

## MACSAS CONFERENCE 2009 – EDINBURGH Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2009

**Summary of Key Note Presentations:** Martin Scott, Church of Scotland Minister and Head of the Ministries Council

### Introduction

I first heard about violence and sexual abuse in the church through my wife and Lesley Orr. The issue was never brought to the surface before and it was only by good luck and chance that we now know something of the reality of abuse in the church. Lesley Orr's report "Out of the Shadows" about violence against women by ministers was ground breaking, yet the church tried to keep it quiet.

In the last few months the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland has been caught up in the Homosexuality controversy which concerns consenting adults in loving relationships, yet nobody is talking about child and adult abuse in the church. Abuse is about power not about sex.

I can see clear links between the issues Martin Ridge raised this morning and the dynamics at play within the Church of Scotland.

### Theological Issues

There are deep theological problems which help to create a climate where the abuse of women and children can take place within the church. Certain theological stances are fundamentally dangerous to women, children and vulnerable adults

- (1) **Atonement theology** – there is a way in which the Christian story is sometimes understood: That God was so angry with the world because of sin that he sent his son to suffer in order to put everything right. God sacrificed his son, if you will, to put us right with God. We were all made clean by his blood. This is a fundamentally abusive story. Theologians attempt to justify it by saying that there was a good intention at the heart of it all, to put humanity back in a right relationship with God, therefore its okay that he sacrificed his own son. This atonement theology allows abuse to be covered over.
- (2) **Position of Women** – from the earliest centuries the church has read into the 'fall' and certain New testament thinking that God prefers men to women, that women are secondary and lesser than men, and also that women are responsible for the fall. This belief justifies the subordination of women and the treating of them as second class citizens.
- (3) **Position of Children** – the church is completely screwed up about children. What is the role of children in the church? What is the place and value of children in the sight of God? Because of this lack of clarity children are treated in ways that one would not treat adults.

These issues are not raised in the church, and when you try to speak of them the reaction is astounding even in the more progressive liberal communities. I tried to talk about atonement as an abusive theology with the Iona Community and I found their reaction surprising.

### What is the Church of Scotland Doing?

- A safeguarding officer has been appointed and there is a £300000 budget to handling disclosures concerning those who work with children and vulnerable adults.
- There is also an advisory committee which looks at all offence disclosures to determine if a minister can be cleared to have contact with vulnerable people.
- The Advisory Committee is clear that if a person has been put on the register, a contract is established before they can be part of the church community to ensure that children and vulnerable adults are safe.
- Candidate's training process now includes safeguarding. All candidates are told that confidentiality issues cannot be used as a trap to stop disclosure.
- Support is offered for survivors/victims to ensure protection is in place.
- There is a free telephone helpline "First Assist" – for every minister/ minister's family. It is an anonymous service to alert someone to abuse where it is happening or that they are aware of.
- There are two new Acts of the General Assembly: one to govern harassment and the other on Bullying.

The Church of Scotland has also written and accepted a report/policy **on Proportionality and Forgiveness**, setting out when it is and isn't appropriate or proportionate to forgive an abuser for instance. The policy delineates between the ideal of Forgiveness, which is a gift of God, and the reality that many abusers continue to abuse and/or take no responsibility for their actions. We as church must live with reality and not with ideals.