followed. Safeguarding records are maintained in an orderly fashion. The existing arrangements as they operate in relation to the handling of safeguarding concerns are proportionate and effective.

The main area of weakness from the point of view of safeguarding is the policy itself which is not fit for purpose. The content is out of date, and it is difficult to use, consisting of much information that appears to have been cut-and-paste from other sources. Work to address the policy deficiencies has started already, however, the work was deliberately not brought to a conclusion prior to the findings of the review as contained in this report since it was felt that the review may highlight other areas that need further consideration.

**Recommendation eleven:** MCM, supported by CSS, must complete the review of the policies procedures and systems to ensure that they are fit for purpose

4. **Failure to recognise limits of own competence**

This is a theme that recurs in different contexts and there appears to be something of a pattern across the church. It should be emphasised that this is not a universal characteristic, however it does appear in different contexts.
Examples would include:
   a. the failure of the trustees to recognise the responsibilities that they had and that need for more specialist advice.
   b. the seeking of advice from two local pastors which inadequately considered the issues and is outside the scope of their expertise.
   c. Ian's response to the complainants back in 2020 which was inadequate.

There were also suggestions within the complaints that this is true in relation to pastoral care and one person referenced the lack of theological / ministerial training in the leadership. These points are more subjective, and the polarisation of views is pronounced at this point. There were those who expressed gratitude for the pastoral care that they have received and felt that Mark's background in social care was a real strength. It needs to be recognised, however, that there are a significant number of people who have been hurt and potentially damaged by their experiences at MCM. Clearly the situation is unacceptable.

**Recommendation twelve:** The leadership must ensure that they clearly understand the limits of their own competence, and that they seek advice, or where appropriate, refer situations to external agencies. This should include both procedural requirements and awareness raising through training and the cultural change in the church.

5. **Handling challenge and disagreements**

One of the strongest recurring themes across the interviews and the questionnaires was way that disagreements are handled. Once again there is a high degree of subjectivity here. There were many who expressed their experiences of challenge and/or disagreement that were positive. Additionally, there were a few expressions that conflict could be difficult, however, this was mixed in with the acknowledgement that this may have been the individuals issue due to their own personality rather than being a problem with the leadership. There were, however, those who were generally supportive of the church and leadership who acknowledged that sometimes the clear and decisive expression of "biblical truth" could sometimes be harsh.

There is little doubt that this is an area that needs to be addressed. Clashes of theology can often bring out the worst in people. Where there is deep conviction of a particular point, care needs to be taken to ensure that hard truths are spoken with love and gentleness and for the good of the individual concerned. It would seem that the most likely explanation here is that the problems arise from overzealous attempts to convey biblical truth rather than an attempt to bully or harass. That said, regardless of the motivation or intention the fact remains that numerous respondents expressed concern about the way that disagreements are handled, and the experience is certainly one that is harmful.

**Recommendation thirteen:** The review of policies and procedures must include clear and practical codes of conduct, including for pastoral care and handling disagreements. CSS will support MCM in developing these.

**Recommendation fourteen:** The safeguarding training for leaders provided by CSS must include managing conflict

**Recommendation fifteen:** a clear, biblically consistent process for dealing with complaints and grievances needs to be established in the revised policy and procedures and the trustees should also consider a more proactive feedback process both in relation to pastoral care and in relation to situations of disagreement or challenge that enables the elders and the trustees to gain a picture of whether improvement is being made.

**Recommendation sixteen:** the church leadership should consider whether a process of reflective practice would benefit both the elders and the trustees. CSS will explore this with the leadership as part of the ongoing work and can provide training if required. This would allow the leadership to identify recurring patterns and to develop and refine their approach to handling such situations of conflict.

**Recommendation seventeen:** the leadership should give consideration to whether there will be benefits to engaging with leaders or churches that have a broader theological base than is currently the case. Affiliation to one of the networks such as Affinity, FIEC etc may help and encourage the leadership to explore a wider range of options and approaches if they engage with a more diverse group of churches.

**Recommendation eighteen:** the church leadership should reflect on why individuals who disagree feel isolated and unheard in conflict situations. The best practice and code of conduct will support this to a degree, but reflection is also required. The church should develop clear principles to which it works.

**Recommendation nineteen:** greater care and consideration should be taken when handling conflict, to ensure that the power dynamics are understood, and that challenge is provided in an appropriate and caring way.

**Recommendation twenty:** the trustees should give serious consideration to whether expectations, approaches etc are clearly understood by members and those who attend services regularly, so that they are able to make an informed decision as to whether MCM is the right place for them. Clarity about the culture and ethos of the church would help to avoid some of the problems that have been identified during the course of the review.

6. **Church culture:**

Another area that was consistently raised by those who had been harmed by their experiences at MCM was that of the culture. This aspect intersects with many of the other recommendations. Once again, highly polarised positions and strong views were expressed.

This included many aspects and behaviours, and there are differing recollections and interpretations, however, the prevalence of the concerns raised would indicate that at the very minimum, there is a lack of appreciation of the way that approaches, and behaviours come across to others.

A more detailed list of concerns can be found in (Appendix C), however, words and phrases that regularly came up included manipulation, control, bullying, pressuring, and over-reach etc. A few people went so far as to describe the culture as cult like.

Looking at the examples provided, it is clear that none of the allegations reach a threshold for referral to statutory services. That said, it is also clear that the threshold for those statutory services is extremely high. There can be no doubt that the culture experienced at Mission Church, though not intentionally harmful, does contain features which result in harm and therefore there is work to do to address these features of the culture. These issues will be addressed in a number of ways, including, reflective exercises with the leadership, training, clear expectations outlined in codes of conduct, clear routes for raising concerns, etc.

**Recommendation twenty one:** the leadership should engage in a reflective process that considers why so many past members have experienced the church culture as they have. CSS will lead this.

**Recommendation twenty two:** the elders should engage in a reflective process and should consider training in relation to dynamics of power. In particular the power of theological knowledge, spiritual position, and age and experience should be considered

**Recommendation twenty three:** The leadership should reflect on whether particular vocabulary further adds to the sense of being manipulated or bullied. Likewise, whether the articulation of support that is offered to individuals could be seen to "have strings attached" or implies conditions or other expectations .

**Recommendations twenty four:** The leadership should reflect on the maintenance of appropriate boundaries and seek to ensure that individuals are cared for well and that there is clarity in the roles and expectations.

**Recommendation twenty five:** the church leadership should engage the members in a process of reflection that seeks to identify why the experiences of some have been so negative. In addition to identifying such features, this process will help to identify blind spots and inconsistencies that the church itself may be overlooking. This should be supported as appropriate through the teaching and preaching of the church and the example provided by the leadership.

**Recommendation twenty six:** the church need to produce a clear action plan that covers not only policies and procedures, but how the cultural aspects will be addressed. CSS will support and work with the church to develop a realistic and robust plan.


7. **Leadership style:**
   This was also a recurring theme in the responses. Once again, perspectives are highly polarised, and so the question of why a significant number of people experience the church as they do become important.

   In addition to the previous recommendations that will feed into this:

   **Recommendation twenty seven:** The church leaders should consider giving greater thought to the biblical basis of safeguarding and developing theology that balances the important principles of biblical responsibility and authority with the need to safeguard members well, through humble, servant hearted leadership. CSS will support with this as required

   **Recommendation twenty eight:** The church leaders should consider how scrutiny and accountability for the ongoing implementations of the plans and commitments arising from this review will be provided once this culture review has concluded.


8. **Leaving well**
   This was also a significant theme in both the complaints and the wider call for evidence, and again, it intertwines with many of the previous comments. It was a notable feature that both the complainants, and some of those from the church commented on anxiety and discomfort at the thoughts of "bumping into" each other. Although this links into the handling of conflict, there are some particular aspects to this theme. Some of these issues will be addressed via procedures and others will be picked up in some of the other recommendations; particularly those relating to handling conflict.

   **Recommendation twenty nine:** The trustees should ensure that clear and consistent processes for recording and reporting resignations from membership are implemented. The leadership should consider how they can encourage the church by example to take positive steps to ensure that those leaving the church do not feel unnecessarily isolated or victimised.

   **Recommendation thirty:** Where possible, the elders should seek to build constructive dialogue with other local churches so that when people leave and start to attend a different church in the area, there is open and genuine communication where appropriate. It is important that the way that other local churches are referenced in terms of the relationship and theological differences, does not create division and discomfort should a past member of MCM decide to attend that church.

9. **Theological**

The final category to consider is that of theology. There were comments that related to rigidity of theology and, that this can suppress open discussion. The power of knowledge to intimidate and silence and an unwillingness to engage with other theological perspectives was also raised. While it is not the place of CSS to dictate to MCM what their theological positions should be, we would make a further recommendation that relates specifically to the question of safeguarding.

**Recommendation thirty one:** MCM has a fairly distinctive culture that will not suit every individual. We would recommend that the church articulate clearly, it's more distinctive theological positions so that individuals joining the church are clear about what they can expect, and what will be expected of them.

**Appendix A: recommendations**

**Recommendation one**: The trustees should consider acknowledging the poor handling of the complaints in the early stages and articulating their response to that failure.

**Recommendation two**: The review of the church's policies and procedures must include an effective process for handling concerns and complaints, whether raised internally, or by external parties. This policy must provide a robust structure to ensure that concerns are investigated fairly and transparently and that the person responsible for handling the complaint is competent to do so and able to examine the issues in an unbiased fashion.

**Recommendation three:** The leadership must ensure that the updated policies and procedures are supported by a culture that listens to, takes seriously, values and responds appropriately to concerns or complaints that are received.

**Recommendation four:** The Trustees must attend training to ensure that they are clear about their responsibilities in relation to governance and Charity Commission requirements

**Recommendation five:** The review of the church's policies and procedures must provide effective processes to ensure that governance and management of the church is effective and legally compliant

**Recommendation six:** the trustees must implement processes for ensuring that governance, safeguarding, and other arrangements are understood, fully implemented, and that the effectiveness of the arrangements, and the competence of those who hold roles are all monitored and assessed on an ongoing basis

**Recommendation seven:** the trustees must ensure that there is effective accountability, challenge, and respectful handling of divergent views. Ideally, the trust board would be more diverse both theologically and with a wider range of skills and personalities, however, ultimately the church is a small organisation and at the present time such diversity will be difficult to achieve. In the circumstances, it is vital that the processes and procedures are robust, and that a culture that listens to divergent views is established

**Recommendation eight:** the trustees should ensure that the lack of diversity (which is currently unavoidable) is consciously managed. In particular, the trustees should seek to ensure that mechanisms are in place to ensure that every view is heard including contrary views and that the culture not only encourages, but also values differences of opinion that strengthen the decision-making processes.

**Recommendation nine:** the trustees should consider ways to ensure that those who find it difficult to make their voice heard have both formal and informal mechanisms for expressing their thoughts and raising concerns

**Recommendation ten**: the trustees should consider a process for gathering views from people who leave the membership or the leadership team. This should actively encourage honest expression of concerns and any information gathered should be considered so lessons can be learned.

**Recommendation eleven:** MCM, supported by CSS, must complete the review of the policies procedures and systems to ensure that they are fit for purpose

**Recommendation twelve:** The leadership must ensure that they clearly understand the limits of their own competence, and that they seek advice, or where appropriate, refer situations to external agencies. This should include both procedural requirements and awareness raising through training and the cultural change in the church.

**Recommendation thirteen:** The review of policies and procedures must include clear and practical codes of conduct, including for pastoral care and handling disagreements. CSS will support MCM in developing these.

**Recommendation fourteen:** The safeguarding training for leaders provided by CSS must include managing conflict

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**Recommendation thirty one:** MCM has a fairly distinctive culture that will not suit every individual. We would recommend that the church articulate clearly, it's more distinctive theological positions so that individuals joining the church are clear about what they can expect, and what will be expected of them.

<u>**Appendix B: Independent Safeguarding Culture Review: progress to date**</u>

This culture review is an extensive process that will run for some considerable time. This progress report will be out of date as soon as it is published, however, it may be helpful to the reader to understand where this report fits into the broader process, hence the provision of this appendix.

| | |
|---|---|
| Full audit of safeguarding policies, procedures, processes, and systems | **Complete** |
| Review formal complaints that have been received | **Complete** |
| Review handling of formal complaints to date | **Complete** |
| Conduct interviews with all complainants to fully understand all concerns (including any not currently articulated) | **Complete** |
| Conduct interviews with leaders and key staff | **Complete** |
| Develop questionnaire for current and past members / attendees etc, drawing from issues identified in the audit and the interviews with the complainants | **Complete** |
| Receive and analyse data from questionnaires<br>• Any respondent who wish to arrange and interview with CSS will be encouraged to do so | Complete |

| | |
|---|---|
| • CSS will identify from the questionnaires parties that they would like to interview in relation to the complaints or issues raised in the questionnaire | |
| Analyse all data gathered, report findings to leadership | Complete |
| Support leadership to develop approach to safeguarding that is both Biblically faithful and legally compliant | This will be included in the implementation stage |
| Support leadership to develop fully compliant policies, procedures, and systems | Now that the report is complete and the recommendations are known, the policies, procedures and systems will undergo a thorough overhaul. CSS will be leading this with input from the church. |
| Provide safeguarding training to leaders and DSLs | Time has been committed on a monthly basis; initially from October to February inclusive and CSS will deliver a bespoke training program, tailored to meet all the recommendations of the report.<br><br>CSS are currently (August 2021) structuring the development and learning which will include both training and reflective exercises |
| Develop implementation plan | Initial plan developed |
| Support implementation of agreed changes | Ongoing support provided by CSS to MCM |
| | |

**Appendix C: Overview of the complaints and submissions to the review process**

**The church received 8 formal, written complaints.**

Connected individuals 4

Individuals 3

Groups 1

In section 5, a proposed framework for analysing concerns and complaints was outlined. The review concludes as listed below.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. criminal activity which needs to be referred to the police or the local authority. | None of the complaints fit in this category |
| 2. breaches of regulatory requirements that reach a threshold for reporting to a regulatory body such as the charity commission. | Clear and acknowledged breaches in this category |
| 3. abusive behaviours that do not meet the threshold for reporting to statutory or regulatory bodies. | Some aspects in this category<br>While these may not have been intentional, they are nonetheless features |
| 4. morally sinful behaviour, which may require discipline according to the organisation's own policies and procedures, but which are neither legal matters, nor abusive behaviours. | None of the complaints fit into this category |
| 5. unacceptable behaviour, that needs to be challenged, but which does not meet a threshold for internal discipline. | Some aspects in this category<br>While these may not have been intentional, they are nonetheless features |
| 6. genuine mistakes that need to be identified and corrected. | Some aspects in this category<br>While these may not have been intentional, they are nonetheless features |
| 7. genuine disagreements, for example related to a theological position, a practice within the church, or an understanding of a particular situation  or principle. | Some aspects of some of the complaints would fit in this category |
| 8. genuine misunderstandings that can be resolved through open and honest communication. | Not applicable in this situation |
| 9. false or malicious allegations which have no substance or foundation. | None of the complaints fit into this category |

The "call for evidence"  resulted in:

26 returns representing 28 people

9 returns (10 people) were from current members

| Category | Forms returned | People represented |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| Total | 26 | 28 |
|  |  |  |
| Current members | 9 | 10 |
| Current attendees | 5 | 5 |
| Past members | 7 | 7 |
| Past attendees | 4 | 4 |
|  |  |  |
| Members of the previous church | 1 | 2 |

None of the complainants submitted a form

All of the complainants were interviewed

8 of those responding were interviewed

Having analysed all of the data gathered, the following areas of concern were identified

| **From the formal complaints** | | |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| **Controlling / manipulative behaviours** | | |
|  |  |  |
|  | Domineering, bullying and vindictive behaviour (MS) |  |
|  | Use of pulpit to manipulate people (MS) |  |
|  | Use of "divine authority" to manipulate people (MS) incl. people who leave MCM have left God |  |
|  | Belittling, discrediting or humiliating people in meetings (MS) |  |
|  | Applying emotional pressure – e.g. damaging or not supporting the church (MS) |  |
|  | Using "support" as a means to control people in a variety of ways |  |
|  | Building people up with praise etc in an unjustified way as a way of controlling them |  |
|  | Toxic culture – cultlike |  |
|  | Controlling and manipulative behaviours; overbearing |  |
|  | MS gives the impression of being open and approachable, however he is really authoritarian |  |
|  | Lure in through charm, but turns controlling / culture of fear |  |
|  |  |  |
| **Decision making processes** | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Decisions being made without consulting the whole leadership (MS/IF) | |
| | Unwillingness to be held to account and insistence that others did not need to be consulted (MS/IF) | |
| | Closing down contrary voices in relation to the day-to-day running of the church (MS) | |
| | Claiming costs from the church (e.g. Uganda work) | |
| | | |
| | **Handling of challenge / disagreement** | |
| | Obstructive and isolating retaliation when challenged (MS) | |
| | Harsh and unsympathetic manner when dealing with disagreement (MS) | |
| | Accusations and blaming of people who raised concerns MS | |
| | Threatening individuals who opposed (e.g. excommunication) | |
| | Elders "ganging up" on people and ensuring those who raise concerns are outnumbered and intimidated (MS/IF) | |
| | Attributing sinful attitudes or behaviours to those who disagree (MS) | |
| | Pattern of final confrontation meeting before leaving | |
| | Creating unnecessary conflict and disagreement between individuals or forcing disagreements to the surface unnecessarily (IF) | |
| | Not being listened to when raising concerns & being | |
| | Coercion though support / sense of being indebted / feeling guilty if not attending church | |
| | Attacking those who oppose or raise concerns | |
| | Disagreements not handled well – 2 couples previously in leadership have left | |
| | | |
| | **Overreach into members lives or other organisations** | |
| | Expecting individuals to seek permission for things that were not church activities (MS) | |
| | Overreach into other organisations | |
| | | |
| | **Leadership style** | |
| | Creation "competition" for Mark's favour (MS) | |
| | Creating an "inner circle" to do Mark's bidding (MS) | |
| | Leadership unwilling or unable to acknowledge mistakes | |
| | Provoking to try to get a reaction | |
| | Inappropriate "labels" used for people in the congregation behind their backs e.g. "lovable wingnuts" | |
| | Undermining people's confidence | |
| | Bullying | |
| | Challenged / criticised in public | |
| | Unwillingness to learn from mistakes and change | |
| | Demanding unquestioning loyalty | |
| | MS stepping down (or threatening to) if doesn't get own way | |
| | Lack of spiritual direction | |
| | Expectations that other leaders should mirror Mark and Mary's lifestyle | |
| | Sometimes harsh and lacking grace | |
| | | |
| | **Governance and management** | |
| | Lack or ineffectiveness of accountability structures including the Elders (IF) not being willing or able to stand against Mark | |
| | Elders / leaders "falling in line" to support Mark's view when a challenge is made to Marks view / account of events. | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Lack of accountability / weak elders who do not challenge | |
| | Small leadership group mostly consisting of couples can result in narrow perspectives and can make it difficult to disagree | |
| | Some people not challenged, either because they are too vulnerable or perhaps too valuable | |
| | | |
| | **Pressuring individuals into conformity** | |
| | Pushing people into roles that they were not suited to (MS) inkle pushing people into baptism and membership | |
| | Pressure to get involved and serve | |
| | Pushing people to a level of service that affected their health | |
| | Pressure to serve & even considering stepping down from something can be seen as disloyal | |
| | Overloading the willing | |
| | | |
| | **Cultlike** | |
| | Luring people in with generosity and kindness and then identifying "faults" (biblical, spiritual, moral) etc that need correcting MS/IF<br><br>21a - If MS/IF cannot get control over such people / issues, their behaviour changes becoming more manipulative and aggressive | |
| | Isolating individuals – creating overdependence on MCM or MS and making them feel as though they were the only one in that situation or who thought that way | |
| | | |
| | **Leaving well** | |
| | Misrepresentation of people's reasons for leaving to members – often presented as "they didn't like the truth with which MS had confronted them.<br><br>Degree of pride – (standing up for truth even if people don't like it<br><br>General comments along these lines from the pulpit<br><br>Not reading out resignation letters | |
| | Driving out people that are seen as troublesome | |
| | Isolation / ignoring after leaving | |
| | Cutting people off when they leave and withdrawing support | |
| | Ignoring and isolating those who have left | |
| | | |
| | **Church culture** | |
| | People get drawn into a culture of  "we are right" | |
| | Very cliquey | |
| | Coercion though support / sense of being indebted / feeling guilty if not attending church | |
| | Made to feel like outsider | |
| | It's all about Mark, Ian, and money | |
| | | |
| | **Silencing** | |
| | Silencing or ignoring the views, needs or concerns of individual members rather than supporting & caring for them | |
| | Restrictions on women in ministry – preaching, not allowed to pray with or minister to men | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Sexist | |
| | The view of male headship can mean that women's voices are not heard | |
| | | |
| **Failure to recognise limits of own competence** | | |
| | Inappropriate handling of people who have suffered trauma | |
| | Taking sides in counselling and mediation | |
| | Insensitive behaviour towards people carrying past hurry by associating with those who inflicted the hurt | |
| | Harmful concept of pastoral care - unloving | |
| | | |
| **Finance** | | |
| | Pressure on people to give financially – even pressure to give beyond what they could afford | |
| | Talking about taking money from the church for personal benefit | |
| | | |
| **Safeguarding** | | |
| | Mishandling safeguarding situations | |
| | | |
| | Hurt; wanted to kill self, feeling stressed / anxious at possibility of bumping into MS / IF | |
| | | |
| **Theological** | | |
| | Intolerance of and unwillingness to engage with other theological perspectives | |
| | Unwillingness to engage with genuine questions | |
| | Emphasis on unity can suppress disagreement and sometimes genuine disagreement is interpreted and disloyal and or creating disunity | |
| | Fixed, inflexible theological perspectives – very "black and white" | |
| | | |