thirtyone:eight

Creating safer places. Together.

An Independent Learning Review
The Crowded House

26th October 2020

The Crowded House Independent Learning Review

Introduction

The Crowded House (TCH) is an independent church that originated in Sheffield in 2000. It has developed organically since then and been through numerous iterations with many changes in structure, leadership and membership. As a result of intentional church planting, there is now a network of Crowded House Churches, both in Sheffield and extending to Bakewell in the Peak District and Boroughbridge in Yorkshire. The Boroughbridge church is already registered separately with the Charity Commission. By the end of 2019, the other three churches, TCH Sharrowvale, TCH Union and Peak Trinity were seeking to establish a new Charitable Incorporated Organisation (C.I.O.) that brought the three churches together under one charity. It is beyond the scope of this Learning Review to capture the full history of The Crowded House Network, but an attempt will be made later in this report to outline the key points of the church's vision, mission and history as these are significant factors in understanding the church, its development and its culture.

Up until February 2020, the one constant figure in the story of The Crowded House has been Steve Timmis himself, who founded the church with support from Tim Chester. The Crowded House network of churches is affiliated to the American church planting network, Acts 29, but does not belong to any denomination in the UK. It has a distinctive approach to church life and growth. Over the years there have been relational connections with the Northern training college, Porterbrook training college and Crosslands training College. These have also had links with Oak Hill Theological College.

Commissioning

The current elders at The Crowded House made initial contact with thirtyone:eight on 13th February 2020, regarding their wish to discuss the potential commissioning of an independent review. A subsequent telephone discussion was held on 18th February, between Malcolm Savage (Elder, The Crowded House) and Karen Eakins (Head of Consultancy and Engagement, thirtyone:eight).

Following several subsequent discussions, it was agreed that thirtyone:eight would undertake an independent learning review. The full scope was developed, and the review was launched on 16th April 2020.

The following context was given:

'An article in [Christianity Today](#) in February 2020 reported allegations from several individuals against Steve Timmis, together with concerns about the wider church culture. The article stated that fifteen people who served under Steve Timmis described to Christianity Today a pattern of spiritual abuse through bullying and intimidation, overbearing demands in the name of mission and discipline, rejection of critical feedback, and an expectation of unconditional loyalty.

The Crowded House wants to enable any who have been harmed by the leadership of the church to express this and for their experiences to be heard and considered. The review will examine the actions, decisions, leadership culture, and ministry activities of the church, in order to help The Crowded House leaders to understand what has happened, to seek forgiveness where appropriate, and to ensure a healthy church culture for the future.'

Setting the Scope

The basis of a comprehensive and robust review is determined by the scope, the methodology adopted and the professionalism with which the review is undertaken. The Crowded House have expressed a commitment to ensuring the fullest possible learning regarding both good practice and any failings in the organisational culture and safeguarding practice.

The review has sought to examine the actions, decisions, leadership culture, and ministry activities of the church, in order to help The Crowded House leaders to understand what has happened, to learn from past errors, to seek forgiveness where appropriate, and to ensure a healthy church culture for the future.

The aim of the review is therefore to ascertain the following:

1. As far as is possible, a comprehensive picture of Steve Timmis' activities in relation to the alleged harm caused to individuals, whilst serving as an elder at The Crowded House.
2. To gain as far as possible, a comprehensive picture of any other Crowded House leader's activities in relation to any harm they are alleged to have caused individuals whilst serving as an elder at The Crowded House.
3. Whether any of the alleged abusive incidences were known to anyone at The Crowded House prior to the media publication.
4. Why it took such a long period of time for the abuse allegations to come to light.

5. To what extent the cultural context at The Crowded House provided an environment for any alleged abuse to occur and to not be disclosed, and what factors contributed to this.
6. To what extent the policy, procedure and process for reporting abuse prevented earlier disclosure, and/or earlier action.
7. Whether The Crowded House's response to the disclosures and allegations has been adequate and protective.
8. What additional steps have already been taken to improve The Crowded House's processes, culture, etc to mitigate any risk of repetition of such events or similar.
9. What lessons need to be learned by The Crowded House, and what measures still need to be implemented to help prevent any such abusive incidences from re-occurring, and how are these supported by current policies and procedures.
10. What opportunities there are for wider learning for organisations beyond The Crowded House.

Press releases and calls for participation

The announcement regarding the launch of the independent learning review was made on 15th April 2020. Similar information was communicated on both The Crowded House and the thirtyone:eight website, outlining the context, purpose and scope of the review, together with the anticipated timeline for completion.

Those with information that may be of value to the review were invited to make contact with the review team. The assurance of confidentiality was given, and anonymity offered where desired. The following statement was made,

'In the meantime, anyone, including victims/survivors, who wishes to participate in the review, or pass on relevant information to us which may be useful to the review, can do so confidentially by emailing TCHsafeguardingreview@thirtyoneeight.org
Both Thirtyone:eight and The Crowded House take data privacy and confidentiality very seriously. Identities of confirmed participants will be known only by the reviewers. No victim/survivor identifiable details will be passed between The Crowded House and thirtyone:eight without prior consent from those individuals'.

Additionally, a press release was sent out on 17th April 2020 to the following media outlets: Premier Christian News, Church of England newspaper, Church Times, Christian Today and Christianity Today.

Due to a larger than anticipated number of participants, the timeline was updated on 4th June to communicate the following:

'The interview stage of the learning review is now underway. Due to a higher level of participation than initially anticipated we have extended the timeline of the review through to the end of August 2020. The Crowded House and thirtyone:eight are both committed to ensuring this is a comprehensive review, that seeks to achieve optimum learning for The Crowded House and the wider church going forwards. The invitation to participate remains open until Monday 15th June 2020.'

This generated some wider participation. All the information sourced has been helpful in drawing out the learning and informing the final review recommendations.

The Reviewers

About thirtyone:eight

Our vision is *'a world where every child and adult can feel, and be, safe'*. Creating safer places is how we achieve that, and we do this together, in partnership with organisations and individuals. People are at the heart of everything we do because we're driven to protect vulnerable people. Together.

Our mission is therefore to:

- **Equip** society with the knowledge and skills to create safer environments for children and adults at risk.
- **Empower** society to respond appropriately to those who are vulnerable or have experienced abuse.
- **Encourage** society to stand against oppression and exploitation by informing legislation and striving to raise the standards in safeguarding practice.

Over the last 40 years that we've existed, we've seen some fundamental and positive changes in the safeguarding arena, particularly in the Christian community. From being a lone voice, we've seen many of the major church denominations now taking seriously their responsibility to safeguard those in their care. We've also seen some new and emerging issues arise, as organisations seek to tackle the challenges their communities face. Changes in legislation and governance have also meant the landscape of safeguarding has changed and greater political devolution has brought greater variances in guidance across the four nations of the UK. With an increase in awareness has come an increase in the need for our specialist advice and support.

Further information about thirtyone:eight can be found at thirtyoneeight.org

The Review Team

Helen Gilbert BA, PGCE, MA (Social Sciences)

Helen Gilbert has been a Safeguarding Associate at thirtyone:eight since 2014. She spent over 25 years in Primary Education and as a head teacher she worked closely with statutory child protection agencies and sat on the Local Safeguarding Children Board. For eight years she worked in educational consultancy and inspection. In 2013 she completed an MA in Woman and Child Abuse at the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University. She has been the Designated Safeguarding Lead for a large Anglican church and worked closely with the Diocesan Safeguarding Team on more complex cases. Her responsibilities at thirtyone:eight include developing and delivering a range of safeguarding training packages for a number of denominations as well as independent churches, and also providing consultancy advice for churches, cathedrals, dioceses and schools as well as other faith groups and secular organisations. This includes safeguarding audits, risk assessments, clergy file reviews and Stage 3 Complaints. She has completed risk assessments relating to clergy and church schools in a number of dioceses. Her current research and development interests are safeguarding within international settings and the abuse of power and creating safe cultures in faith settings.

Bill Stone BA, MA, CQSW, MPhil

Bill Stone is a Safeguarding Advisor for thirtyone:eight and an experienced social work practitioner and consultant. Having worked for thirtyone:eight for over 10 years, he is currently policy lead and works on the helpline. He advises and produces practice guidance on safeguarding for churches and other faith-based organisations and undertakes consultancy and training projects. He is the Relationship Manager for thirtyone:eight for several large faith-based organisations. Bill has undertaken past case reviews and investigated complaints for dioceses and other church organisations. He takes a lead role for thirtyone:eight in terms of policy development and produces briefings and guidance on the legal and policy framework for safeguarding practice. In addition to his work for thirtyone:eight, Bill has a diverse portfolio of independent work, including Court directed assessment work and teaching with the Open University.

About The Crowded House

Explanation of Terms

TCH	The Crowded House
The Edge Network	House Churches led by Tim Chester between 2002 and 2010
215 Network	House Churches led by Steve Timmis between 2002 and 2010
TCH Sharrowvale	Re-gathered church led by Steve Timmis from 2010
Gospel Communities	People were assigned to these small groups, also known at different times as Household Congregations, Life Groups or Ministry Teams
The Manor Team	This was the longest standing of the ministry teams. It was located on The Manor Estate and there was always the desire for a church plant here. Steve Timmis was always closely involved with The Manor Team.
Grace Church	Church Plant in Boroughbridge. Tim Chester moved there in 2015
Union	TCH Plant in Sheffield in 2018. Also referred to as TCH Union by participants and on their website
Peak Trinity	TCH Plant in Bakewell in 2018
TCH Loughborough	TCH affiliated church. Broke away in 2018
TCH Network	Network of relationally affiliated TCH churches - Sharrowvale, Union. Peak Trinity, Gracechurch Boroughbridge
TCH Collective	Term used for Sharrowvale, Union and Peak Trinity
C.I.O.	Charitable Incorporated Organisation
CT	The publication 'Christianity Today'

Background and History of The Crowded House

To capture the full history of The Crowded House (TCH) is beyond the scope of this learning review. The events and experiences that are the subject of this review cover a period of approximately 20 years, from 2000 to 2020. Over this time TCH grew from a small household congregation of 8-10 adults in Sheffield to a network of churches, with an international reputation. Over the past 20 years, there have been many changes in its structure, leadership and membership.

Neither the original church nor the developing network of TCH churches belong to any denomination. TCH has placed high value on having its own distinctive approach to church life and growth. This is informal and relational in its practice and, although theologically TCH is positioned towards the conservative and reformed end of the doctrinal spectrum, it doesn't have any easily identifiable position on ecclesiology and church governance. For a time the TCH churches joined the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) but for a variety of reasons the Sheffield church took the decision to leave at the end of 2018. Grace Church Boroughbridge and Peak Trinity chose to continue belonging to FIEC.

The one constant figure from 2000 until February 2020 has been Steve Timmis himself. However, Mr Timmis has personally informed the review team that he has made the decision not to take part in this review. The history of TCH below is therefore based on documents and the memories and narratives of others but without any input from Steve Timmis himself. The reviewers have therefore presented information and findings to the best of their ability and understanding, acknowledging that there is some discrepancy about actual dates between different narratives. Nevertheless, it offers a helpful contribution to understanding the history of TCH, the many changes that took place over time, and the impact these may have had. It also offers some explanation of the diverse experiences described. Whilst it refers to the key elders at different periods of TCH's history, it does not detail all the many people who came and went from different leadership and ministry roles.

Pre-2000
Prior to the inception of The Crowded House in 2000, Steve Timmis began the Broomhill Project, which emerged from Christ Church Fulwood, a large and thriving Anglican church in the southern suburbs of Sheffield. Review participants reported that Christ Church Fulwood did not officially support the venture although the review team received no confirmation of this as Christ Church Fulwood was not a party to this review. By the autumn of 1997 the group was meeting in Steve Timmis' new family home and changed its name to The Crowded House. A participant who was involved at that time reported that there were some issues around Steve's pastoral approach, which was described as *'combative'*. Meanwhile a plant was planned, called Inner City Life, which was

launched in October 1998 under new leaders. The Timmis' and remaining members joined the plant as well. After a difficult start, it is reported that '*Steve announced that he intended to start TCH again, but with a better group of people.*' Others in Inner City Life say they had their concerns about Steve Timmis' pastoral style and what they described as '*his ability to spin information*' and stated that they would not '*send*' him to start another church. During 1999 the Timmis' left Inner City Life and Steve publicised his intention to start the new Crowded House nationally.

September 2000

Steve Timmis launched The Crowded House with a team of 8-10 adults meeting as a household congregation in his home. There were two elders, Steve Timmis and Tim Chester, who has been regarded by many as the co-founder. Many people date the inception of The Crowded House from this point.

May 2002

TCH grew and split into two separate household congregations, one led by Steve Timmis and the other led by Tim Chester. A few months later a third congregation was planted under Steve Timmis' oversight. Subsequently the congregation led by Tim Chester planted a second household congregation. Steve Timmis developed a relationship with Sharrowvale Wesleyan Reform Church, which led to a merger whereby his side of the network came under the Wesleyan Reform Trust. The Trust oversaw the church building and manse and continued with a mix of the original trustees, supplemented by new trustees from TCH, including Steve Timmis. This is explained in greater detail later in the report.

TCH continued to develop as two separate, but related networks of household congregations.

- **The 215 Network** led by Steve Timmis and others and named after the street number of the Sharrow Vale Wesleyan Reform Church. Later this became known as TCH Sharrowvale.
- **The Edge Network** led by Tim Chester, along with three other elders and named after the Nether Edge area of Sheffield. Those in this side of the network had less contact with Steve Timmis.

2010

After eight years functioning as separate networks, the Edge Network and the 215 Network combined to form one church, meeting as one congregation on a Sunday morning while doing mission through smaller 'gospel communities' across the city. This had been discussed amongst the elders of both networks, although apparently the Edge Network elders were not unanimously supportive of the decision. There was an increased emphasis on the central gathering but limited substantive change to the activities of the gospel communities. The church had a combined eldership, effectively led by Steve Timmis, although the position of 'Lead Elder' was not formally defined.

The various gospel communities had different approaches to engaging in community mission and developed in different ways, largely determined by the leader/s of each group. Some communities were based on geographical location and others were focus based, for example working with students, participation in sport, ministry to particular international communities or young families.

2013
It was difficult to obtain a precise date, but various TCH leaders believed it was 2013 when Steve Timmis began to work for Acts 29, the global church planting organization, first as European Director, and then as CEO.

2013/14
A major restructuring of the church took place which involved disbanding all the then Gospel Communities, and replacing them with Life Groups, doing similar sorts of missional activities, but with a different configuration of membership.

2015
One of the longer standing members of the eldership team resigned and Tim Chester moved from Sheffield to lead Grace Church, the TCH church plant in Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire. This was part of the TCH Network but became a separate legal entity with its own trust shortly afterwards in January 2016.

2016
Life Groups were disbanded and replaced with Ministry Teams. Most groups were totally disbanded and merged together in a large group but the Manor team, the student team and a few of the groups focusing on reaching internationals continued.

2018
Ministry teams were re-arranged again with people being allocated to teams on the basis of the activities being undertaken rather than on existing relationships. TCH Union was planted with two elders. Peak Trinity was planted in Bakewell. The leader of Peak Trinity remained as an elder at TCH Sharrowvale initially. Subsequently, in March 2020 he was joined at Peak Trinity by another leader and they formed a separate eldership. The elders at Sharrowvale considered the appointment of an Assistant Pastor.

2019
Two of the three elders of the then Crowded House Loughborough expressed a desire to resign their affiliation with TCH Sheffield. Nobody, including the current elders and the trustees of TCH, was able to explain to the review team the precise reasons for TCH Loughborough breaking away. A series of meetings were held with church members to discuss structure, membership and other matters. The leaders had identified '*change fatigue*' as an issue to be addressed and they wanted to re-energise the Ministry Teams without further structural change.

2020

Acts 29 On 3rd February, Matt Chandler (President of Acts 29) announced that Steve Timmis was being transitioned from his role as CEO. In a subsequent announcement, he linked this to allegations of abusive leadership.

Christianity Today On 7th February Christianity Today (CT) published an article focused on Steve Timmis' leadership style at The Crowded House. In this the criticisms of Steve Timmis were very similar to those identified by Acts 29, in that he was accused of abusive leadership and creating a culture of fear and control.

Christianity Today Article

For many past and present members of The Crowded House, the article published in Christianity Today on 7th February 2020 came as a complete surprise. Elders and trainee elders in The Crowded House Network reported that earlier that week Steve Timmis had advised them that he was being transitioned from his position as CEO of Acts 29.

Matt Chandler announced this on 3rd February, advising that Steve Timmis would be transitioned to a four-month sabbatical for rest and recuperation following seven hard years growing the Acts 29 network[1].

On 5th February, a further statement was issued by Acts 29 and given to Christianity Today. This stated that the Board of Acts 29 was made aware of accusations of abusive leadership against their CEO, Steve Timmis. This was reported in a number of Christian news outlets:

'the board had received accusations of abusive leadership against Timmis two weeks prior, had launched an investigation, and had "found evidence" that Timmis should be removed "immediately". Chandler said he was not more forthcoming initially because of "legal ramifications" and because "employment decisions involve real people" the board members "love deeply" and "for whom we continue to pray."[2]

The language of abuse in relation to Steve Timmis was first heard publicly here. Any additional reasons behind the change in Matt Chandler's narrative can only be a matter of speculation and that is beyond the scope of this review. What is clear is that the publication of the Christianity Today article coincided with the Acts 29

---

[1] https://youtu.be/JJ6W13myBSI).
[2] (https://julieroys.com/acts-29-president-matt-chandler-under-fire-for-removing-staff-alleging-abuse-changing-story-about-removal-of-ceo/).

revelations. A number of sources reported that this was coincidental. However, what is also clear is that even without the Christianity Today article, the second statement from Matt Chandler would have posed sufficiently serious questions for TCH elders and trustees to have prompted some form of review.

Elders at TCH and a number of people close to Steve Timmis reported an awareness that there would be an article in Christianity Today, but anticipated that the focus would be the Acts 29 announcements. They were unprepared for a hard-hitting critique of The Crowded House.

The language used in the Christianity Today article about Steve Timmis and the Crowded House culture is strongly emotive. The title highlights 'abusive leadership' and the introductory paragraph summarizes:

'*Fifteen people who served under Steve Timmis described to Christianity Today a pattern of spiritual abuse through bullying and intimidation, overbearing demands in the name of mission and discipline, rejection of critical feedback, and an expectation of unconditional loyalty.*' (Page1/7). Other words and phrases used in the article were '*gospel gaslighting*', '*heavy shepherding by design*', '*overly controlling*', and '*creating a culture of fear*' [3]

Other past and present members of The Crowded House have reported to the review team that they were invited for comment and either declined or did not respond.   It was reported that Steve Timmis was asked for an interview by the journalist and declined but sent a statement. Only one perspective was presented through the article. Interviews with a wide range of participants have confirmed that the events cited (i.e. people leaving) did take place. However, there was a range of perspectives on why these things happened and some participants presented an alternative view about how events were handled.

Participants demonstrated a wide range of responses to the article both with regard to their experience of Steve Timmis and their experience of the church culture that he and other leaders of TCH helped to create.   Those who had positive experiences of Steve Timmis and TCH said that they did not recognise the man described in the article and challenged both the article and the responses that it triggered, citing gossip on social media and divisions within TCH itself. Some said they found the article perplexing and were still struggling to make sense of it. In contrast, those who had negative experiences, said that the journalist had painted a true and insightful picture. Some of these, felt the article articulated concerns that they had hitherto been unable to express and some of them found it validated their own experiences which brought them some relief. Some said that it confirmed that they '*were not going mad*' and one said:

---

[3] https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/february/acts-29-ceo-steve-timmis-removed-spiritual-abuse-tch.html

'I read the article and collapsed in a heap on the floor, crying. Nothing in the article surprised me. My main feeling was: "Oh, I'm not crazy after all!" After 20 years of doubting myself and wondering whether anything had happened or whether it was just me there was a feeling of relief. I don't know any of those who contributed. To tell the truth I'm not particularly interested in the outcome. My main aim in contributing to this review is for my voice to be heard. I worry that there will not be enough female voices, all the contributors to the article are men'.

The Language of Safeguarding

Language has been likened to a lens through which we observe and make sense of the world. Whilst it must be acknowledged that abuse does, sadly, take place in all settings including church settings, the abuse narrative can be problematic when applied to people's experiences of being involved in a church. In the opinion of the reviewers, it can oversimplify a complex situation, reducing it in a polarizing way to a simplistic clash between good and evil, victims and perpetrators, those who are '*sinned against*' and those doing the sinning. It is important, therefore, to preface this report with an examination of the language of abuse.

Using the language of abuse often implies intent and is closely associated, in people's minds, with law enforcement and criminality. The criminal law provides boundaries and formally defines the protection to which individuals are entitled by law. Physical or sexual abuse is a criminal matter and allegations of criminal behaviour are a matter for the appropriate authorities within the criminal justice system. The language of abuse also assumes a societal consensus about what is acceptable behaviour, implying that abusive behaviour is self-evidently beyond the pale, that abuse is abuse and, whatever the context, there are no excuses for abusive behaviour.

In relation to The Crowded House, and at the time of writing this review, it needs to be emphasised that no allegations have been made of any criminal or illegal behaviour.

Within the last decade, safeguarding, in a much broader and all-embracing sense, has become a central priority across society. This is partly in response to scandals and the misuse of authority within organisations of all kinds, including churches, charities and missions. Recent guidelines from the Charity Commission extend the use of the term safeguarding to include the potential for harm in relation to all those affected by the activities of the charity including beneficiaries, staff and volunteers. This extended scope for what is now treated as a matter of safeguarding, includes behaviours such as bullying and harassment. Charities and their trustees also have a responsibility to safeguard the reputation of the charity and protect the regard in which it is held by donors, supporters and volunteers. Where a church is a registered charity there is an

additional need to follow the guidance of the Charity Commission. However, any church, regardless of its charitable status, should be mindful of and demonstrate best practice.

In the realm of child safeguarding, the lines between what is and is not abuse are clearer than in the case of adults. Our experiences within thirtyone:eight indicate that there are many churches that adopt clear and rigorous approaches to child safeguarding, but there is less confidence about adult safeguarding. Although abuse is one end of a spectrum of potentially harmful behaviour, the legally defined concept of 'significant harm' helps us to draw a line between abuse and unwanted behaviour which falls short of abuse. When applied to adults, the concept of 'significant harm' is complicated by adult agency and choice. Adults are deemed to be able to make choices for themselves and enter and leave relationships. It is acknowledged that some adults are particularly vulnerable due to additional care and support needs and there are certain situations where there is a significant power imbalance where the potential for harm is increased.

Calls to the Safeguarding Helpline at thirtyone:eight indicate that pastoral care is not generally seen as being problematic from a safeguarding point of view. This is because, in church settings, pastoral care is a relationship that people embrace willingly, they consent to share their lives with others and they willingly submit, or not, to the authority of their leaders. However, pastoral care and support is often offered to people at points of vulnerability, either due to the circumstances of life or because they are working through past events or hurts. There is always a risk of an imbalance of power between those giving and those receiving pastoral support. This imbalance can be exploited if leaders are not exercising authentic leadership or if, within the church culture, teaching about sin is not properly balanced by teaching about grace. In such contexts drawing the line between abuse and non-abuse is particularly challenging.

The term 'spiritual abuse' brings together these arguments about definition and this term has become highly contested within the Christian community. However, the term and its meaning are not new. In 1995, Johnson and VanVonderen[4] confronted the misuse of spiritual authority in their book entitled *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*.[1] In the book they describe church environments in which the words of leaders cannot be questioned, where the concept of spirituality is used to make members conform to certain norms or standards, where people's difficulties are attributed to their sin, rebellion or lack of faith, and where there is little emphasis on grace.

In *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*[5] Oakley and Kinmond (2013) identify an initial welcoming period to the church in which new members receive personal attention, love and care and in which the church often becomes their substitute family. Individuals then become increasingly involved in church life and enjoy a very positive experience for a number of years. They also highlight cultures where members are held highly accountable whilst the minister or leader is not, and where censorship restricts

---

[4] Johnson, D & VanVonderen, J. 1991. The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse. Bethany House Publishers.
[5] Oakley, L & Kinmond, K. 2013. Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse. Palgrave.

or eliminates the possibility of asking questions. If members break this rule they are evaluated negatively and so often learn to suppress their own concerns and in turn, they discourage others from raising issues. Further characteristics highlighted by Oakley and Kinmond include a rubber-stamping approach to church decisions, censorship of external relationships including those with people from other churches, conformity to expectations of behaviour and of an increasing commitment to church, isolation as a consequence of non-conformity, fear of leaving and never finding another church like this one, isolation of people who leave, half-truths told about people who had left.

Johnson and Vanvonderen, Oakley and Kinmond, and Oakley and Humphreys (2019)[6] all address the impact of spiritual abuse upon victims, with similar findings. These include a loss of a sense of self and identity, a lack of ability to trust oneself, others or leaders, an undermining of faith and trust in God Himself, fear, confusion, deep-seated anger, an inability to commit to church again.

For the purposes of this review, the most recent definition of spiritual abuse formulated by Dr Lisa Oakley in her research and developed by Oakley and Humphreys in 2019 will be used:

> *Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision-making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts [in this case the Bible] or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.' (p31)*

In the analysis of the interviews and statements contributed by those taking part in this review, the reviewers have used this definition as an interpretive frame for understanding the events and experiences that have been described. They have attempted to be objective and balanced whilst doing justice to the pain and harm that some participants have described. Where possible the reviewers have used people's own words, conscious that people have different perspectives of their own and others' experiences, whilst protecting people's wishes for anonymity. Above all, the desire throughout this review has been to listen to the voices of those who feel impacted by these events and enable them to be heard.

The majority of participants who contributed to this review did not use the language of abuse found in the CT article to describe their experiences. Some did, notably those

---

[6] Oakley, L & Humphreys, J. 2019. Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating healthy Christian cultures. SPCK Publishing. Justin Humphreys is CEO(Safeguarding) of thirtyone:eight

who are named in the article who had already expressed serious concerns, along with others who also described very negative and damaging experiences at TCH and framed these as abuse. However, most expressed themselves in a more nuanced way, using more qualified language such as *'harm'*, *'hurt'*, *'unreasonable expectations'*, *'domineering'*, *'intimidating'*, *'not listening'*, *'misusing authority'* and *'overbearing demands'*. Many participants were reluctant to attribute ill-will or deliberate harmful intent to Steve Timmis or to other leaders, but many of them, nevertheless, had in their own words, either been hurt themselves, or been distressed to see others hurt, by what they described as *'heavy-handed leadership'*. They depicted a culture of high expectations for conformity, combined with strong convictions about the local church and the unquestioned authority of elders in relation to every aspect of daily life.

Thirtyone:eight's mission is about 'creating safer spaces' and it is this broader safeguarding remit that provides the motivation and sets the agenda for this review. The focus of the review is as much about exploring the culture of TCH as it is upon the allegations of abuse made against Steve Timmis. In addition to responding to the allegations of abuse, there are key questions about how TCH church culture became one in which, despite such an inspirational vision, so many describe experiences of hurt rather than being able to grow and develop as disciples of Christ.

Methodology

The Review Process

As outlined in the Terms of Reference, the learning review seeks to address ten questions arising from the allegations raised against Steve Timmis, one of the founding elders of TCH, in an article published in CT in February 2020. These questions were agreed between the commissioners and thirtyone:eight. Due to the measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, all meetings took place online via Microsoft Teams.

The Review Process included:

1. A preliminary meeting with the review commissioners.
2. A review of written documentation supplied by the commissioners.
3. Setting up a dedicated and secure email account.
4. Preparation of an 'Information for Participants and a Consent Form'.
5. Public notification of the review via the thirtyone:eight website, social media and Christian press.
6. Circulation of invitations to participate to past and present members of The Crowded House identified by the commissioners, including Steve Timmis.

7. Monitoring the secure mailbox, responding to all queries and requests to participate in the review and keeping a record.
8. Receiving written statements from participants.
9. Identifying participants for interview and setting up interviews via Microsoft Teams.
10. Collation of evidence from documentation, written statements and interviews.
11. Reporting on the findings against the ten questions set out in the scope agreed with the reviewer commissioners.
12. Providing recommendations for the future.

1. Preliminary meeting with the review commissioners.

On 22nd April 2020 the review team and Head of Consultancy and Engagement at thirtyone:eight met with the review commissioners. The commissioners are the chair of trustees and the two remaining elders who are also trustees at The Crowded House. This meeting was important in order to ascertain the charitable status of TCH and establish a shared understanding of the review process. It was also important to clarify the boundaries of confidentiality, particularly as the commissioners have also made themselves and their behaviours subject to the review process. The meeting gave the review team a further understanding of both the complexity of the TCH network and also the events leading to the decision to commission the review and the widely diverse opinions about that decision.

2. Review of Written Documentation.

Due to the restrictions in place to combat the spread of COVID-19, the review team were not able to make physical site visits to view relevant documentation in situ. Therefore, where appropriate, names were redacted by the TCH elders and all documents were sent to the thirtyone:eight secure mailbox.

Documents were supplied under the headings listed below:

1. Background information to the organisation
2. Policies
3. Guidance and Safe Practice
4. Risk Assessments
5. Recruitment
6. Safeguarding Meetings and Reviews
7. Trustees
8. Actions taken in response to the allegations

The reviewers have also referred to 'Total Church'[7] by Steve Timmis and Tim Chester but have not been able to ascertain whether Steve Timmis still holds to all that he stated in the book, which was published in 2007.

3. **Setting up a secure mailbox.**

Thirtyone:eight set up a dedicated and secure email account which was only accessible to the review team to ensure maximum security and confidentiality of information transferred. All such arrangements are guided by the thirtyone:eight protocols for data security and management.

4. Preparation of Information for Participants and a Consent Form.

The review team prepared an information leaflet for circulation to everyone who expressed an interest in participating. This explained:

- The purpose of the review, stressing the importance of helping TCH leaders and trustees to understand what has happened, learn from past errors, to seek forgiveness where appropriate and to ensure a healthy church culture for the future.
- That participation was entirely voluntary.
- That participants could withdraw from the process at any point.
- The arrangements for interviews.
- The option to provide a written statement prior to, or instead of, an interview.
- The possible benefits of taking part.
- The possible disadvantages and risks of taking part.
- Arrangements to protect confidentiality.
- Procedure for reporting concerns or complaints.
- Information regarding access to emotional support for those impacted throughout the review process.

A consent form was supplied for those who wished to take part to return to the review team.

5. Public notification of the review via the thirtyone:eight website, social media and Christian press.

It was clear at the outset of the review process that there were widely differing opinions about both the allegations against Steve Timmis and the decision to commission the review, and that there were those who questioned the independence of thirtyone:eight. Thirtyone:eight sought to publicise the review as widely as possible and to capture this diversity of experience and opinion through the broadest possible range of participants. In addition to the TCH website, the review was announced via

---

[7] Chester, T. & Timmis, S. 2007. Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community. IVP.

the thirtyone:eight website and social media platforms and also in Christian media outlets: Premier Christian News, Church of England newspaper, Church Times, Christian Today, Christianity Today. In our efforts to assist in establishing thirtyone:eight's independence, transparency and accountability in this process, all information pertaining to the scope and timeline of the review have been published and updated as necessary on a dedicated area of the thirtyone:eight website. All sources of information about the review provided details of how to access the secure mailbox to enable those who wished to participate to make contact.

6. Circulation of invitations to participate to past and present members of The Crowded House identified by the commissioners.

The review commissioners supplied a list of potential participants. This included past and present members, interns, employees, leaders, elders and trustees and Steve Timmis, and reflected membership at different stages of TCH's history. Where there was permission to pass on contact details, the reviewers contacted these people inviting them to participate if they wished to do so. Where there was no permission for the commissioners to pass on contact details, the reviewers wrote an invitation for the individuals concerned, and, where the commissioners had contact details, they forwarded these invitations to participate via email. The commissioners confirm that this invitation was sent to Steve Timmis. The reviewers subsequently arranged for the commissioners to send a further personal invitation to Steve Timmis by recorded delivery. The commissioners confirm that this was done.

7. Monitoring the dedicated and secure email account, responding to all queries and requests to participate in the review and keeping a secure record.

1. Every person emailing the account received an automated response advising them that the inbox would be checked every Monday and Thursday. In reality, the inbox was checked more frequently due to the high level of participation requests.
2. Every person who expressed an interest in participating in the review was sent the participation information sheet and consent form and asked to conform that they had relevant information and still wished to take part.
3. They were allocated a number, and this was entered on a spreadsheet with the date of their initial email and the date of the reviewers' response.
4. When they returned their consent form the date was entered on the spreadsheet and they received an acknowledgement. Those who had information that would speak to the scope of the review were advised that the reviewers would contact them to arrange an interview.
5. Once the interview was arranged the date was entered on the spreadsheet.
6. Where participants sent a written statement prior to or ahead of the interview this was also entered on the spreadsheet.

7. The reviewers also entered on the spreadsheet the role of the participant at TCH in order to monitor the range of participants.

8. Receiving written statements from participants.

In response to the participants' information leaflet, some participants opted to send a written statement instead of having an interview. The reviewers scrutinised the remaining statements and, where these were brief and/or indicated that a further conversation would be helpful, the participants were invited to an interview.

9. Setting up interviews with participants.

Setting the criteria for interviews was challenging, particularly as there was a background discourse that questioned the independence of thirtyone:eight. The reviewers were keen to capture the widest possible range of experience and opinion and believed it was important not to exclude anyone who felt they had something that needed to be heard. The reviewers also wanted to interview people who had been in a range of roles at TCH and those who had been part of TCH at different stages of its history and development. The reviewers did not interview anyone who did not have direct experience with TCH at some time in its history.

The interviews were semi-structured, and the review team began every interview by giving the participant the opportunity to tell their own story. They then invited the participant to share their experiences, responses and opinions in relation to the ten areas identified in the scope. Finally, participants were invited to add anything else that had not been covered and to ask any questions themselves. Where participants gave permission, interviews were recorded and stored securely. During the interview one of the review team also took notes and documented comments against the ten scoping points.

10. Collation of evidence from documentation, written statements and interviews.

The review team collated and analysed the participants' narratives and opinions against the ten scoping points.

11. **Reporting on findings against the ten questions.**

The reviewers spent time independently working through the documentation, written statements and interview records in order to draw provisional conclusions in response to the ten scoping points. They then met to compare their findings and agree the key points for the report and allocate the writing of different sections.

Once the first draft was completed, the reviewers read and reviewed each section. In addition, it was agreed that the commissioners would review the section outlining the history of TCH, for the sake of accuracy. In accordance with thirtyone:eight quality assurance protocols, the draft report was first reviewed by the Head of Consultancy and

Engagement and then by the CEO (Safeguarding) before being submitted to the commissioners in final draft form.

12. Providing recommendations for the future.

In light of the findings and analysis, the reviewers have provided recommendations for TCH moving forwards within this final report. Whilst the story of TCH is deeply sad, it is by no means unique. It is the hope of the reviewers and thirtyone:eight that the lessons learned will also be helpful for the wider church.

Review Findings

This learning review has been informed by a significant body of documentation supplied by TCH and a large number of written statements and interviews in which those participating described their experiences of being a part of The Crowded House network over the past 20 years. The review team have read their statements and listened to their accounts, seeking to let them tell their own stories. Although each person's account is different, certain common themes have emerged and the story of TCH and its unique way of 'doing church' is a complex inter-weaving of many different elements. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, the reviewers have drawn from the documentation, written statements and interviews as they report their findings and analysis under each of the scoping points.

As stated, Steve Timmis chose not to participate. He wrote to the reviewers, explaining his reasons for this decision. Consequently, the reviewers have had to rely on documentary evidence and other people's recollections and accounts in formulating their conclusions. The reviewers have sought to be fair and balanced in doing so, but have not had the benefit of hearing Steve Timmis' own narrative and perspective or his response to the allegations and accounts provided by those who chose to participate.

Information About Participants

92 individuals or couples received information from the thirtyone:eight review team about the review process. Their decision to participate was entirely voluntary.

This includes 27 individuals or couples whose names were provided to the review team by TCH commissioners. This reflected people who had been in a range of roles either as members or working for TCH at different times during its history. These names included Steve Timmis, trustees and former trustees, elders/leaders and former

elders/leaders, former interns, employees and members who had contributed to the CT article. They all received invitations from the review team to participate, on the same terms as other participants, via email unless they had already approached thirtyone:eight themselves. Steve Timmis had informed the elders who commissioned the review that he would not take part but was nevertheless invited by the review team.
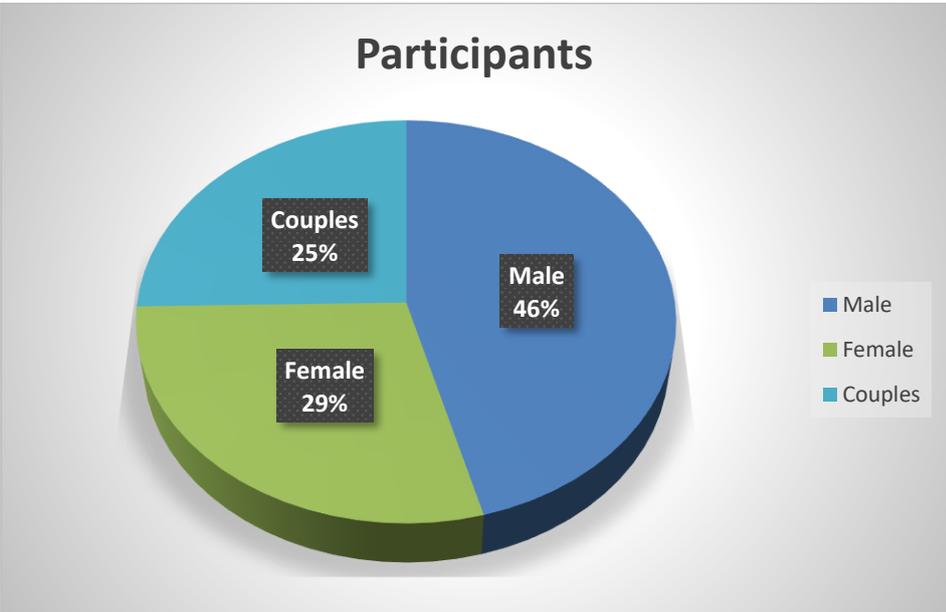
24 of these 27 indicated a wish to participate and received a participants' information sheet and a consent form from the reviewers. 3 either did not respond or declined to participate.

65 further individuals or couples contacted the review team independently via the secure email account, expressing a wish to participate. *These all received a participants' information sheet and a consent form. 59 of these went on to participate either through a written statement and/or an interview. 6 did not proceed with the process.*

Breakdown of Invitations and Responses			
Invitations/Requests		**Participation**	
Invitations sent	27	Participated	24
Further requests to participate	65	Participated	59
Total	**92**	**Total**	**83**

83 individuals or couples participated through written statements and/or interviews (104 adults in total). Where couples registered to participate together, they wrote a joint statement and/or were interviewed together. Each of these is counted as one submission.

Total Participants by Gender/Status	No.	%
Male	38	46
Female	24	29
Couples	21	25
Total Statements / Interviews	**83**	**100**

The review team were aware from the start of the review process that there was a wide range of views regarding the allegations in the CT article, about Steve Timmis and about the culture of TCH. They sought to engage with as wide as possible a cross-section of views, without exerting any pressure on anyone to participate. The criteria however required that participants were or had been involved with the TCH Network. Participants were therefore drawn from the following:

- Members of TCH
- Leaders of Missional Communities
- Interns and Trainees
- TCH Employees
- Acts 29 Employees
- Elders
- Trustees

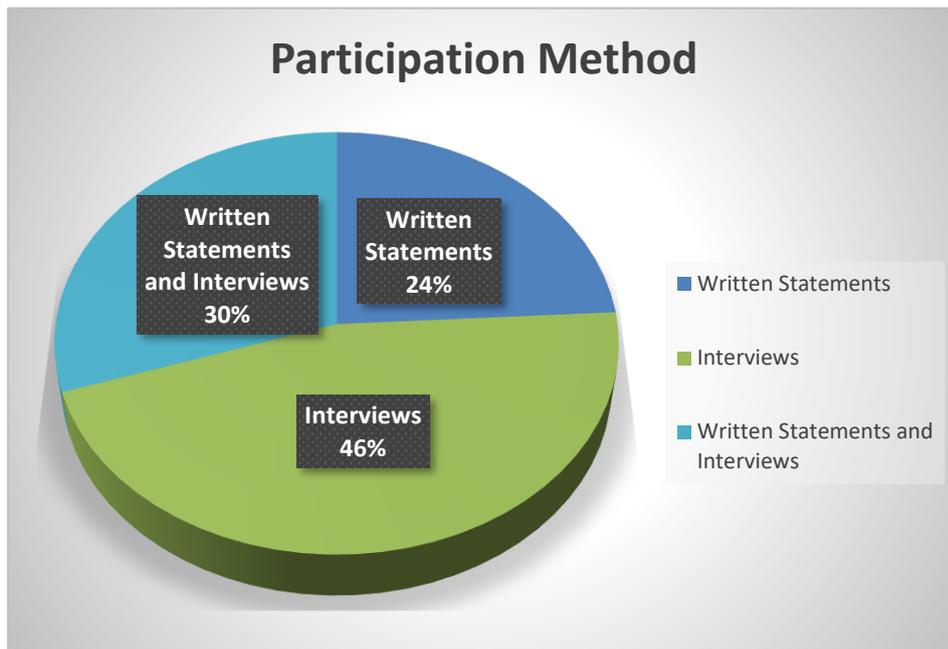**45 individuals or couples submitted written statements in total**.
20 of these were not interviewed either through choice or because the reviewers felt they did not meet the criteria, or the statement spoke for itself.

63 individuals or couples participated in an interview in total.
38 of these did not supply a written statement
25 of these supplied a written statement either prior to or after the interview.

Participation Method	Number	Percentage
Written Statement Only	20	24
Interview Only	38	46
Written Statement & Interview	25	30
Total	**83**	**100**

Participation Method

- Written Statements
- Interviews
- Written Statements and Interviews

Written Statements and Interviews 30%

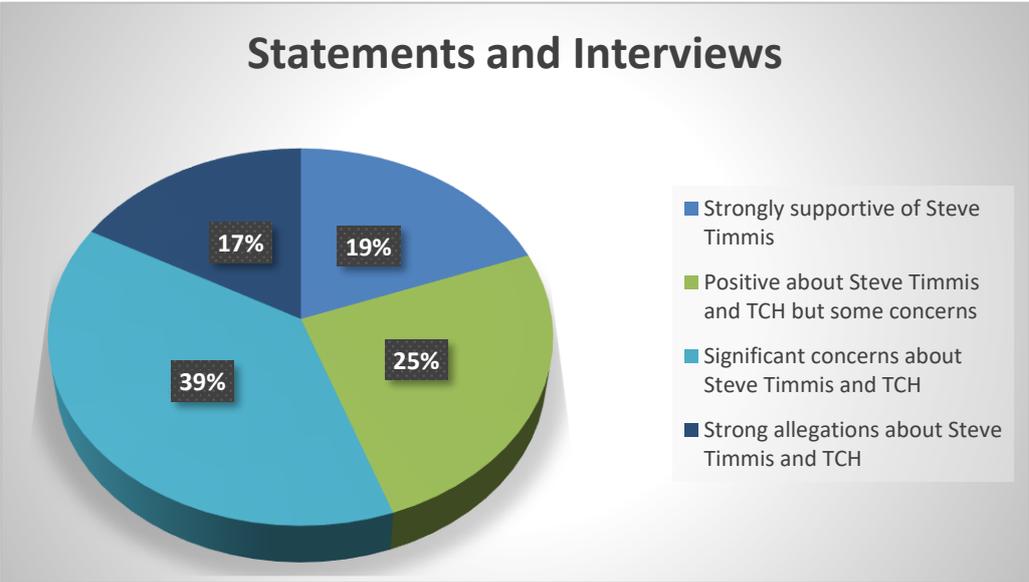Written Statements 24%

Interviews 46%

The many changes in structure and leadership may offer a partial explanation of why there have been so many different experiences of TCH and such different perceptions of its leaders.

The CT article had the effect of polarizing the current members of TCH and this diversity of opinion is also reflected amongst the past members of TCH who spoke to the reviewers.

Whilst there was a very broad spectrum of opinion and experience, the reviewers were able to categorise the responses into four main groups:

1. People who remain strongly supportive of Steve Timmis.
2. People who have valued the ministry of Steve Timmis and TCH but had concerns about some aspects of church life, notably leadership and accountability.
3. People with significant concerns about Steve Timmis and TCH, who spoke of hurt or harm experienced by themselves or others.
4. People who made strong allegations of harm/abuse against Steve Timmis and/or the wider TCH culture of leadership.

Statements / Interviews (n=83)	Percentage
Strongly supportive of Steve Timmis	19
Positive about Steve Timmis and TCH but some concerns about leadership and accountability	25
Significant concerns about Steve Timmis and TCH and harm caused to themselves or others	39
Strong allegations of harm/abuse against Steve Timmis and /or the wider TCH culture of leadership	17
Total	**100**

Statements and Interviews

- Strongly supportive of Steve Timmis
- Positive about Steve Timmis and TCH but some concerns
- Significant concerns about Steve Timmis and TCH
- Strong allegations about Steve Timmis and TCH

Group 1

Irrespective of the allegations made in the CT article and the actions of Acts 29, this group were still unequivocally supportive of Steve Timmis.

Group 2

This group included both past and present members of TCH, but the majority were still part of the wider TCH network. They had many positive experiences of TCH but articulated some concerns as well, notably about leadership and accountability.

Group 3

The largest group contained many people who had had close contact with Steve Timmis, as elders, leaders, interns or employees of TCH or Acts 29. They articulated significant concerns about Steve Timmis' leadership and the wider culture of TCH and many talked about hurt or harm experienced by themselves or others.

Group 4

This group included those who wrote strongly critical statements of Steve Timmis and the wider culture of TCH or spoke to the reviewers, specifically addressing the harm they said they had suffered or seen others suffer at TCH. Within this group, a number used the language of abuse.

It is important to state that across all the groups, the majority of participants spoke highly of Steve Timmis' gifting as a preacher, his vision and passion for mission, his love for the Bible and his energy and ability to get things done. Many people said they moved to Sheffield inspired by Steve Timmis' vision for missional gospel communities. Significantly, even people who later spoke about their questions, concerns and hurts, recalled the care and support they had received from Steve Timmis and his wife, particularly when they first joined TCH or when they were facing personal difficulty and trauma. Many people observed that he could be very patient pastorally towards people who were particularly vulnerable.

However, during the interviews there was a pattern of emerging concerns being expressed about aspects of Steve Timmis' actions and behaviour, the actions and behaviour of other elders and leaders over the years and aspects of the culture of TCH, particularly within TCH Sharrowvale. These are addressed below under the points of the review scope.

1. As far as is possible, a comprehensive picture of Steve Timmis' activities in relation to the alleged harm caused to individuals, whilst serving as an elder at The Crowded House.

1.1 A matter of perception.

A number of participants who took part in the review reported that, when questioned or challenged by people who had concerns either about him or his decisions or actions, Steve Timmis responded, '*that's your perception*'. The review participants themselves articulated some very different perceptions about Steve Timmis, his character, his motives and whether he caused harm to others.

A longstanding member of TCH spoke about Steve Timmis' godly character and sacrificial service:

> '*As someone who has had a great deal of experience of the church and the leadership over a lengthy period of time, I have no concerns whatsoever with Steve Timmis' character or conduct and I think we are poorer for losing him as a leader. .....In the time that I've known him I have seen Steve's love for God and his love for God's people demonstrated in so many acts of sacrificial service. By God's grace, he is a man of godly character......My personal testimony is that, far from being harmed by*

Steve or the church, I grew in my love of God & I thrived as a Christian under his teaching & leadership as he pointed me to Jesus. His consistent concern has been for the glory of Christ and I have learnt so much from his godly character & example over the years.'

One participant who had served as an elder alongside Steve Timmis described Steve Timmis' devotion and the kindness that he showed to his own family, and reported that he also saw that same kindness being extended to brothers and sisters in Christ.

Some, including those within Group 1, reported that Steve Timmis was forthright and had a manner that some people could find intimidating. One described him as having *'a grumpy resting face'* and another said:

I really think Steve is one of the best men I have ever known. He's not perfect, and he can have a tendency to be forthright, possibly because of his clarity of thought and communication…and sometimes people can then distance themselves from him, mistaking his clear vision and clear expression for dislike or disapproval. But being forthright is not being abusive. I have never known him to be abusive. On the contrary, I believe his intentions for those in TCH, whom he has pastored and loved sacrificially, has always been to see them shaped more and more by the gospel, and to see them grow in love for, and become more like, our beautiful Saviour Jesus, who Steve loves nothing more than to commend to us and point us to."

Some reported wrestling with reconciling their love and respect for the man who had helped shape their spiritual growth and journey with the questions that had been growing, and that were then brought sharply into focus as a result of the CT article:

I have known Steve to be a man who has sacrificially loved those inside the church and outside. He has poured himself out in ministry and worked hard for the message of the Gospel. Steve has sought to teach and exhort and encourage in sound doctrine and godly living. I have never felt coerced or bullied or pressured at any point during my long history with TCH . I have not had cause to doubt Steve's motives…………. I have been concerned around the culture that has developed around Steve of high expectations and lack of approachability. This has been stifling and problematic to leadership development. It seems from my perspective that Steve has struggled to raise up leaders well. Leaders have not flourished or grown healthily under Steve. This could be a reason for him to step back.

I do not believe Steve had any bad intentions or purposely tried to manipulate people. His fault, I believe, has been around not responding humbly when things have been raised to him. He has not been able to overcome the relationship difficulties that have continued to arise over the years. I don't know if this is because he doesn't know how or if he doesn't see it as his problem. Either way I believe his lack of ability or desire to address this sort of hurt is another reason I have been led to question his

continued leadership; at least until he has sought to address these issues. This for his own sake as well as others.

Many reported experiences of two sides to Steve Timmis. Some participants reflected that they found inconsistency between Steve Timmis' public ministry, and aspects of his character. One participant commented:

'It wasn't the bible teaching that was the problem. Steve is a great preacher. What you hear from the pulpit is really, really good. There are two sides to a person. I absolutely sign up to Steve's teaching and to his theology. It is character issues; that's why it's hard for people who haven't experienced the manipulation and control to understand. There's the pulpit image and the man in real life; the image and the reality.'

Others reported that they found their relationship with him perplexing:

'It's complex. A great deal of respect and affection, thankfulness for all sorts of things. But it also felt a very precarious relationship, I was very nervous around Steve, fear of falling out of favour and being rejected. At TCH in general, marginalised and broken people find a home and find Jesus. Steve was very tolerant of people's idiosyncrasies and was good with vulnerable people. Steve is a very caring and sensitive pastor to people who struggle, and he is wonderful at coming alongside them and sharing his insights. I've seen him do this with all sorts of people, for example XXXXX who was struggling with anxiety. He has a sensitive pastoral heart and a vision for us being communities on mission; people who present as vulnerable are cared for well……. There is a defensiveness with Steve, a closing down. Criticism is turned back so that it becomes your fault.'

Others held a very different, monochrome view that Steve Timmis was manipulative and controlling. It was not uncommon for people to break down in tears during the interviews as they described painful occurrences that affected them deeply. Several talked about relief at the publication of the CT article because they felt it validated their own experiences and proved to them that *'I wasn't going mad.'*

'We tried to talk to people about what had happened, but they couldn't understand. They didn't get what a tight community it is at TCH and they didn't understand how manipulative and controlling Steve is. We found a counsellor who has really helped us understand the impact of spiritual abuse. It felt at first like everything was a fog. The manipulation and control. There was so much dissonance. But the most therapeutic thing of all has been that this has come out into the open. Our experiences are true, we're not crazy, it's not just us!'

Several participants reported that Steve and his wife had supported them in their marriages. However, others alleged that he had undermined the relationships between husbands and wives and that this had put a strain on their marriages. One

wife stated that, because of Steve's influence, her husband had never had the freedom to lead their family. Another related:

> *'I was told I was a 'weight around XXXX's neck' like a 'millstone'. He was asked why he had married me. I was told I 'was holding him back' from doing great things.'*

1.2 Lack of Leadership Accountability

A recurring concern expressed in written statements and interviews was the lack of both internal and external accountability. This concern predates the foundation of TCH in 2000 and goes back to the Broomhill Project, the small group that came out of Christ Church, Fulwood and led by Steve Timmis. One participant who had been involved at the time summarised succinctly why accountability amongst a plurality of leaders is so important and expressed concern that this was what was missing:

> *'It seems to me that what was lacking from Day 1 of the new fellowship was a clear lack of accountability. The church had one elder (not ideal especially when you consider that the word is always used in the plural in New Testament) which was Steve. What I would suggest is always needed is an accountability structure in which perhaps external, respected leaders can have access to the elder and meet with the flock to assess how things are going. Criticism of Steve was taken very personally and was quickly shut down. Plurality of leadership is so, so important. What was also noticeable was that the fellowship was quite young and inexperienced ………. There was no-one with maturity in the group. This should have been a warning sign of what was to come. I am still not clear who sanctioned the church plant - was it a Fulwood-backed project or was it a maverick initiative headed up by a pioneering spirited man acting alone?*
>
> *It seems obvious to me why so much of the qualifications for Biblical eldership relate to character. For sure, the ability to teach is vitally important, but most damage in evangelical leadership is caused by character issues. These can only really be dealt with and mitigated in a plurality leadership context where there is no first amongst equals.*
>
> *My plea is that TCH leadership can honestly confront its own shortcomings and put structures in place to prevent pain like this to happen in the future. Individual leaders need protecting from themselves.'*

In 'Total Church'[8], Tim Chester and Steve Timmis make a number of references to the accountability of leaders and as the authors they clearly believe that this is an important biblical principle. They state that there should be no artificial distinctions between leaders and members and that, biblically, we are all accountable to each other, whether leader or led:

---

[8] Chester, T. & Timmis, S. 2007. Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community. IVP.

A leader is not a 'special case': he is a servant of the gospel among gospel servants; a brother among his brothers and sisters. (p121)

I am pastored by my congregation. My struggles are often out in the open for everyone to see. I can be open about my failures. (p192)

I remember talking over lunch with two church leaders. At first, they expressed concern that we did not have an accountability structure over and outside of us. But, as I talked to them about the day-to-day accountability I enjoy from my congregation and from other congregational leaders with its opportunity to share heart struggles, their attitude changed. Soon they were saying, 'I wish we had something like this; our accountability is so superficial; I feel alone most of the time'. True accountability is more about relationships than hierarchies. It requires community more than structures. (p193)

However, the majority of participants reported that this was not their experience of the reality of TCH but rather that Steve Timmis was not accountable to either his fellow elders or to the trustees. People raised the concern that there has not been any external accountability as TCH sits outside any denomination or federation of churches. The commissioners confirmed that TCH Sharrowvale had affiliated with FIEC for a time but had left, yet some participants did not know that TCH was no longer a member of FIEC. The closest that TCH had to an umbrella body was Acts 29, of which Steve Timmis was himself the CEO. These points were raised repeatedly during the interviews, by those whom the reviewers considered to be experienced leaders and mature Christians:

'One man, ST, had ultimate and unquestioned authority. ST managed to exercise this control by dislocating the church from local connections in Sheffield and from FIEC. As CEO of Acts 29 he had a global leadership role and this made him unchallengeable. He received major affirmation from global evangelical leaders. 'Management by exception'- he would give leaders freedom to make decisions and take action, but you never knew how he would respond. His response swung unpredictably from lavish generosity to unreasonable belligerence. There was constant churn and change, people moving on. He ruled by fear: 'What would Steve think?' I found myself unable to anticipate the response I would get from ST and that uncertainty was disabling.'

A Christian worker who came to serve at TCH explained his concerns about the lack of internal and external accountability:

'There is a lack of accountability structure, nothing outside the local church, like the FIEC. Absolutely no interaction with other Christian churches in Sheffield. That's wrong, that's dangerous. We're meant to be working in partnership

to make Jesus known but at TCH there is nobody from the outside who is invited to preach. No communication with other leaders. That should have been a huge red flag; no communication with ministers in the city.'

One other highly significant factor is the lack of clarity over Steve Timmis' employment status. Steve Timmis was not employed by TCH and had neither an employee's job description nor a volunteer role description against which the trustees could hold him to account.

This is dealt with more fully under Scoping Point 5.

1.3. Elders: Followers rather than Leaders

One participant who was himself involved in leading a church plant, reported that his church leaders advised:

'Don't take a load of young guys with you when you church plant like Steve Timmis did with Crowded House. Take some difficult, questioning people with you who will keep you accountable.'

The history of TCH as told by participants in this review, has been that Steve Timmis has surrounded himself with younger men. It was observed that young elders and trainee elders enjoyed the privileged of being chosen for this office *'but would hardly stand up to an older man with an international reputation'*. Participants reported a lack of people, within the eldership team that Steve Timmis built around himself, who would be willing to ask questions.

'Steve was such an alpha male charismatic leader. Other leaders were less so and bowed, gave in. There was a wanting to please Steve culture.'

Both in their written statements and during the interviews, numerous people raised questions about the way elders were selected as well as the way they functioned. The overriding narrative was that elders and leaders were selected by Steve Timmis and presented to the church for approval but that this was a rubber-stamping exercise, a decision that no one would question.

A significant number of participants recounted previously unspoken concerns, that older, experienced, Godly and wiser men were never invited to join the eldership, men who might just have challenged Steve Timmis. Some who had been in the eldership at Sharrow Vale at various times describe how any elder who challenged Steve Timmis either apologised or left the office of eldership fairly quickly.

One person who had been an elder in both the Edge Network and at TCH Sharrowvale, expressed great concerns about Steve's leadership. He reported that there were no structures, it was all based on relationship with Steve Timmis, and that:

> 'Elders were not informed of big changes. Suddenly, an executive eldership was formed out of nowhere so that the ordinary elders were just told things rather than part of the pastoral process and overall leadership. Steve Timmis surrounded himself deliberately with young impressionable men who looked up to him but had no gravitas or ability to counter his decisions or challenge his behaviour. ST called the model of church governance a "modified Presbyterianism". A deliberately vague and indefinable system of church that in reality, simply meant ST was free to do what he pleased with no meaningful accountability.'

Others reported concerns that, at different times, Steve Timmis' son and his son-in-law were members of the eldership. Whilst people noted with gratitude the sacrificial service of Steve over many years, numerous participants commented negatively about the power and influence of Steve Timmis' family throughout the church, feeling that this was not healthy. More than one participant described this as *'a clear case of nepotism.'* One church member said:

> 'One of Steve Timmis' great strengths and weaknesses is that as a very forceful personality he will dominate almost any discussion he is a part of, so the "consensus" decision will usually be that favoured by Steve. This danger has been exacerbated by weak governance, favouritism and nepotism. Steve's son and son-in-law have been elders; a close family member was also appointed Chief Financial Officer for Acts29. His other son after having recently returned to his faith - was appointed as a paid outreach worker. A close family friend was appointed as assistant minister.'

A number of participants reported that this extended to the appointment of staff, an area which is covered more fully under Scoping Point 6:

> 'We have noticed a number of appointments of TCH staff roles that weren't widely advertised and where the appointed staff are family or close friends of Steve Timmis – his son was appointed as men's worker on the Manor estate…..more recently XXXX was appointed as assistant minister.'

One person who had taken the decision to step down from eldership at TCH spoke about being uncomfortable with decisions they had taken and the lack of opportunity allowed to revisit and reflect:

> 'I recognise that leaders make decisions and sometimes make wrong ones. However, we did not review these as an Eldership, so never had a chance to change our minds or apologise for these or any decisions.'

1.4. Trustees disempowered and unable to fulfill their oversight role.

The role of trustees is dealt with more fully under Scoping Point 2. TCH is a registered charity and as such is required to be compliant with charity law and to have proper regard to the requirements and guidance of the Charity Commission as the charity regulator. Charity law defines charity trustees as those who have general control and management of the administration of a charity. Charity Commission guidance defines the role of charity trustees as having overall responsibility for the governance of the charity. There has been ambiguity about the role of the trustees at TCH, largely due to the exclusion of those who were formally appointed as trustees from the decision-making process carried out by the elders.

The TCH charitable trust dates back to the time when Steve Timmis entered into arrangement with Sharrow Vale Wesleyan Church. By 2000 this church was in serious decline and without a minister. For a couple of years the trustees ran the church and Steve Timmis came as a regular preacher. Trustees reported that an agreement was reached whereby he would undertake seventy percent of the preaching and develop a partnership in which TCH had use of the manse for visitors or new families coming to Sheffield. At this stage, it is reported that Steve Timmis was still committed to the principle of house church, but later he changed course and saw the church building as a place for gathering TCH in centralised meetings. Within a few years he had begun to appoint elders and took on the direction and vision of the church. The original congregation were absorbed into TCH and were, at the time, delighted to see new growth that included younger generations.

From that point onwards, Steve Timmis and TCH had the use of the church building and the manse. The board of trustees '*took care of the buildings and the legal necessities*'. Members of the Wesleyan Church were delighted that they had gained a gifted preacher and teacher and a new lease of life for their ailing church. However, the trustees reported that they never had a voice at elders' meetings and, with hindsight, realise they were simply a rubber-stamping committee. This had been their role under the previous minister and the imbalance of power now was such that no one ever questioned the charismatic preacher who had rescued their church from extinction. One trustee confirmed:

> '*As far as I can remember, Steve was never employed by Sharrowvale and always had other income. He had no job description. The trustees have never had oversight and that goes back to the previous minister before Steve..... 90% of responsibility has been taken by the elders. Trustees have rubber-stamped and have had no role in safeguarding. Trustees were supposed to get quarterly budget reviews, but they didn't. I had a conversation with Steve suggesting the majority of trustees should have been elders (this was actioned on the new CIO). The trustees who were not elders were never invited to elders' meetings. I've never seen any elders' minutes…..He's a strong character and it was difficult to challenge him.*'

Thus, another potential layer of accountability was missing. Neither Steve Timmis as lead elder nor those formally appointed as trustees ensured that there was clarity about who had ultimate responsibility for oversight of the charity, for safeguarding or for other matters of legal and regulatory compliance.

1.5. The 'Inner Circle' and the 'Outer Circle'

For any church leader, it is a significant challenge to ensure that any personal friendships within the congregation are navigated carefully. It is important that leaders neither show nor are perceived to be showing favouritism.

Participants' narratives showed clearly that there was the widespread view at TCH that there was an 'in-group', an inner circle that was close to Steve Timmis and the wider Timmis family. This was reported both by those who said they never felt they were part of that group, and by those who said they had been part of it and then moved to the outside if they raised questions or had a difference of opinion. There was a view that these were the people who '*shared the vision*' of Steve Timmis, the people who '*got it.*' They were people that Steve Timmis could trust and people who would defend him to others who questioned.

Steve Timmis and TCH have had a long-standing vision to plant a church on the Manor Estate in a socially deprived area of Sheffield and, for some years, there has been a missional community, an embryonic church plant, on the estate. Young single adults and young couples have moved onto the estate to establish this missional community and people reported that Steve Timmis has held up this group as an example that exemplifies the vision for TCH. Members of this group have been part of the '*inner circle*' who '*understand the vision*.' Steve has been very involved with this group, although a number of participants observed that he himself has never moved onto the estate.

Young potential leaders or Christian workers drawn to TCH from around the world were often welcomed into what was frequently described by participants as the '*inner circle*' and they became regular guests in the Timmis' home, '*guests at the birthday table*' as one person put it. However, they report that there was a price tag to being part of the inner core, unquestioned allegiance. A number of participants described how within this group '*non-core people were talked about, dismissed in a word*'. They stated that this behaviour was replicated by other leaders.

As a result, not everyone reported feeling comfortable with being part of that inner circle:

> '*I became increasingly uncomfortable with the conversations that would occur in their kitchen. For example, stories of other people's struggles, faults or mistakes. It*

was a kind of 'pass time' as their children would enter in the space and bring up the latest piece of information gleaned from the community whether good or bad. Because I was on the 'in' I was privy to these conversations but in time realised that my own experiences were entertainment too as details were swapped, repeated, added to as new details were found. At first, I felt that there was no harm meant, and joined in, enjoying the inclusion. Later I just chose to sit silent. Increasingly I wanted to remove myself as I felt compromised to be hearing personal information and stories, questioning if it was gossip. Often as something was recounted, Steve's wife would tell him how he should intervene, propping up a sense that only Steve could 'sort him out', or referring to how someone wasn't being 'man enough.' A common directive that Steve encouraged in other men was to 'man up' if they didn't behave or respond in the way he approved of. This really meant be more of a man, in the way that he was a man in demeanour, assertive, strong, relentless, driven, an alpha type in general.'

1.6 Constant Change

Repeatedly, people spoke of constant changes taking place. Many stated that they never really knew the rationale for these changes, but said they trusted the leaders and did not question their decisions. Some thought that often the changes were because they never had sufficient leaders for the number of communities. Some people said they believed it was a deliberate strategy to keep the church fresh, promote dependence on God rather than dependency on structures and prevent the development of inward-looking cliques.

However, others reported that they were suspicious of the motives behind the strategy:

'There was constant change – we were shuffled round – constant critique of gospel communities. Just as you got a sense of your community it all changed. I didn't have my family – Steve Timmis did. I felt really lonely. It felt like a brand, not a church. Change for change's sake felt like a need to control.'

The drawing together of the different house church communities to a centralised meeting at 215 Sharrow Vale Road was a major shift in emphasis. Some believed this was a consequence of a shortage of leaders in the context of considerable growth and expansion, rather than a deliberate change of strategy. However, the longer standing members who had been attracted to the distinctive TCH house church approach to church life described '*feeling that something was being lost*'.

One participant stated:

'As history developed, TCH adopted the congregation at 215 Sharrow vale Road and we were no longer a house church network. We had an open door and very much the appearance of any mainstream traditional church. However, the leadership were still hopeful of maintaining or encouraging the culture and values that we were founded

with. This worked with some but became a source of tension with others – many came and left – I would only be guessing as to all their reasons as I have not been party to those conversations. There had been, I believe, an increasing tension between the aspiration for church community and mission and the reality – this was addressed by the leadership through repetition of the 'values' and lots of reorganising of groups. In some respects the methods seemed to be self-defeating.'

1.7. Mission at the expense of pastoral care

Several participants reflected that TCH was as much a mission organisation as a church. They put forward the view that mission was at the centre of the vision and drove everything; there were high-stakes expectations for members, not just to be part of a missional community but to ensure that this community was at the centre of their daily living.   They said that whilst this worked well in a church populated by young people who were students, single adults or young couples unencumbered by children, the ideal became more difficult to sustain as people had families and gained professional responsibilities.   Furthermore, some joined the church attracted by the vision, but found that their personal circumstances or health, restricted the level of commitment they were able to make. A widespread view was expressed that rather than seeking to accommodate peoples' different circumstances, such people were dismissed by Steve Timmis and his inner circle as '*not getting the vision*' and that he was ready to suggest they found another church. One participant described TCH as *'an experiment with people's lives.'* Other comments included:

> *'It was all about mission. Steve turned churches and teams into military units, not hospitals. People on the fringe were encouraged to leave...... ...Lots of people left and then you never heard of them again. It's as though the waters closed over their heads; they were photoshopped out of history.'*

Many of those who wrote statements or were interviewed, expressed concerns about pastoral care, both at the day to day level and with respect to people with more complex pastoral needs:

> *'Steve was convinced by what he was convinced by. The church never grew up, never embraced people who were limping along or groups that were patchy in growth. Commitment to values was pre-eminent. Early on sceptics linked the success to younger people and two gifted leaders and asked if that was sustainable. Then I dismissed the sceptics – I wouldn't now.'*

1.8. Unconditional Loyalty

Accounts of Steve Timmis' need for unconditional loyalty emerged repeatedly in the written statements and the interviews. Some participants offered their suggestions

about the reason for this, but it would not be appropriate for the reviewers to include these speculations.

Former elders spoke about the pressure to show loyalty to Steve Timmis and reported that this loyalty included an *'embargo'* on making contact with those who had left, noting that such people were isolated and that any genuine concerns they might have had were not listened to.

1.9. Divided Loyalties – Acts 29

No one at TCH recalled the exact date, in 2012/2013, when Steve Timmis took up a paid position with Acts 29, first as European Director and then as the International CEO. Despite the high level of commitment anticipated for the role at Acts 29, including significant travel overseas, Steve Timmis retained the position of senior elder at TCH. It would have been reasonable for the trustees and other elders to suggest that this would have been a good point at which to hand over the mantle to others.

It is the opinion of the reviewers that Steve Timmis' employment with Acts 29 was a watershed for TCH. Although at the time a place on the Christian international platform raised the profile of TCH further, there have been significant costs for both Steve Timmis himself, for the church and for those who have come within its sphere of influence.

A number of people believed that the influence of Acts 29 upon TCH was less than helpful:

> *'We do feel that there has been a shift in the church culture over the past four years – it often feels like the church has become a "showcase" of Acts 29 with the Acts 29 motto being repeated every Sunday. Whilst we were blessed by many visiting preachers, it started to feel more like a show.*
>
> *We have also suffered from cultural arrogance, a belief that our way is better than that of other churches, and that Steve Timmis is effectively infallible. This has never been preached (in fact the opposite has), but we have had a series of outside speakers (especially internationally from Acts 29) telling us how wonderful we are; how great a model we provide; how influential we (and Steve in particular) have been to the church globally. This leads to a position where it is very hard to address cultural flaws and learn deeply from others, and especially to question Steve's increasing "celebrity leader" status.'*

Inevitably, the Acts 29 role did place many demands on his time, and Steve Timmis was away from Sheffield for significant periods. He had no contractual responsibilities at TCH, yet he continued to be regarded as the senior elder and founding father. The relatively young eldership team led in his absence but lacked the authority to make decisions, waiting until Steve returned to hear his opinion on matters. One person

who had been in the eldership commented that *'the involvement with Acts 29 was not helpful - it made Steve less available and the North American culture influenced his preaching'.*

Another participant observed that:

 'if you had something you felt you needed to discuss or raise with Steve it was better to grab five minutes with him when you could, as it could take several weeks to find a formal slot in his schedule. And so, as a result of Steve's busyness, for some people several weeks could pass before raising a concern, during which time, bitterness could grow and small niggles could escalate into big frustrations'.

As with any organisation, there are times in the life of a church when a change of leadership can be beneficial. It can open the way for God to move afresh whilst releasing the previous leader into new ministry. The pruning of the vine brings more fruit. When a leader seeks to move into a new ministry, without relinquishing something of the old, one has to ask the reason.

The concept of 'Founder's Syndrome'[9] was first introduced in the corporate world but has long been applied to non-profit organisations including Christian Charities and Missions. Key features are:

1. A sense that the organisation belongs to the founder.
2. An inability to delegate and poor management on the part of the founder.
3. The inability of the founder to make a graceful exit and enable a smooth transition to new leadership.
4. An unwavering dedication to the original vision.

There are indications to suggest that the above points were true, at least in part, of Steve Timmis at TCH. Many participants have reported that not only was leadership style an issue, but also the lack of suitably mature and gifted leaders to sustain the vision. By positioning himself always at the centre, Steve Timmis had not succeeded in growing other mature Christian leaders.

In the years since then, Steve Timmis appears to have had divided loyalties, divided between the global organisation that he was employed by and the church he had founded but not prepared for transition, rather keeping it dependent upon himself.

Summary

Steve Timmis is widely respected as a gifted bible teacher and a dynamic and innovative church leader. As the founder and lead elder of TCH, his forceful and determined personality has impressed itself deeply on the church's culture and had a significant

---

[9] Schmidt, E. Re-diagnosing Founder's Syndrome. December 2017. Non-Profit Quarterly.

impact on those who have been a part of the church's history over the past 20 years. Perceptions of this impact vary widely from deep admiration to accusations of abusive leadership. People have highlighted his example as husband, father and grandfather, his tireless service and the way he and his wife have opened their home to others. Some have related how he has both challenged and encouraged them in their Christian journey.

However, the majority of participants in this review reported that, whilst there are things to admire about Steve Timmis and his ministry, there are also concerns about his leadership style. These centre around a lack of accountability and a need for personal control over every aspect of church life that some participants in the review experienced as coercive, overly-controlling and stunting rather than enabling.

2. To gain as far as possible, a comprehensive picture of any other Crowded House leader's activities in relation to any harm they are alleged to have caused individuals whilst serving as an elder at The Crowded House.

2.1. Collective Responsibility

Many participants spoke not just about Steve Timmis, but about the whole culture of TCH and the role of other elders in enabling that culture to exist. One of the current elders articulated succinctly what others had expressed:

> 'The CT Article brought this into the public domain. It suggests the problem lies entirely with Steve. But the rest of the leaders have questions to answer around culture.'

This was reiterated by a past-elder who also linked culture and theology during his interview:

> 'I hope the church can continue but lots needs to change. Leaders need to step back and reflect – examine how they have been enablers. They need to look at issues that would allow a repeat. They need to look at theology as well as culture.'

2.2. Elders and Accountability

The accounts of members, employees, volunteers, past and present elders and trustees all indicate a widespread belief that in the twenty-year history of TCH there has been no-one who has been able to challenge the views of Steve Timmis. This has been linked to what has been perceived as Steve Timmis' need and requirement for unconditional loyalty. Consequently, there has been a regular turnover in the leadership, as one after another has concluded that they were hitting up against an immovable object. One past elder commented:

'Steve Timmis was impossible to challenge. Anyone who attempted to challenge him was liable to end up apologising to him. A challenge was seen as a personal attack; disloyalty, disobedience……There was only one way to leave well, with the blessing of the elders, to a church plant or an approved group.'

Some have managed to leave well, or at least appear to leave well, and find a door to ministry in other parts of the TCH network or elsewhere. However, the review team have been party to disclosures, letters and emails which indicate that in some cases there is another story, a story that was not told to church members, members of their mission communities, the trustees, or even others who were elders at the time. Others left less well, under a cloud, but the prevailing narrative framed them as people who *'didn't share the vision'*.

Speaking to the reviewers, many elders who are now elsewhere within the TCH network or outside it, have reported their own conflicts with Steve Timmis and the catalysts that prompted them to leave after years of investing their lives for the vision and trying to fit the TCH mould. Many have described their loss of confidence in ministry and, for some, the long-term effects upon their mental and spiritual health and that of their wives. Some say that they still feel very conflicted:

'It's hard to know how much responsibility we should take. Obviously, we share some responsibility for the problems with the culture. I wouldn't describe my experience of Steve in terms of 'bullying and abuse'. That's not my experience. It's not that I'm denying any problems, but I wouldn't use that language. I knew that people were upset with Steve and they found him difficult, but I never put it in that category.'

Elders from across the TCH network have talked with the reviewers about their own complicity arising from an inability to confront Steve Timmis. Amongst those who are still part of the wider TCH network there is evidence of a mood of reflection. During their interviews people have said that they bitterly regret not finding the courage to speak out as reflected in the quotes from these five different people who have held or still hold eldership positions in the TCH network:

'Steve carried authority – a gifted teacher and preacher – church enjoyed the status he brought. He would always win an argument. As elders we enabled him – should have put the brakes on. No one including XXXX would push back. When problems were noted there was a 'leave it to the Lord' attitude.'

'I am examining my own guilt. We are reviewing 'Is there something about our activism that subtly binds other people's consciences?' Have I been complicit in something unhealthy here?'

'I've never been in a church with Tim [Chester], but his church has a different feel and culture, a sense of mutuality. All of us have been weak in the way we've stood up to Steve. The big failure of leadership at TCH has been a failure to stand up to Steve.'

'The church never grew up, the eldership was conflict averse. The vision had become too important, more important than the people.'

'I have reflected endlessly over the past weeks on the nature and extent of Steve's guilt, and by extension my own complicity. Some of those who were hurt by Steve had their own issues that compounded the situation. Steve had a way of exposing a person's insecurities. I have assumed he did this unwittingly by the intensity of his vision or as a mis-placed form of discipleship. But I also wonder if perhaps it might sometimes have been an intentional means of control. Whatever Steve's intent, my mind has often gone to the description of Jesus: 'A bruised reed he will not break.' (Isaiah 42:3; Matthew 12:20) These people were bruised reeds with their insecurities, but instead of being protected by us they were broken by their experience of TCH.'

For those who hold or who have held the office of eldership, this has to be a period of soul-searching. Some have expressed to the review team the desire to find an appropriate way of seeking forgiveness from those who have suffered hurt within TCH.   Some have reflected that they had been guilty of *'heavy-handed pastoring'*; others have asked, *'Have we inherited a culture of heavy shepherding – do we need to repent?'*

This level of self-reflection is an appropriate response. The office of true eldership is a high one. Those who are appointed to eldership are called to protect the sheep whilst helping them to grow in grace, manifesting the fruits of the Spirit. 1 Peter 5:2-3 clearly states *'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.'*

It is evident from stories shared during the interviews, that many people have been deeply wounded. This is not just by Steve Timmis, but because they feel others in leadership have, at best, failed to listen to their concerns and questions and, at worst, actively perpetuated the culture that has equated honest questioning with a failure to submit to the authority of elders, to rebellion and sin. People reported numerous instances where they had tried to seek help from other elders over their concerns about Steve Timmis only to be told, *'that's just Steve.'*

Some have volunteered that they themselves have been 'heavy-handed' in their dealings with people.   This is a discourse that needs to be developed as numerous participants have described how they feel certain other leaders have adopted Steve Timmis' approach and been too ready to dismiss those with genuine questions, as rebellious sinners. One elder stated,

'I am beginning to see that we have effectively brushed over these concerns because we never really dared to listen.'

2.3 Trustees and Accountability

When considering the activity of other leaders, it is necessary to examine the role of trustees at TCH.   As well as being a church, TCH is a registered charity and as such is required to be compliant with charity law, and to have proper regard to the requirements and guidance of the Charity Commission as the charity regulator. Charity law defines charity trustees as those who have general control and management of the administration of a charity. The Charity Commission clearly defines the role of charity trustees as having overall responsibility for the governance of the charity[10].   Trustees have general oversight of the management of the whole organisation rather than having particular operational or executive powers. HR policy and practice and safeguarding fall within their remit, although this would be at the level of policy rather than operational practice. Trustees are responsible for all of the activities carried out of the charity and they are responsible for managing risk, including reputational risk and risk to beneficiaries and staff.

The role of trustees in safeguarding has come into sharp focus recently in a number of reports from the Charity Commission into the operation of charities where concerns have been reported. The Charity Commission report on Oxfam (June 2019)[11] for example, brings together a number of wider lessons for the charity sector generally:

'Trustees are collectively responsible for their charity and ultimately accountable for everything done by the charity and those representing the charity. Trustees must actively understand the risks to their charity and make sure those risks are properly managed; the higher the risk, the greater the expectation and the more oversight is needed. In a large and complex charity, it is normal for the executive to have significant decision-making authority – but the trustees must still be willing and able to hold the executive to account.'

Protecting people and safeguarding responsibilities should be a governance priority for all charities; especially those working with vulnerable groups. As part of fulfilling their trustee duties, trustees must take reasonable steps to protect from harm people who come into contact with their charity. *Protecting people from harm is not an overhead to be minimised, it is a fundamental and integral part of operating as a charity for the public benefit*. (p134)

---

[10] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-trustee-whats-involved#about-charity-trustees
[11] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807945/Statement_of_the_Results_of_an_Inquiry_Oxfam.pdf

As highlighted under 1.4, Steve Timmis had inherited a board of six fairly senior trustees when he entered into an agreement with Sharrow Vale Wesleyan Reformed Church in the early 2000s. Trustees who participated in the review reported that under the previous minister they had been a rubber-stamping committee who 'oversaw' the buildings and finances. They also related that some, but not all, of these trustees continued in office after Steve Timmis entered into this agreement and Steve himself was also formally appointed as a trustee. One of the original trustees reported that:

> Steve was the leader and I was happy with that. I don't know how he was fully supported financially…. There were trustees' meetings about every six months, it was not hard and fast. We had financial reports from the treasurer who presented us with a spreadsheet which we discussed and agreed upon. This was then presented to the whole church for discussion and approval.

Such a picture would not have been uncommon over fifteen years ago, but as highlighted above, the requirements of trusteeship have developed exponentially in the last decade. Sadly, it appears the trustees at TCH have not kept pace in this regard.

Some of this is due to apparent marginalisation of the people who held the formal role of trustees by Steve Timmis himself - excluding the board from conversations and keeping the decision-making process tightly within the eldership. Trustees report that ninety percent of responsibility for oversight of the church as a charity was taken by the elders. Trustees continued to rubber-stamp. They said that in practice they had no oversight of safeguarding and did not receive regular financial reviews, despite the fact that trustees hold responsibility for reporting to the Charity Commission on the charity's finances and serious incidents, including in relation to safeguarding matters.

Steve Timmis was not formally employed by TCH and he had neither an employee's job description nor a volunteer role description. Trustees expressed that they felt unable to hold him to account. Nevertheless, charity trustees do have a responsibility to ensure there are clear lines of accountability and delegation in a charity. Where appropriate this would include the adoption of role descriptions, codes of conduct and relevant policies and guidance, and of processes to ensure that there is a pathway for reporting concerns relating to matters such as safeguarding and areas of non-compliance. The fact that these were not in place, and that there was ambiguity about who was ultimately responsible for oversight of the charity, reflects a failure in governance.

None of the above negates the responsibility of trustees to keep abreast of charity law and to act properly and with due diligence in overseeing the affairs of the church as a charity. There is detailed information about the roles and responsibilities of trustees on the Charity Commission website. Chairs of Trustees should receive regular mailings from the Charity Commission. Some of the current trustees predate Steve Timmis at Sharrow Vale and have a long history of and love for the church that has kept them there

despite some concerns. Trustees who spoke to the reviewers reported that they should have 'carried the can' for Steve's actions and asked more questions.

> *Over the years we have seen people leave, ostensibly 'with our blessing' – there had been some slight disagreement and we wished them well. Looking back that should have been questioned.'*

2.4 The new CIO

By 2018/19 it appears that the clear view of the elders of TCH was that the Sharrow Vale Wesleyan Reform Church trust was not fit for purpose. The activities of the church had expanded dramatically and there was now a network of linked churches that shared the same administrative hub. There was a staff team of seven people employed by TCH occupying the downstairs space of a separate office building. This building housed an equally sized team employed by Acts 29 in the office upstairs.

Initially the TCH Collective[12] made a submission to the Charity Commission for a new C.I.O. (Charitable Incorporated Organisation) in Autumn 2019. This led to a number of questions being asked about the relationship of the new structure to the old. The response to the question below outlines the rationale for creating a new trust and is quoted here:

Question

> *The application form states that this is for the incorporation of an existing charity 508691 – Property held in connection with Sharrow Vale Wesleyan Reform Church. The objects of that charity as set out in clause 1 of the Deed of Declaration dated 29 November 1984 are to provide a Manse or place of residence for the Minister. The accounts for the unincorporated charity refer to operating a Church and the application form for the new CIO seem to relate to a Church which does not seem to be in accordance with the original trusts. We therefore wonder if there has been a supplemental deed to amend the 1984 trusts or if there is a separate governing document for the Church itself?*

Response

> *There have been no supplemental deeds or governing documents added to the 1984 deed since its creation, however there is a trust that precedes it. The 1886 deed relates to operating a church and the 1984 deed has functionally been added to that. The 1886 deeds states that 'the said Chapel and School shall be taught and inculcated (in) the doctrines and practice of the Christian Religion.'. Our research has indicated that from at least the 1980s the financial return of the church has been filed with the Commission under the 1984 deed. A significant motivation for our*

---

[12] The TCH Collective includes TCH Sharrowvale, Union and Peak Trinity.

desire to set up a CIO is to have trust deeds that are less antiquated and better suited for the purpose.

The new CIO for TCH collective had only just been registered when the events of February 2020 triggered Steve Timmis' resignation and this review. Some of the original trustees have left and the recent church plants, Union and Peak Trinity, have declared their intention to set up their own trusts as separate local churches. So, although the new CIO is much more fit for purpose than the old trust was, there has already been significant change in its composition. Going forwards it will be critical for the new board of trustees to be effective in holding the leaders to account.

Summary

Steve Timmis was the founder and the figurehead for TCH, the model of household church engaging with the community and focused on mission as described by Chester and Timmis in 'Total Church'. This proved to be a very appealing vision and TCH quickly grew into two networks of small groups of Christians meeting in homes, the Edge Network and the 215 Network. Other leaders were recruited and appointed by Steve Timmis. These were generally young men with very limited experience of such leadership who enthusiastically endorsed TCH values of being gospel-centred, community-based and mission-focused.

The ideology of mutual accountability and collective responsibility appears to have diminished and by 2010 TCH had become a gathered church with all the household communities coming together in Sharrow Vale on Sunday mornings. There was a regular turnover in the eldership. Some of the younger men who owed their position to Steve Timmis, reported that they soon found that he 'was impossible to challenge.' Some moved on to other ministry situations, others apparently left under a cloud. It appears that neither the trustees nor the growing body of elders felt they were able to effectively hold Steve Timmis to account, despite the ready availability of Charity Commission guidance on governance (for the trustees) and theological assent to the principle of the plurality of elders (among the elders). Some who did try to raise questions say they found themselves back-tracking and apologising later for doing so.

Many of these men, especially those who remained as elders across the network, now report that they turned a deaf ear to people who sought them out to speak about questions and concerns relating to Steve Timmis' leadership and decisions that resulted in deep hurt for some members. Some are still processing events from the past which resulted in hurt to members and former members of TCH and are questioning their own '*complicity*'. The leaders who took part in this review have expressed deep regret regarding their lack of critical questioning of decisions taken by the leadership and their lack of courage to speak out.

A minority of participants said they were deeply shocked by the CT article and the examples it cited**.** However, the majority, including some in Group 1, said that in terms of the examples given, there was nothing new, no incidents that had not been known about.

3.1 Turning a blind eye

What has become clearer as people have given their accounts is that apparently every alleged incident of abuse, bullying, harassment, control, was known about by somebody, but nobody was aware of them all. There were a number of contributory factors including the separation between the different missional communities, the separation for years between the Edge Network and TCH Sharrow Vale, the regular turnover of staff and elders, and marginalisation of those formally appointed as trustee. These, together with unconditional loyalty and acceptance of the authority of elders, perpetuated a culture where it was easy to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to stories of people who had been hurt or who had left and to believe the narrative that had been framed about them.

The reports of the participants indicate that many people left quietly and took their stories and their questions with them. Often they were too bruised to speak out or take action until months or years later, when an online network of TCH '*refugees'* began to form, stories were shared, and their narrative began to gain traction.

3.2 Common concerns

However, there are certain incidents that have surfaced repeatedly in written statements and interviews, either because people have clear concerns about the way they were handled or because they were bewildered and have questions about them that have continued to niggle away.

The first was cited in the CT article and involved a member who disagreed strongly with Steve Timmis about the treatment of a woman in their gospel community. There are different framings of the narrative, but due to the strength of the disagreement the member and his wife faced '*church discipline*.' They left and described to the reviewers how they were then shunned by their gospel community. An elder who was involved at the time stated that he has since recognised his own responses were driven by Steve Timmis' narrative and he now sees things through a different lens and has sought the couple's forgiveness.

The second concerned a group referred to time and again as 'The Americans'. A number of participants spoke about the group, expressing concern that they had left TCH

suddenly and without explanation. As the reviewers have not heard Steve Timmis' perspective, they have had to rely on the narrative of others to gain some understanding of what happened. As far as can be ascertained, a small team from Campus Outreach came from the US in 2015 to work in partnership with TCH, engaging in outreach and discipleship amongst students. This followed a three month visit to TCH the previous year. Their main point of contact had not been Steve Timmis, but two other elders engaged with student work, one of whom left TCH within months of the team's arrival, having voiced serious concerns about Steve Timmis. The other elder also moved on.

A TCH member who worked closely with the team described them:

> *'They were godly, gentle men and women passionate about reaching students in Sheffield. They shared the same biblical convictions and offered passion and energy for student ministry. Their vision, and passion was refreshing and being in a team with them was great. They had time to invest in people, met with students 1 to 1, and spent time talking through people's gifts and how they could be used in the church small group.'*

Participants reported that it was a perplexing time for the American team. As they were new to the UK, they were not clear how much of this was UK culture and how much was TCH culture. Steve Timmis then took oversight of the student work and disagreement surfaced regarding the management of the American team. At that point the team leader was told that their culture did not fit that of TCH, and they needed to change. The American team leader spoke humbly to the reviewers about the experience and acknowledged that leaders from his own church in the US had foreseen difficulties, having visited TCH and observed the philosophy, but he had believed he could make it work. He felt he was left with no choice but to resign and to return to the US with the rest of the team. The team included three married couples, some with young children who had left their home to work missionally in the UK. The experience took its toll on them all and the leader described being left '*reeling, questioning and disorientated*.' He commented that there are still elders who '*live under that regime - they don't know anything else; they need to be recalibrated.*' He confirmed that back in the US he received much-needed support and validation from mature Christians and had settled that '*the Lord uses broken places and broken people and had opened things for me.*'

The third situation that numerous people spoke of centred around the issue of membership. They recounted the story of a young couple who had signed the membership agreement initially, despite some misgivings about the TCH position on women, but who felt unable to do so in good conscience when it was time for renewal. The couple were then advised by one of the elders that if they were not members, they would not be able to attend the mid-week Bible Study, even though this was open to non-believers. The couple concerned described the effect of this upon them:

'We were 'banned' from going to Bible studies and other church events (apart from the Sunday gatherings) further making us feel worse than unbelievers and pushing us further out of the Church family - at a time where we were engaged, planning our wedding, and preparing for married life and would have liked support rather than pressure. The church that was my family and we really wanted to make our spiritual home together became, for me at least, another family that just didn't want me. And for XXXX, she was left with a deep feeling that she was not 'good enough'. We met with the Elders shortly after our wedding to discuss how we went forward. After some conversation there was no attempt at reconciliation and we were met with the phrase 'so... have you started to look for other churches yet'. The experience has left me very untrusting in churches and my spiritual growth has taken a battering. I am left with very few friends in Sheffield as the Church was my life. Not having a loving, supporting, rich church community is not how we wanted to start out our married life.'

The review team heard many other similar stories. They have highlighted these as they were frequently referred to in interviews, yet no single person seemed to know the full details.

One couple were aware of two of these stories and reported they were also deeply concerned about one of the elders who, very suddenly, announced that he was leaving. They began to ask questions and were soon invited for a meal with the Timmis'. They recounted that:

'They asked us for a meal because our group was asking 'why is all this happening?' They convinced us. 'You can trust us,' was their style, 'we've been very patient with xxx'. We went away and realised we never got 'real' answers. It's a very sad time....

That so many thinking people reported having some deep questions and misgivings, yet were drawn into a trusting acquiescence, indicates a culture that was far from healthy.

Summary

Although some participants were shocked by what they felt was the combative tone of the CT article, the allegations were not entirely new to the majority. Participating leaders, past and present, report that they knew of the accounts and allegations, that there had been disagreements with Steve Timmis and that he could be 'difficult'. Participating members report they had been aware of people leaving, although they rarely knew the detailed reasons. People who left following disagreements with the leadership of TCH were often being framed as having 'lost the vision' or as 'unrepentant sinners.' As a result, they were rarely contacted after they left and had no opportunity to give their perspective of the story.

The narratives that prevailed at the time were not framed in terms of safeguarding, still less, abuse. The various people who were responsible for safeguarding at the time these events happened were insufficiently independent of the church leadership and Steve Timmis, in particular, or lacked the authority to challenge his version of events.

The language of abusive leadership was introduced by Matt Chandler of Acts 29 and then in the CT article on 7th February. This language was deeply distressing to those who were strong advocates for Steve Timmis, whilst some participants felt it was an accurate description and that they too had been subject to abuse and '*gaslighting*'.

4. Why it took such a long period of time for the abuse allegations to come to light.

4.1. The Attraction of TCH

There are many things about TCH that are deeply attractional. Primarily, TCH has offered a call to radical discipleship. Those who joined were serious about their Christian faith and invested their lives wholeheartedly into doing church 'The Crowded House way'. Almost without exception, participants articulated that this is what drew them to TCH, what they loved about the church and what kept them there, even if they began to have questions. One person who talked about unspoken questions said, '*We want you to know that there are so many lovely things about TCH*' and this was a common refrain.

In addition, TCH was committed to outreach to the minority communities in Sheffield. This area of ministry attracted a number of people who felt a genuine calling to work amongst this community and some moved to Sheffield from other parts of the country to be involved. This area of mission engagement was integral to their sense of what God was calling them to.

As people told their stories, what unfolded was the sense that the greatest strengths of TCH could also be potentially dangerous weaknesses, but that this only became evident with hindsight. Many people said that leaving would be like cutting yourself off from your family. Those who had made the difficult decision to leave did not do so lightly and many talked about the pain this caused them and the sense of what they had lost. One person who had left explained the sense of loss saying, '*Leaving was massive because of relationships – you lost 15 years of relationships.*' This summarised what was said by many others.

There are a number of strands that intersect to form the culture of TCH, a culture in which people accepted what they were told and did not ask questions. An understanding of these strands offers an explanation of why it took a long time for people firstly to

acknowledge concerns and secondly, to name certain behaviours as bullying, controlling or abusive.

4.2. Vision

Many people joined as young, single people either whilst they were at university in Sheffield or because they came as interns. Others came as young couples. Often, they had limited experience of other churches or of the great doctrines of the Bible. They were drawn by the vision for a church that was refreshingly different from the established denominations, a church that was serious about the call to New Testament discipleship and living out the Christian faith within close-knit, missionally-minded communities. This vision was articulated in Chester and Timmis' book, 'Total Church'. The book was seen by many as an inspirational call back to a biblical lifestyle, a call that has been repeated throughout church history. However, the cultural sense that TCH was special, unique, different from other churches, also brought its dangers, making it difficult for people to ask questions or to consider if there were other ways of doing things that were consistent with biblical teaching. One person who had been in leadership reflected that:

> 'TCH was defined by how it was different from other churches. Other churches were held at arms' length…. It's difficult to leave because where do you go when TCH is the exemplar of church?'

Another church member, who reported some significant concerns about the way the vision was interpreted, said they questioned why they were still at TCH and it was because 'they did not want to go back to church as they had known it before'.

4.3. Preaching and Teaching

Steve Timmis was frequently described as a gifted preacher. Even some of his harshest critics state that he is the best preacher they have ever known. When Steve Timmis entered into the agreement with Sharrow Vale Wesleyan Reformed Church, it was a turning point in the history of that church. One of the original members stated:

> 'Sharrowvale Church would have been closing by 2000 if it weren't for TCH. There was no pastor and only a few older people. I have a great respect for Steve because, had it not been for him, the Christian witness in the area would have failed. We have seen amazing growth and it's been an amazing place……. I've been very blessed over the years by the words that he has brought, he's a great preacher.'

Members of TCH network who were not in leadership, employed or intern positions or who were not part of the Timmis' 'inner circle', said they had limited relational interaction with him. Their primary experience was hearing him preach at Sharrowvale on Sunday mornings and they found his words biblical, inspirational and challenging. Many of these

said they had only heard whispers of the concerns highlighted in the CT article and that they had not wanted to pay attention to rumour or gossip.

4.4. International Reputation

Steve Timmis' radical vision for church, his gifted preaching and teaching and his writings all gave him an international platform. People from around the world visited TCH to see this model of church and sought out Steve Timmis, seeking opportunity to come and serve there. People reflected that the church enjoyed the status this brought. It fed into the narrative that being a member of TCH was something special, something blessed by God, something that could not be found in other churches. Young Christians were unlikely to challenge a leader who had a place on the global Christian stage. One person commented that, *'there was a sort of adoration of Steve.'* Another said, *'Steve enjoyed the favour of Acts 29 – how could people bring up concerns?'*

4.5. Isolation within gospel/missional communities

Many described a church culture that required one hundred per cent commitment but in which they said relationships outside their close community groups were strongly discouraged. Consequently, whilst members had intense relationships with those in their own missional community group, many said they lacked relationships with the wider membership and were often oblivious to difficulties experienced by others outside their own immediate circle. This would contribute to a greater sense of grief, loss and isolation should members leave and would make such a decision all the more difficult as detailed in 4.8 below.

4.6. Constant State of Change

Many participants reported that the story of TCH was one of constant change and this is described in some detail in the section of the report entitled The Crowded House: Background and History. Some stated that Steve Timmis believed in change for change's sake. Others said they believed that often there were good reasons linked with the missional vision as they were not seeing many come to Christ.

4.7. Inexperienced Leaders and the imbalance of power

This is addressed under Scoping Point 1. Leadership and style of leadership are key issues in any church or organisation. Steve Timmis and TCH hold a strong position about authority and submission to church leaders. Initially, there were men not too dissimilar in age to Steve Timmis in the eldership. However, after the loss of two mature men from the eldership team in 2015, Steve Timmis drew younger men into this leadership circle, recommending them first to the wider membership as candidate elders and then, after twelve months, advocating their admission to the eldership team. These men were generally many years younger than Steve Timmis himself and often limited in

their experience of other churches and other leadership styles. Steve Timmis had been the mentor and father figure for some of these leaders. Participants noted that they had neither the experience nor the maturity to challenge their '*father in the faith*' and they allowed their responses to be determined by Steve Timmis himself. Several participants commented that seasoned Christians with some experience in ministry who joined TCH were never offered a place at the table.

Within the eldership team Steve was viewed as '*first among equals.*' However, past elders and leaders said that whilst there was open discussion at meetings, they were always waiting to hear what Steve thought. People reported that Steve Timmis is a very strong personality who chooses his words carefully. Numerous people commented that not many of the leaders would challenge him.

4.8. Leaving TCH: The Narrative

As outlined under 4.1, written statements and interviews make it clear that TCH was a difficult place to leave, particularly after years of personal investment into the vision and into relationships. Participants have repeatedly commented that those who asked difficult questions were told they were free to leave.   There was a widespread narrative that was woven about those who did and that no-one wanted to be the next person to be branded as the one who '*didn't get the vision*', '*was going against God, against scripture*' or '*was rebellious, unrepentant, a sinner.*' One couple who talked about the strengths of TCH also spoke about their growing concerns, including the pain of seeing friends leaving saying, '*there was a culture of silence – we never knew what happened but there was a discourse of maybe this isn't the church for them*'. Another couple, who had only had positive experiences of TCH themselves, acknowledged that they could see now how people who had left had been ostracised and felt that by default, they too had been part of that culture.

Participants who had left, were often tearful in giving their account of the pain and cost involved:

> '*We were afraid that Steve would curse our future.*'

> '*When we decided to leave, we were forbidden from explaining why we'd left 'for the sake of the reputation of the church'. The 'spin' story given was that we were perhaps not even Christians anymore since we'd left the church. We were told not to speak to our former church family unless they contacted us, but later found out that they felt abandoned by us because we'd not been in touch with them. The relationships were severed. We were utterly dropped by our church family, who we had previously seen almost every day. We were told that our leaving was 'so painful' for them, and they had to work through how they could forgive us before we could see them. We still haven't seen people because once you leave you are utterly forsaken.*'

For some it appears it was easier to silence the questions, and stay. Following the CT article, some did not want to react in haste but were awaiting the outcome of this review.

Summary

Many people were attracted to TCH as an exemplar of radical discipleship and the church grew significantly as existing Christians were drawn in (in large numbers) and people were converted (in smaller numbers). It appears that a constant '*churn and change*' within the TCH network and a lack of transparency in decision making meant that only Steve Timmis had the full picture. The prevailing narrative was one of successful progress. People became disaffected with TCH and people did leave from time to time but, on the other hand, there were new churches being planned, embryonic church plants being fostered and TCH was being held up as an example internationally. Steve Timmis, TCH founder and leader, might '*ruffle a few feathers but at least he got things done*' (in the words of a fellow leader). Existing leaders at TCH reflected to the review team, that it took Steve Timmis being transitioned out of his CEO role with Acts 29, together with the media publicity during the same week, to bring to their attention the seriousness of the allegations of bullying and misuse of authority that are the subject of this review.

5. To what extent the cultural context at The Crowded House provided an environment for any alleged abuse to occur and to not be disclosed, and what factors contributed to this.

5.1. Shaping the culture

Steve Timmis may have had a significant role in shaping the culture at TCH but other elders, gospel community leaders and trustees have all had a part to play in shaping and perpetuating it.

It is important to acknowledge that not everyone was critical of the culture at TCH and that even amongst those who expressed concerns, there were aspects that they valued. People cited the sense of community, being part of an extended family, the desire to follow biblical teaching in every aspect of life. One person said, '*I think it was a beautiful culture and I feel privileged to have been part of it....people made sacrifices for each other.*' Under Scoping point 4 the report highlights the genuine and positive attributes that attracted serious and committed Christians to the church and kept them there giving them a sense of belonging to a like-minded family and community.

However, many participants reported a number of areas that they or others had questioned and suggested that there had been widespread complicity in perpetuating what some described as '*a conspiracy of silence*'. The roles of leaders and trustees have been addressed under Scoping Points 2 and 3. This has included the

reported lack of internal and external accountability, the youth, inexperience and sometimes personal connections of those appointed as elders and the marginalisation of those formally appointed as trustees.

This section of the report examines further aspects of the culture wherein behaviours that hurt others deeply were neither recognised nor challenged.

5.2. Disconnection between different groups

It appears that at different times, in different missional communities and in different parts of TCH network, people had wide-ranging experiences. A number of explanations were offered for this:

- **Inconsistent application of TCH values.** Participants reported that leaders in some gospel communities had a softer approach and the expected 'standards' varied. As a result, some people had very good experiences and received gentle and supportive pastoral care.

- **Frequent Change.** A number of participants commented on the frequency with which gospel communities were changed, being re-named and re-shuffled so that membership was reconfigured. The reviewers acknowledge that in some churches this is common practice but in the case of TCH, members have cited it as a source of instability that prevented some ongoing relationships and some have suggested it was a way of maintaining control.

- **Lack of communication between different groups.** Participants who had good experiences either said they were not aware of problems in other groups, or explained that they had not wanted to believe rumours.

5.3 Application of biblical teaching.

It is beyond the remit of this report to address theological issues. Nevertheless, several participants have raised theological questions in relation to the wider culture of TCH and it is therefore appropriate to include these. These critiques do not relate to the biblical teaching in itself, but rather to the manner in which it has been communicated and applied.

5.3.1. Sin and Grace

There was a widespread view expressed by participants that within TCH culture there was an over-emphasis on sin and an under-emphasis on grace, although this was not universal. For example, those who were part of the Edge Network between 2002 and 2010 generally reported a greater emphasis on grace. Similarly, a number of those participants who reported that they had raised concerns but nevertheless had remained

as members of TCH, had been under different leadership in recent years, as part of TCH Union.

Most critical were those who had been members of TCH Sharrow Vale, or those who had been trainees/ interns or employees.   One such participant said to the reviewers:

> *'Churches need a balance between grace and truth. At TCH it was truth, truth, truth and no grace.'*

People articulated the view that this perceived imbalance was at best not helpful, and at worst harmful, particularly in relation to:
1. Commitment
2. Pastoral Care
3. Authority
4. Gender roles

5.3.2. Commitment

One of the attractions of TCH was that it described itself as 'the church on mission' and offered a call to a radical Christianity. A number of participants observed that TCH was as much a mission agency as it was a church and there were high expectations that all members committed to '*life on mission'*. Steve Timmis emphasised '*ordinary life with gospel intentionality'*.   In order to achieve this, there had to be total commitment to one's missional or gospel community. The Sharrow Vale Membership Pack states:

> *'Being part of a Ministry Team is not about simply attending a weekly meeting or bible study. It means that you share life with other brothers and sisters in Christ. This shared life - mealtimes, cleaning times, leisure times etc., is the context of both discipleship and mission. A Ministry Team is not something to fit into our schedule, it is the context for determining our schedule.'*

One person explained the TCH emphasis on commitment and mission in this way:

> *'The ambition for TCH is Life on Mission. It's explicit that church is an extended family – there's a high level of commitment. Other churches may not see as sinful what is seen as sinful at TCH. Sinful language could be used if people are not connecting in the way we believe is biblical, if not submitting and loving others.'*

However, various participants described how they felt this expected level of commitment had impacted on them in reality. One person described this as a '*gospel plus'* message, saying they were always striving to meet additional criteria; they felt they were always being monitored and were constantly anxious.

Some spoke about the different levels of commitment that are possible at different stages of life, highlighting how much easier it was to be totally involved in a gospel community as a student or young single adult than it was once they faced the demands of professional life or of having young families. Some talked about a lack of allowance being made for people with different levels of capacity to live up to these expectations:

> *'"Life on life" is the well-known phrase of TCH. It means well... but is easily been taken out of context…..It certainly helps to feel like you know people well, and a number of my friends who have now left, say that they miss the intentionality of people at TCH. The danger with "life on life" is that is sets the bar really high, whilst some people can cope with having people turn up for tea unexpectedly, being out every night at a church gathering etc, there are a number of people in the church who would struggle but would feel they couldn't say anything. There has been underlying expectation that you do everything with other people, again an ideal that raises the bar so high, people feel crushed by it or perceive they can't ever reach it.'*

Some reported that, with hindsight there was an imbalance between living up to the expected TCH values and developing your personal walk with Jesus:

> *'There was never a real sense that one's relationship with Jesus was the important thing. I was judged by my leaders, Steve primarily, and then filtered down through all subsequent leaders, by what I did, what I attended, how many people I had seen in a week, and how sacrificial they thought I'd been.'*

Others talked about the struggles they faced reconciling such expectations with their needs as couples, as parents and their responsibilities to their wider families. The examples they reported included:

- Submitting personal decisions, such as choosing their children's school, to their missional community.
- Forgoing time as a family unit in order to spend time with their missional community.
- Being questioned if visits to parents or wider family meant they were absent from church.

One person summed this up that by saying that as time went on, young adults faced increasing responsibilities in all areas of life and this level of community commitment was no longer sustainable, but *'the church never grew up'*.

Some of those who had left, and those who had witnessed friends leaving, reported that they were regarded as those who could not live up to the expected standards of commitment.   Others explained they had left because they had made choices that were considered inappropriate, for example in their choice of life partner, and described the pain of being branded as *'unrepentant sinners'* and then shunned by people they had considered friends.

5.3.3. Pastoral Care

Numerous participants reported feeling that the imbalance in relation to sin and grace spilled over into pastoral care. Some spoke emotionally when re-living pastoral encounters with elders in which they felt their own sin and rebellion took precedence over seeking an understanding of how they might be supported to find God's grace and healing in difficult times.

Participants recounted that seeking pastoral support or counselling outside the biblical framework approved at TCH was strongly discouraged. There were numerous stories about a lack of compassion for those wrestling with deep-seated issues and the long-term harm this had caused.

Some people said that as a result, they subsequently had difficulty trusting in a God of grace, and some that they had given up on faith completely. Others spoke about relief when joining other churches and finding God's grace afresh.

There were individuals who spoke about needing counselling after leaving TCH due to being told repeatedly that they 'were the problem' and believing this to be true. Some reported that the culture perpetrated by Steve Timmis, but also by others in leadership, led to significant emotional spiritual and mental damage. People talked about the time it took to understand the full impact these experiences had upon them.

The reviewers heard from some young adults who reported wrestling with issues of sexual orientation/gender identity. They spoke of the loneliness and heartache this caused and how this was compounded because there was no-one to whom they felt they could safely go, given the church's strong teaching on these issues. Balancing biblical conviction on these matters with the call to compassion is a difficult issue for Christians of all denominations, and scripture can be used to justify a range of viewpoints. From a safeguarding point of view, the challenge is how to remain true to the convictions and values of the church, whilst ensuring that those who are seeking to make sense of these deeply personal issues are not left feeling damaged and unsupported. This may mean lovingly signposting them to those who can offer to walk alongside them.

Another aspect of pastoral care is every member care for one another. Whilst on one level participants reported that this was a strength of gospel communities, it appears this did not extend to those who left '*under a cloud*.' People reported that in some instances groups were told not to pursue people who had left, and at other times they said it was more of an unspoken sense that they should not do so. As a result, the personal stories of those who had left were not heard by other members of TCH.

5.3.4. The Authority of Leaders

Participants consistently reported that TCH has very strong teaching on submission to the authority of leaders. People who raised this as an issue felt there was a misapplication of this teaching and that, biblically, submission should be a two-way process. People observed that leaders themselves should be accountable and the leadership model should be one of distributed leadership instead of allowing so much power to be invested in one person. One member reported how this culture opened the door for '*heavy shepherding*'. The view was expressed repeatedly that there are areas in life that should be left to the individual or couple to navigate before God and in which church leaders or members should offer support if required but not interference. Examples included receiving gifts from parents, being free to visit extended family, to maintain friendships outside the church, personal child-care arrangements and the disciplining of children. One participant commented as follows:

> '*There are differences between the church and the military. TCH was like a military organisation with strict discipline and absolute authority for the leaders. There was no freedom of thought, no questioning of authority, no asking for explanations. The ecclesiology of TCH is wrong. It's all about top down leadership with no opportunity for members to contribute to decision making. The elders make decisions in closed rooms.*'

5.3.5. Complementarian Theology

TCH is at the reformed end of the theological spectrum and holds a complementarian view of women. This is explicitly stated in the Sharrowvale Membership Pack. It was clear that there were a number of women who felt this was not an issue and felt who valued in their roles. However, this was not universally true.

Those women and men who did raise this as an issue affirmed that they were themselves complementarian by persuasion, but were concerned about the interpretation. One female participant reported concern that women's voices were not heard. Others reported that a number of professional women had left the church as a result. One young woman who came as an intern reported that she was dismayed to discover there was no opportunity for her to do any bible teaching or receive feedback. She reported that the culture was very male dominated and that women were not encouraged to study the bible together, that in fact there were few spaces where women could teach. The same woman reported concern that men should not have personal responsibility for young women, reporting conversations she felt were inappropriately personal and probing.

However, perhaps most telling was an ex-elder who reported feeling that the complementarian discourse had shifted in recent years and was applied in a way that was detrimental to both men and women. He felt that it often led to a misinterpretation

of gender stereotypes. He reported that it was unnecessarily hard for women to speak out, saying that when women were happy to stay in the background and be no trouble this was confused with godliness. He also felt that the way complementarianism was presented gave wrong expectations to young men:

> 'It gave wrong expectations of and to young men – warps godly character and humility.....sets up an idea of the godly male that some men don't need to hear. I need to be nurtured as the man that I am.......It's unnecessarily hard for women to be outspoken. If women are happy in the background and no trouble this is confused with godliness. Outspoken women with rightly held opinions are in for a bumpy ride.'

Summary

There is significant overlap between this section and other areas of the report. Whilst one person, in this case Steve Timmis, may have a powerful influence in shaping the culture of a church or any organisation, they do not do this alone. It needs the agreement, behaviour and action, or inaction, of others to embed both the spoken and the unspoken beliefs and values that characterise the organisation.

It appears that the charisma and international reputation of Steve Timmis meant that many people put him on a pedestal, believing that he must know best. He offered a call to discipleship that was challenging and spiritually invigorating and a view of church that appeared to be modelled on New Testament rather than denominational lines. As a result, it appears people followed him willingly, gave unconditional loyalty, suppressed questions, and accepted that TCH was a unique and special church that was not for everyone. As people have had time to reflect, many have questioned the **interpretation** of biblical texts and concluded that this interpretation has some significantly negative impacts in many aspects of the lives of individuals and on the health of the church as a whole.

In addition, it is the opinion of the reviewers that frequent structural reorganisations together with a disconnection between different groups meant that there was a discontinuity in many relationships. As a result, there was a lack of awareness regarding the potential real reasons for some leaders and members leaving TCH.

6.1. Safeguarding

The commissioners provided significant documentation relating to safeguarding at TCH Sharrow Vale.   However, many of those interviewed either had little or no recollection of discussions about safeguarding.   Those who did reported that where safeguarding was discussed it was in relation to policies and procedures to safeguard children. It appears there had been very little awareness of the issues and complexities of adult safeguarding.

6.1.1. Safeguarding Children

The safeguarding policy had been formulated some years ago and was based on the thirtyone:eight Safeguarding Standards.[13] This had been reviewed annually, in light of the TCH Sharrowvale context and appeared to be well-understood and applied in relation to children under 18. There were no obvious gaps with regard to child protection and some of the supporting documentation supplied, such as the action log of safeguarding meetings, safeguarding reviews, JAM club code of conduct, Youth code of conduct, FAQs for new helpers was very well thought through.   Evidence was provided of particular child safeguarding issues about which TCH volunteers had sought advice from thirtyone:eight. It appears the advice given was followed up well and child protection issues were not minimised or ignored.

Numerous participants stated they believed that attention to child safeguarding has been good. A number of people who worked with children and young people in TCH were interviewed and their comments indicated a good understanding and awareness of child safeguarding and a pride in offering children's and young people's work to a high standard. Comments included:

> *'The safeguarding policy was based on the thirtyone:eight template….   We were diligent. We took it seriously. There was a process for dealing with things and things came up now and then, it all went smoothly.'*

However, the scope of the policy was explicitly limited to 'regulated activity', activities provided by the church centrally. As far as it is relevant to most churches in England and Wales, 'regulated activity' with children is defined within the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act (2006) as follows:

---

[13] https://thirtyoneeight.org/media/2496/10-safeguarding-standards.pdf

a) any form of teaching, training or instruction of children, unless the teaching, training or instruction is merely incidental to teaching, training or instruction of persons who are not children;
b) any form of care for or supervision of children, unless the care or supervision is merely incidental to care for or supervision of persons who are not children;
c) any form of advice or guidance provided wholly or mainly for children, if the advice or guidance relates to their physical, emotional or educational well-being;

This definition relates to eligibility for criminal records checks for those working in such roles, but many of the more informal, missional, voluntary roles in church, would not be categorized as such. The concept of 'regulated activity' therefore, whilst essential within the statutory sector such as in schools, care homes etc, is less pertinent when it comes to safeguarding in church. Although the above definition relates to work with children, there is a yet more complex set of criteria to be applied when defining 'regulated activity' with adults. See the section on Adult Safeguarding below.

Whilst evidence shows good child protection procedures in the more formal settings, it appears insufficient attention was paid to wider aspects of how to safeguard children and adults in the more informal settings of house church, mission groups, and within pastoral care.

Safeguarding needs to be seen as integral to everything that happens in association with the church, whether this falls within the remit of 'regulated activity' or not. All churches need policies and practices that work towards creating safe spaces for all children and adults across both formal and more informal activities. This wider aspect of Safeguarding has not been in evidence at TCH. This expectation stems from the statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children[14] and is shared by the Charity Commission in its guidance on safeguarding

6.1.2. Adult Safeguarding

For at least the last ten years it has been common for churches to have robust child protection procedures and this reflects the history of child protection in this country. The protection of adults at risk is a more recent priority and was formalised in law for England and Wales with the passing of the Care Act 2014[15] and subsequent practice guidance. Many churches and other organisations are still getting to grips with the practical implications of these requirements and there is a growing bank of resources and training modules to help them.

Charity Commission guidance has, in recent years, broadened the scope of the safeguarding task for charities, including churches, and has placed a new emphasis on its importance. In its policy paper '*Strategy for dealing with safeguarding issues in*

---

[14] Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 A Guide to Interagency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children
[15] www.legislation.gov.uk.>ukpga

charities' (2017)[16] it places the specific duties to protect children and vulnerable adults from the risk of harm within a wider context and starts with the principle that no-one should be put at risk of serious harm from a charity's activities no matter who they are or what their circumstances. An extended quote from this report will give the sense of this broadened scope of the Commission's view of the safeguarding task:

> *'Protecting people and safeguarding should be a governance priority for all charities, regardless of size, type or income, not just those working with children or groups traditionally considered at risk. It is an essential duty for trustees to take reasonable steps to safeguard beneficiaries and to protect them from abuse and mistreatment of any kind (including neglect). This is fundamental part of operating as a charity for the public benefit. Trustees should also, where appropriate, promote the well-being and welfare of the charity beneficiaries. Additionally, trustees must take reasonable steps to protect from harm employees, volunteers and others who come into contact with the charity through its work. A charity should be a safe and trusted environment.*
>
> *In addition, many charities work with or come into contact with children or adults (aged 18 or over) who may be experiencing, or at risk of, abuse or neglect.*
>
> *Safeguarding for these situations has specific meanings under English and Welsh legislation and certain legal requirements apply including protecting the rights of adults to live in safety, free from abuse and neglect.'*

It is easy to see the many ways in which this broader, more all-encompassing description of what safeguarding means can be applied to churches. The Commission's guidance clearly articulates the responsibility of trustees to ensure their charity has taken reasonable steps that will help protect people from harm.

Numerous people reported that TCH follows the thirtyone:eight model safeguarding policy. The TCH policy includes reference to adult safeguarding, yet many participants also stated that in their view safeguarding within TCH was seen as largely for children and young people. Adult safeguarding is one area where there is a gap in the policy and guidance for TCH.

- There is a section in the Safeguarding Policy on Safer Recruitment which outlines the procedures for recruiting those who work with children and young people or adults with care and support needs. These include role descriptions, application forms, self-declarations, interviews and DBS checks.

- There is no evidence of robust and consistent practice when recruiting people to roles undertaking non-regulated activities.

---

[16] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategy-for-dealing-with-safeguarding-issues-in-charities/strategy-for-dealing-with-safeguarding-issues-in-charities. The Commission's guidance for trustees on safeguarding is also helpful and can be found here - https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safeguarding-duties-for-charity-trustees

- The documentation supplied did not cover the area of domestic abuse, yet this is a major safeguarding issue affecting both children and adults within churches as well as within the wider community.

- Documentation does not cover safeguarding in relation to pastoral care or those with mental health issues. There are some challenging pastoral and safeguarding issues in relation to people with mental health problems, who may find some aspects of church life difficult. It appears that within the culture of TCH, mental health issues have not been seen as an area of vulnerability that needs to be considered under the safeguarding umbrella. Anxiety and depression are very common within all communities and pastoral care and discipleship for adults needs to be offered in a way that honours the person's agency but also safeguards their emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Some of our interviewees talked about being on the receiving end of 'biblical counselling' which, rather than helping them to find God's grace and help in their difficulties, they felt attributed these difficulties solely to sin and rebellion. One participant said:

  'Biblical counselling framed everything as a sin issue - even mistakes on a powerpoint were translated as laziness. There was no space for frailty - it was a form of gaslighting. The counsellor sees the counselee's sin. Any resistance proved that you were proud, blind, arrogant and unteachable.'

- There is no mention of any steps taken to prevent or address bullying and/or harassment in either the safeguarding policy or the new Staff Handbook. One of the former elders stated:

  'The policy focused on child protection, bullying and harassment is not seen as a safeguarding issue. Risks to vulnerable adults were not taken seriously enough. The Safeguarding Lead worked hard on the policy and I think we did a good job on child protection but there was no awareness of psychological or spiritual abuse.'

6.1.3. Reporting Concerns

The procedures for reporting allegations of abuse or neglect are set out in the TCH safeguarding policy. There is a child protection coordinator and a deputy who are named in the policy and widely known to church members who are invited to bring any allegations or concerns about abuse to them. The safeguarding coordinators ring the thirtyone:eight Helpline if in doubt about how to proceed and make referrals to statutory authorities where necessary. This procedure appears to work well in terms of child protection and there were examples given when concerns were raised about child welfare and safety which appear to have been dealt with appropriately.

However, it appears that understanding of adult abuse was limited to vulnerable groups such as those with autistic spectrum disorders, refugees or asylum seekers. People who participated in interviews generally said they had not considered that anyone can be vulnerable at times (due to age, illness, disability, mental health issues, life circumstances or past trauma, for example) and many said they were not aware of any discussions about an adult safeguarding policy.

6.1.4. Bullying, Harassment, Controlling or Abusive Leadership

It appears concerns about bullying or abusive leadership, such as the allegations made in the CT article, were not seen as safeguarding issues and people had nowhere to take them; that questioning of the leadership was actively discouraged, either within or outside of the leadership, and could result in 'church discipline'; and that the independence and authority of the safeguarding coordinators and their power to make decisions outside of the narrow remit of the church's understanding of safeguarding was limited. Indeed, at times the safeguarding leads were themselves elders or related to elders. One couple said:

> 'We can't think of any examples of bullying or abuse of adults. Any concerns can go to the leaders. You can always speak to another elder if you have a concern about your own elder.'

This was repeated in slightly different ways by a number of people even though other personal narratives told a very different story. This would seem to reflect the wide range of experiences and perceptions. It appears that the majority of people did not consider framing allegations of bullying adults within a safeguarding perspective.

6.1.5. Spiritual Abuse

It was reported that the TCH safeguarding team did discuss the principle of spiritual abuse and the question of whether or not it should be included in the policy. A member of the church safeguarding team who contributed to this review said:

> 'I'm aware of the thirtyone:eight position statement on spiritual abuse and am also aware that there is no consensus definition of what spiritual abuse is. Shortly before the CT article, the safeguarding team had met for the 6 monthly safeguarding review. In that meeting we discussed again the Spiritual Abuse position statement. I had been previously asked to see if a section recognising spiritual abuse should be added to our safeguarding policy; several months earlier one of our team had spoken to thirtyone:eight who had said it did not need adding to the policy as it was covered by the other forms of abuse that were mentioned. We discussed the topic again but were aware that the definition is not yet fully agreed, is vague and potentially open to misinterpretation, therefore no changes were made at this time, and there was a decision to look into this further and revisit it at a later date.'

Thirtyone:eight subsequently explored the relevant history related to this particular referral; it appears the person who called the thirtyone:eight safeguarding helpline either did not understand or did not pass on the full advice given. This included signposting the caller to the thirtyone:eight website for further information regarding definitions of abuse and understanding spiritual abuse, together with guidance on how definitions could be incorporated into a policy statement.

When bullying and abusive leadership arises, whether it is categorized as spiritual abuse or given another name, such as pastoral malpractice (the language used by the FIEC), the fact remains that people can be seriously affected by it. The Charity Commission would expect the trustees to investigate allegations of such conduct fully and take protective and remedial action where appropriate. In significant cases the Commission would also expect the situation to be reported as a serious incident. Without a robust, independent and authoritative safeguarding/complaints process people in church who feel that they are being maltreated or that pastoral authority is being abused, have nowhere to go.

The statement on abuse and pastoral malpractice from the FIEC website states[17]

*Recent high-profile cases have also reminded us that **church leaders**, or others in the local church involved in leadership and pastoral care, can behave in ways that, whilst not illegal, do fall short of the standards expected of a person with pastoral responsibility. These behaviours range from serious misconduct (including coercion or control) to simply being unwise in relating to others. Again, given the autonomy of the local church, we expect local churches to take the initiative in taking appropriate disciplinary action where it is needed.*

6.2. Recruitment, Employment and Grievance Procedures for Interns and Employees at TCH

Over the years TCH has welcomed a steady stream of interns and employees. The commissioners have supplied a draft Grievance Policy dated September 2019 and a draft Employment Handbook dated December 2019. These have not been finalised or approved by the trustees.

They have also supplied a range of job descriptions for paid positions and role descriptions for volunteer roles for those working with children and young people, along with contracts of employment and volunteer agreements respectively. Some of these appear to date back to 2015, whilst others have been introduced during 2019. These are all welcome developments and should be commended.

Over the years, it appears the process for recruitment of people to trainee or intern positions or to employed roles can at best be described as 'ad hoc.' Although the

---

[17] https://fiec.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-do/ministry-networks/abuse-and-pastoral-malpractices

Safeguarding Policy contains processes for recruitment of those working in regulated activity with children, it appears that there has not been a clear policy or consistent procedures for recruitment to the full range of paid or volunteer roles with children, young people or adults who may be vulnerable.

6.2.1 Interns

Ten of the participants had served as interns (sometimes called gospel trainees) at different times in the history of TCH, some of these coming to Sheffield from overseas. These young adults were drawn by the charisma of Steve Timmis and TCH.

One spoke very positively about the internship and has continued to be involved at the centre of TCH. He hopes to be an elder one day. His story was distinctly different from the others. The other narratives reported a concerning lack of consistency both in terms of the recruitment process and the intern experience.

Interns reported that there was no written agreement of what would be expected from them or what they could expect from TCH. Some reported that when they arrived the accommodation arrangements and conditions of work were somewhat different from those they had been led to expect. Some expressed concern that there was very little opportunity to develop their skills in leading bible studies or speaking about the gospel, and there were no opportunities to test out any preaching gifting as this was solely the responsibility of the elders. Some felt they were placed into situations to which they were not suited, because of the need to fill a gap.

They talked of '*Steve Timmis' boot camp approach'*, of being named and shamed in front of others, and of a theology that reinforced the notion that doubts are sinful. Some reported the perception that they were looked down on because they did not meet the TCH expectations. Others reported that the former interns who supervised them lacked any confidence to make decisions. One reported a '*totalitarian approach'* to how they were expected to use their free time, and the exhaustion he felt as he never had a day off.

Another described Steve Timmis as a '*fascinating character'* and his bible teaching as engaging and challenging. Yet he found his humour sarcastic, and at times humiliating. He reported that, during the intern year (alongside others), he did a lot of practical work, cleaning and decorating but felt there was not much opportunity for growth. He reported that at the induction session they were told that if they had a grievance or a concern, they should not talk to anyone – the biblical principle was to address the person themselves. They had no official mentor and nowhere to go with concerns.

There appears to have been a lack of clarity around expectations for interns and some participants have alleged unfair treatment. The one constant has been the lack of any

policy and process for reporting concerns and being heard. It is the view of the reviewers that not only has TCH failed to develop a consistent and transparent policy for the recruitment and deployment of interns but has, at times, failed in its duty to pastorally care for young adults, some of whom were living in a new culture.

6.2.2. Employees

Ten participants had worked for Steve Timmis, employed either by TCH or in the Sheffield office of Acts 29. During their interviews they reported a range of experiences. One previous employee reported that they received treatment that they were later told was *'inappropriate, un-Christian and illegal, in other words contrary to employment law'.* Another reported being *'non-plussed'* by Steve Timmis attacking his character but said that when he asked for advice from other elders, instead of being directed to a concerns or grievance process he was told, *'We're not going to have this conversation. You should never mention it again.'*

Summary

In recent years there have been a number of safeguarding leads at TCH. They attest that they have exercised diligence in ensuring that there has been a robust approach to child safeguarding and have referred concerns about child safeguarding matters to thirtyone:eight and sought their advice. However, whilst the review team have seen summaries of advice from thirtyone:eight (CCPAS), they have not seen the actual advice documents sent by the helpline and therefore cannot comment on how the advice has been followed.

Attention is paid to recruiting children's workers safely, but it appears that this does not extend to those who work in non-regulated activities or more informal settings.

Most participants had little or no recall of any discussions about adult safeguarding and the current safeguarding lead reports this has been a weakness.   It appears that people applied the term 'vulnerable adults' to specific groups with additional needs and that there was little awareness that any adult can be vulnerable at times (for instance due to age, illness, disability, mental health issues, life circumstances or past trauma)[18] and that there is a particular need to be sensitive to this in a pastoral setting as pastoral relationships can involve an imbalance of power that is open to misuse unless safe boundaries are observed.

Evidence suggests that the trustees have had no oversight of safeguarding and this is a serious omission.

---

[18] This kind of definition of vulnerable adult is derived from the relevant case law and legislation. See, for example, *SA(vulnerable adult)* [2005] EWHC 2942 (Fam) and s. 5(6) of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004

Apart from those whose reports regarded Steve Timmis' behaviour as abusive, many participants chose not to use the language of abuse even when describing behaviours that appeared to cause harm. It appears that people often found it difficult to distinguish between church discipline that they found acceptable and a possible misuse of authority in the church setting.

TCH is also a registered charity that employs people and runs intern programmes. It appears that the trustees have had no oversight of employment practice or the intern programmes and this is another significant omission. There is now a new draft handbook for employees and a draft grievance procedure (dated 19.9.19). The latter only covers the grievances of employees. It was not clear what advice had been sought regarding creation of these documents. Previously, it appears that there had been no clear pathway for reporting grievances or concerns and many participants explained that there really was nowhere to go.

7. Whether The Crowded House response to the disclosures and allegations has been adequate and protective.

It became clear early in the review process that there was a strong polarisation of views around the content of the CT article and the response of the elders of TCH Sharrowvale, who have faced considerable criticism from both sides of the discourse. It is the opinion of the reviewers that they have borne this with grace and dignity, seeking to navigate the church through difficult waters, whilst recognising that they too must examine their own actions and motives.

7.1. Supporters of Steve Timmis

Those who would describe themselves as strong supporters of Steve Timmis, referred to in this report as Group 1, are not able to reconcile the man described in the CT article with the man they know and love. One person stated, *'The article did not reflect my experience of working with Steve. He's a Godly man. He listened, counselled and advised us – our go-to person'*. They believe it is Steve Timmis who is being victimised and *'tried by social media'* and accuse those who contributed to the CT article of a *'witch hunt'* and *'wanting blood.'* They feel that the Timmis family have not been adequately supported by the church they have served sacrificially over many years and that the elders have acted out of fear with *'a knee-jerk reaction'*. They believe that a process of biblical reconciliation should have been sought in preference to the learning review, and are saddened that there is currently no engagement between Steve and the remaining elders.

However, despite being opposed to the review in principle, those who have engaged with the review team have done so honestly, openly and respectfully and have helped greatly in offering a breadth of experience and perception about Steve Timmis and TCH culture.

7.2. Toxic Culture

At the other end of the spectrum there are those who report having had deeply negative experiences at TCH, of Steve Timmis and in some cases in their interactions with other elders and leaders. Some of these have expressed fear that the remaining elders have been too tarnished by what they describe as the '*toxic*' TCH culture to be trusted. One participant alleged '*the people at the centre of TCH are 'pastorally toxic''*. However, some who had been dismissive of other leaders who they describe as those '*who do Steve Timmis' bidding, colluding, implicated*' expressed a degree of admiration for the current leaders standing up to Timmis, as they recognised it would not have been easy for them to pursue the review in face of vociferous opposition.

7.3. Between the two extremes

Between these two polarised extremes are the majority of people, some of whom are still faithful and committed members of TCH, who had not previously articulated concerns but who stated that the CT article and the following discussions opened the way for them to do so.

By far the majority of participants expressed the belief that the current elders are pursuing the right course, despite in some cases being deeply saddened by the article and the resignation of Steve Timmis, and consider that the time is long overdue for TCH to submit itself to external accountability.   Whilst many spoke about past failures on the part of other elders to stand up to Steve Timmis, the majority reported feeling that following the CT article, the remaining elders have responded well. One past leader commented that it was never easy for young, inexperienced leaders to challenge the founder, adding:

> '*I think they (the current elders) have responded very well. They've tried to retain neutrality whilst acknowledging the seriousness of the allegations. They're in a horrible situation.*'

Another said:

> '*I know xxxx and xxxx, they're really sweet guys but they're not really seen as up front leaders, platform leaders. They're more background guys. I'm really impressed and shocked (in a good way) that they are brave enough to have this review. They obviously want people to participate.*'

These views were reiterated many times over.

7.4. Actions of the Elders

The current Sharrow Vale elders have provided comprehensive documentation that records the conversations, meetings, decisions and communications that took place following the publication of the CT article on 7th February and these offer a clear road map of the journey that the elders followed in the ensuing weeks. Whilst they do not claim that they 'got everything right' the documentation and subsequent interviews demonstrate that they acted in good faith, exercised due diligence and sought advice from outside TCH. This is demonstrated in the summary of key events and communications:

3rd February: Matt Chandler transitioned Steve Timmis from his role as CEO at Acts 29 'for a period of rest and recuperation.'

5th February: Acts 29 made a second statement linking this to accusations of abusive leadership. The language of 'abuse' originated here.

6th February: Elders from across TCH collective and candidate elders met together with Steve Timmis. The record states that they discussed that the issue of people feeling bullied or humiliated by Steve was not new and that someone should be invited to help him understand this better. They also agreed to support Steve and call on Acts 29 to provide evidence of the allegation so that Steve could either refute it or seek reconciliation, as appropriate.

7th February: CT article was published and shone a different spotlight; there were strong allegations focusing on Steve Timmis' activities and relationships at TCH and this changed the narrative and the response. The elders record that they were at the same time 'outraged' by the treatment of Steve in the article but deeply troubled by the stories and were mindful of similar stories that could have been told. They record that on that evening, with a heavy heart, they were in agreement in asking Steve to step down as an elder while an independent review was conducted. Both in the documentation and in interviews the elders acknowledged their own part in how some of these situations had been dealt with. By the end of the day Steve Timmis had resigned as an elder of TCH. He has also resigned from the board of trustees.

8th February: Steve Timmis' son-in-law resigned from eldership, due to the conflict of interest. Steve Timmis advised the remaining elders that he would not participate in any *'investigation'*. The elders of TCH Sharrowvale invited the elders of the other churches in the network to agree a way forward. They resolved to ask someone from outside TCH to explore what had happened and make recommendations. Records state that the Sharrowvale elders visited Steve Timmis asking him to work with them in seeking external advice and input. They recorded that Steve Timmis refused.

9th February: TCH Elders made an announcement to each of the four congregations in TCH Network informing them of Steve Timmis' resignation and the intention to ask for someone outside to explore what has happened and make recommendations. In their statement the elders acknowledged that they also felt the weight of the stories in the CT article stating:

> *It is therefore our intention to ask someone from outside our network to explore what has happened and make recommendations. It will be for that person to shape the process, but we want to listen to all concerned with humility. We are willing to hear where we may have failed people. We recognise the need to open ourselves up to external and impartial scrutiny.*

11th February: Steve Timmis resigned his membership at TCH. The elders stated that they appealed to him to return to the church and walk together through the process ahead.

16th February: The current elders briefed the trustees and agreed to approach thirtyone:eight regarding the potential review. The Sharrowvale elders and John Stevens, National Director of FIEC, spoke to Sharrowvale Church members.

In the days and weeks following, the two remaining Sharrowvale elders bore the brunt of managing the church in crisis, seeking outside support and navigating the polarised opinions that rapidly emerged. In this they were supported by the other elders in the Collective.

- They sought help from John Stevens.
- They were well aware that they faced pressures from those now outside the church who wanted to see action, and from those inside the church who wanted to minimise the allegations. Taking advice from John Stevens they approached the allegations through a safeguarding lens.
- FIEC approached Maurice Kinnaird, a FIEC Pastor, to provide preaching and pastoral support for TCH. He was appointed on 4th March, although due to Covid-19 his support has been largely online.
- The Chair of Trustees advised the Charity Commission of the allegations and of the intention to hold an independent review. They also informed their insurers.
- They sought HR advice regarding TCH employees who were opposed to their actions.

11th March: On the advice of John Stevens, TCH Sharrowvale held a members' meeting to vote on the commissioning of the review. 65 in favour, 7 against, 7 spoiled ballot papers.

12th March: A helpline was launched for those who had been affected.

16th April: The Learning Review was launched.

Summary

The current Sharrowvale elders found themselves in an unenviable position on 7th February. They have been quick to seek advice and support from other elders in the wider TCH network and from external agencies. They have listened carefully and acted on advice and held fast to the principle of an external review, despite some vocal opposition. Although some participants have mixed feelings about the review, the majority have affirmed their decisions and actions.

They are continuing to lead the church, strongly supported by John Stevens and Maurice Kinnaird, through the review process. This is in addition to their respective professional roles. They are also subjecting themselves to the review process. A number of interim staffing arrangements have been put in place, following the resignations of some staff who resigned after the vote in favour of the review.

Prior to the CT article, the elders were considering the appointment of an assistant pastor. The reviewers agree that the appointment of a new pastor of the right experience and spiritual standing who could enable a period of reconciliation and restoration would be a wise priority moving forwards.

8. What additional steps have already been taken to improve The Crowded House's processes, culture, etc to mitigate any risk of repetition of such events or similar?

The immediate response to the removal of Steve Timmis from his CEO role with Acts 29 and the allegations made in the CT article is outlined in detail under point 7. This includes seeking help and advice from external sources such as FIEC, notifying the Charity Commission and commissioning this review.

8.1. Attempts to reach out to Steve Timmis

The reviewers acknowledge that these events will have been deeply distressing for Steve Timmis and his family. They all left TCH following the decision to proceed with this review. It is the view of the current elders that they could have walked alongside Steve Timmis, but that their attempts to raise any issues of character with him, or to hold him to account for his actions, have been resisted. They report that they had initially made repeated attempts to reach out to Steve Timmis in order to express human sympathy and pastoral support. However, they say he expressed the view that the elders had '*not stood with him*' and declined contact with them as long as they continued to pursue the review.

This is understandable, given the history of Steve Timmis' position as founder and leader at TCH and that, following such a rapid sequence of events, any power of influence he had has been suddenly removed and placed in the hands of the much younger men he had brought into his eldership team. Sadly, the trustees have hitherto been disempowered and unable to fulfil their oversight role appropriately and it appears they have been unable to reach out to the Timmis family. Being independent of other church networks apart from Acts 29, some participants raised concerns that Steve Timmis and his family have been left wounded and vulnerable.

8.2. External advice and support

It is significant that the elders are seeking support from outside TCH's network, given the arguably overly-isolationist position of TCH in the past.   This opens the door to bring in a new breadth of Christian experience and wisdom from other mature leaders. Although TCH Sharrowvale had withdrawn from FIEC membership, FIEC has come alongside them in this difficult time. FIEC has introduced the current leaders of TCH Sharrowvale to Maurice Kinnaird, an experienced, independent pastor with pastoral experience in conflict resolution, who is supporting the church through this stage of its life. Maurice is helping with the preaching and supporting the leaders pastorally, although this needs to be done via online links due to the Covid-19 restrictions. He is '*an advisor, a safety check, another voice in the room,*' who has no vested interests.

8.3. Developing a wider network

The current leaders value the support they have received from FIEC and from Maurice Kinnaird and now appreciate the wisdom and support of mature Christians outside the TCH network. They would like to see TCH re-join FIEC but realise FIEC would need to agree to that and they would also want to submit such a suggestion to the wider church membership for discussion.

8.4. Culture Change - the need for listening

Whilst the commissioning of the review has caused some division amongst church members, it has been supported by the majority. It is the view of the current elders and chair of trustees that it has enabled people's voices to be heard and they believe people are now talking more freely to the leaders, expressing their feelings about their experiences of church.

In the light of the many criticisms made about overbearing leadership, the elders are currently attempting to re-navigate the relationship between members and leaders. As part of this process of reconfiguration they are receiving legal advice about the church constitution and the processes of decision-making. They anticipate building in discussion and proper consultation with church members about significant decisions, whilst staying true to their beliefs about the biblical role of elders.

Communication with church members is a big challenge for all churches during the COVID-19 pandemic and TCH leaders are attempting to be open and transparent throughout this review process.

They have responded to comments about the marginalisation of the trustees and the chair of trustees confirms that he is now being included in communications and meetings. This engagement with trustees is long over-due. There is regular communication between the leaders at TCH Sharrowvale and the elders of TCH Union and Peak Trinity.

The elders say they are communicating with overseas missionaries, who have been sent by the various TCH churches and are the joint responsibility of the Collective. They will be asked to express an opinion about which particular church they want to relate to primarily going forward.

8.5. Culture Change – a time for honest reflection

The current elders of TCH Sharrowvale have expressed a willingness to stand down from eldership if this is deemed the appropriate course of action for the future of the church. However, they have been encouraged not to do so before the review is completed and published.

It is a time for honest and painful reflection by those who are or have been part of Steve Timmis' eldership teams and for all those who have helped to perpetuate the negative aspects of TCH culture.

Some of the situations described in the CT article, as well as others, arose before the current elders were in leadership. However, they say that, in their own experience as elders, and in all of the cases referred to in the CT article, Steve Timmis' narrative prevailed and is the one that was acted upon. They report that it was Steve Timmis who controlled the information available to the other elders and any 'pushback' against his view would be strongly resisted; that although lip service was paid to the biblical principle of the plurality of elders, in reality 'consensus decision making' meant that Steve Timmis usually determined decisions and actions himself.

The deepest regrets expressed by the current elders concern their own involvement in leadership decisions taken in the past that have led to people experiencing deep hurt and often leaving the church. They expressed a strong desire for reconciliation, where possible, and blame themselves for being 'too accepting' of the information that was shared with them at elders' meetings.

They have stated that they know they need to apologise to any who have been victims of bullying, manipulation and abuse and to work towards reconciliation.   One of the leaders stated:

> *'With the XXXXs, I went into the conversation with them having already accepted Steve Timmis' narrative. The main issue they were complaining about was the culture of fear and I didn't take this on board. After all of this came out into the open, I apologised unreservedly to them for my part. I had a niggle of conscience about it all along. I spent three hours with them, they were very gracious. I said that I was uncomfortable about the way that Steve was driving things and I accept that my fear of him drove part of it.'*

Other elders and leaders past and present who have participated in this review have said similar things about the way in which they felt they had been too accepting of Steve Timmis' version of events, fearful of challenging and too willing to adopt his position and posture.

The current elders stated that they will be sending a formal apology, to all of those who have felt mistreated or abused by their experiences in the church, saying, *'We're planning to write a letter to all those we know we've hurt. This is really important to us.'*

8.6. Structural Changes within TCH network

Prior to 2020, a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) was set up for the TCH collective and this was originally intended to enable the churches of the collective (TCH Sharrow Vale, TCH Union and Peak Trinity) to share administrative functions such as HR, legal, payroll, and some safeguarding. In theory the two church plants were to be independent, but the reality was different and subsequently the elders of TCH Union and of Peak Trinity had expressed the wish to be more independent. The CT article has accelerated this desire.

Both churches are in the process of setting up their own charitable entities and, although the elders of these churches, and of Grace Church, Boroughbridge still very much believe in working in a partnership, that is likely to be expressed in a less formal way.

8.7. Policy Development, Safeguarding, HR and Finance

8.7.1. Safeguarding

There has been an annual review of the safeguarding policy, although the elders recognise there will be further work needed following the review report. They also recognise that (whilst there should be a trustee with oversight of safeguarding) there is value in having safeguarding officers who are independent of the leadership.   Currently the safeguarding lead is one of the elders and the deputy safeguarding officer has left

the church. Two new assistant safeguarding officers have been appointed with the intention that they will take over the operational role. The elders report that these people have experience of safeguarding in their professional roles. They will need training as new safeguarding leads in a church context. This should include Safeguarding Adults, Pastoral Care and Supporting Survivors of Abuse, Domestic Abuse and Spiritual Abuse/Creating healthy Christian cultures/pastoral malpractice.

8.7.2. HR and Finance

The employment, HR, finance and administration functions that have previously been provided to the collective by the church office will be delegated to the individual churches. An experienced church leader has been appointed to lead on this in the first instance.

Summary

Given the constraints of the lockdown and subsequent restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it is the opinion of the reviewers that the current leaders at TCH have put a number of measures in place that can be built upon following this review. However, they are unable to comment on the ongoing preaching and teaching ministry and pastoral support that has been offered to people during the lockdown.

Attempts were made to engage Steve Timmis in the review process and the reviewers recognise that the leaders feel unable to do any more. It can only be a matter of conjecture as to whether the leaders could have done more to attempt to offer support to the Timmis family.

By seeking outside support so quickly, the current leaders have signalled a cultural change. This will be important if TCH is to be a viable church in the future with demonstrable processes of accountability both externally and internally.

The current elders have expressed regret for their own part in leadership decisions that have caused deep hurt. It will be important for them to take a proactive role in offering genuine apology and seeking reconciliation.

Some work has been done in reviewing safeguarding and HR policies. It is the opinion of the reviewers that these will need a significant overhaul. It would be a useful exercise for the newly appointed safeguarding leads to complete a safeguarding audit to establish a baseline and identify both immediate and longer-term priorities.

The reviewers have sought to address the questions posed in each of the scoping points 1 – 8 above, using the evidence from documentation, written statements and interviews. Inevitably there has been significant overlap between the points and therefore some repetition. The reviewers have highlighted the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that have been described by the participants and some of the key incidents that have been shared.

There are people who have reported only positive experiences, who do not recognise the picture painted in the CT article and are deeply upset by the allegations against Steve Timmis. In contrast, there are those who have used the strong language of abuse found in the article about both Steve Timmis and the wider culture of TCH. However, in relation to the number who have contributed to this learning review, both of these are minority groups.

The majority of participants have used more measured language but nevertheless have shared experiences and reflections that indicate a culture in which people experienced undue pressure to conform to a certain pattern of church life. They consistently reported that:

- those who did not or who were unable to meet those expectations had their Christian faith and commitment called into question
- those who questioned the decisions of leaders were too often branded as rebellious, as sinners, as second-class Christians
- those who struggled with balancing loyalty to TCH with their responsibility to children, parents or even Christian friends outside this close-knit community, perceived that they were being condemned
- that if people left, they were regarded as the ones at fault, the ones who '*did not get the vision*' and that no one went out to look for these '*lost sheep*.'

The reviewers were confronted not just with isolated stories but with a pattern of stories being repeated time and again. Consistent themes in these story patterns were that individuals suffered hurt for which there was no opportunity for healing, Christian fellowship and friendships were deeply damaged and that some suffered a level of harm that has taken or is taking years to recover from.

It is helpful to look again at Oakley and Humphreys' definition of spiritual abuse:

> *Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced*

accountability, censorship of decision-making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts [in this case the Bible] or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.' (p31)

It is beyond the remit of the review team to determine whether any controlling, harmful or abusive behaviour on the part of Steve Timmis or other leaders was intentional. However, there is sufficient evidence for the reviewers to conclude that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the culture at TCH was one in which some instances of emotional and/or psychological abuse took place as a result of persistent coercive and controlling behaviour, in the name of Christian vision and ministry. It is in recognition of the reports of harm done to people over the years, that the current leaders have commissioned this review. There is also the recognition that if TCH is to flourish as a Christian community in the months and years ahead, there are essential lessons to be learned and acted upon.

In Chapter 7 of *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*, Oakley and Humphreys (2019) examine the processes of creating safer cultures and healthier environments. They point out the necessity of everyone working together to ensure the old culture does not re-emerge:

> *Because it is fluid, culture is something that we need to continually assess and keep under review......It is also important that, in a situation where we are seeking to rebuild a culture that has been abusive or toxic, we are alert to the need to challenge any old behaviours that may potentially re-emerge.* (p129)

There needs to be collective vigilance in the future to ensure that old ways, attitudes and behaviour patterns do not re-emerge. Ensuring that safeguarding underpins every aspect of church life and ministry is crucial to developing a healthy church culture in which everyone can flourish.

Listed below are some key lessons that need to be worked through with the whole church community.

9.1. Safeguarding

Thirtyone:eight firmly believes that there is a biblical mandate to safeguard the young and all who may be vulnerable. Churches of all denominations are on a journey to develop and maintain strong safeguarding practices and cultures and this is dealt with more fully under Scoping Point 10.

TCH began as a small house church in 2000. As it has grown over the years it has become both a network of churches and a registered charity. Leaders and trustees are

accountable for developing a culture in which safeguarding is taken seriously and there are policies and procedures in place to safeguard everyone who comes into contact with the church. These policies should not only embrace children and young people, but also take into account; adults who may be vulnerable due to age, illness, disability, mental health issues, life circumstances, or past trauma. They should be applicable to volunteers, interns and employees, leaders and trustees, all those who may have been harmed or who are at risk of harm or those who may pose a risk to others. This is what is recommended in the Charity Commission's guidance.

Whilst there is evidence that the successive safeguarding leads at TCH have ensured that child safeguarding policies and procedures are in place, there is insufficient evidence that the elders or trustees have promoted the development of a strong safeguarding culture more broadly. The testimony of numerous participants indicates that there has been a failure to safeguard adults adequately and that in the interests of 'the vision' and demands for loyalty, genuine concerns have been dismissed and demands for commitment have caused distress to those unable to meet those expectations.

It is the opinion of the reviewers, that all the churches in the TCH network would benefit from completing a safeguarding audit as part of the process of overhauling safeguarding policies and procedures. This would include a review of training needs. All those in any leadership positions should undergo training in relation to safeguarding adults, safeguarding and pastoral care, and in relation to spiritual abuse/creating healthy Christian cultures.

9.2. Leadership and Accountability

All leaders need to lead within frameworks of accountability – to the wider leadership team, to the trustees and to the congregation. Membership or affiliation to a wider umbrella network provides an additional layer of accountability. Many Christian leaders also find it helpful to have a mentor from outside the local church, even from a different Christian tradition. Many participants have reported that these elements have been missing at TCH, noting that members have been held to a high level of accountability to the elders yet, Steve Timmis and other elders did not operate within a transparent accountability framework.

The current leaders at TCH Sharrowvale have demonstrated a willingness to embrace new levels of accountability and it is important that this is continued going forwards. Leaders will need to engage the trust of members so that all can work together to develop a culture of mutual accountability to one another, where it is understood that leaders as well as members have vulnerabilities as well as gifts and talents to offer.

Hitherto, it appears that the those formally appointed as trustees at TCH have been marginalised and, as a result, have not fulfilled their responsibilities as set out by the Charity Commission. Change was already underway prior to February 2020 and TCH is in the process of setting up a new CIO. Originally this was to include TCH Sharrow Vale, TCH Union and Peak Trinity. Since the events of February 2020, TCH Union and Peak Trinity have announced that they will set up separate charities. (Gracechurch, Borough Bridge is already registered separately with the Charity Commission.) Moving forwards there should be a review of the skill set of the board and training for trustees. One member of the board should have oversight of Safeguarding and this should be a standing item on trustees' agendas. The reviewers recommend that members of the board should undergo "safeguarding for trustees" training without delay.

9.3. Recruitment and Management of Staff and Volunteers

There is a section in the Safeguarding Policy on Safer Recruitment which outlines the procedures for recruiting those who work in regulated activity with children and young people or adults with care and support needs. These include role descriptions, application forms, self-declarations, interviews and DBS checks. However, there is no evidence of robust and consistent practice when recruiting people to non-regulated activities. This needs to be addressed in a more comprehensive recruitment policy that is approved by the trustees.

Steve Timmis was not employed by TCH but never had a volunteer role description and was not subject to any regular review process. This situation should not be allowed to develop again in the future. There needs to be a shared understanding of the role and remit of all those who serve the church, including those who do so in an unpaid capacity.

Participants who had been employed by TCH or who had come to Sheffield to be part of the intern programme reported very loose recruitment arrangements as outlined under Scoping Point 6. As a result, people said that often they found they were required to carry out duties and responsibilities that they had not expected. If the intern programme is to be continued, at some time in the future, it would need to do so on a new foundation. There would need to be a very clear programme for interns, and clear criteria for selection to the programme; attention would need to be paid to accommodation and mentoring arrangements; agreements that outline the responsibilities of the intern and of the church towards them would need to be signed ahead of arrival. However, the reviewers recommend that the intern programme is suspended until the church has sufficiently and demonstrably recovered and has the capacity to serve interns well.

9.4. Culture, Identity and Values

For 20 years the identity of TCH has been wrapped up in the identity of its founder, Steve Timmis. The church values have been Steve Timmis' values. The concept of the 'church

on mission' has been at the heart of church life. People have observed that TCH has been more of a mission organisation than a church. It seems clear from many of the testimonies that this has often been at the expense of other aspects of church life and has led to the exclusion of some.

Now is a time for the re-appraisal of the church's identity and values, for finding the balance between God's heart for mission and God's heart for nurture, for discovering the role of the church in supporting the weak and binding up the wounds of the broken.

There is a need for much healing. In order to lay foundations for a healthy future, leaders and members will need to find a way to come together in a true spirit of reconciliation.

It will take time and humility to work together proactively as a Christian community to build a new, healthy culture in which it is apparent to all that:

I. Leaders demonstrate accountability, humility and a readiness to repent and apologise when in the wrong
II. It is safe to ask questions and raise concerns
III. All voices are listened to
IV. It is understood that not everyone can make the same commitment
V. People's Christian witness to their families, friends and in the work-place is valued alongside their contribution to church life
VI. There is a recognition that whilst a statement of faith contains absolutes in terms of the Christian faith, there are also some matters on which scripture is open to different interpretations – in these it is important to learn how to disagree with grace
VII. There is a process for sharing questions, concerns or grievances for employees and volunteers and for church members.

9.5. Pastoral Care

Having listened to many narratives, it is the opinion of the reviewers that pastoral care has not been sufficiently compassionate, either for those struggling to live up to the church's expectations or for those wrestling with mental health issues or past trauma.

Participants' accounts indicate that leaders have failed to recognise that people are able to offer varying levels and types of commitment to the local church at different stages of life. Being a 'whole life disciple' means living for Jesus in the family and in the workplace, amongst friends and neighbours as well as in the local church. Church leaders need to help people discern how and where God is calling them to use their gifts.

A number of participants have also offered their reflections that people who have suffered with anxiety or depression or other significant mental health issues or who may have been traumatised by past events or abuse have not always been treated with sufficient compassion or signposted appropriately to specialist support and care. The

church should be able to recognise when it is appropriate to signpost people to those who can help them best whilst offering to walk prayerfully alongside them on their journey.

A significant change to the culture of the church will be required in order to address these points.

The current elders have reported that prior to February 2020, they had resolved to seek to appoint an assistant pastor.   The appointment of a suitable mature pastor with a track record of pastoral ministry could be a great help to TCH in the immediate future, as the church seeks to reconcile the past and move into a new future.

All those involved in any kind of caring ministry would benefit from training in pastoral care and the associated safeguarding implications.

9.6. Working with Others

Many participants expressed regret that TCH Sharrowvale has been isolated from other Christian communities in the city and had not retained its membership of FIEC. Participants expressed concern that the church had become isolated from other networks apart from the links with Acts 29, a link which some people felt had been detrimental.

The current leaders have now sought and are receiving help from FIEC. They say they hope to apply for membership going forwards.   As stated, the church will need a period of reflection and healing. In the longer-term, informal links with other churches could be mutually beneficial and should be considered.

9.7. Developing Mature Disciples of Christ

Participants reported having a high level of specific direction from leaders about life decisions, stating that this went beyond teaching on biblical principles or offers of counsel or advice about particular situations which are a normal part of pastoral care,. This does not aid the development of people into mature, Spirit-led, reflective disciples but rather creates dependency. Moving forwards, both teaching and pastoral practice should help encourage people as they learn to discern God's guidance and exercise choice with support rather than over-bearing direction from others.

10. What opportunities there are for wider learning for organisations beyond The Crowded House.

10.1. Safeguarding Policy and Practice Lessons

There have been many developments in safeguarding policy and practice over the past twenty years, during the timeframe covered by this Review, and churches of all denominations and persuasions have found it a challenge to keep pace with the rate of change. The safeguarding remit has been extended and expectations of churches and charities have been raised. The many scandals in relation to abuse within faith communities identified within the ongoing IICSA Inquiry[19] have ensured that safeguarding within church settings has remained in the spotlight. Most mainstream denominations are highlighting the need for safeguarding to underpin all areas of church life and ministry. This Review has highlighted a number of learning points for the wider church community.

10.1.1 Safeguarding in church settings

Churches are unique organisations, although they may share some of the same characteristics as other organisations, particularly Christian charities and missions. Churches are driven by faith, vision and passion and they have a role and influence in the lives of their members which can be all embracing. This is both a strength and a potential vulnerability. The quality of church members' relationships with each other is compared in scripture to that of family and has a richness and intensity that, when these relationships are working well in love and harmony, brings joy and intimacy. However, love brings the risk of rejection. When these relationships are damaged, especially if spiritual authority is misused, there is the potential for deep pain and hurt. As in a family, any rupture in these intimate relationships has long term consequences and necessitates a readjustment/transition which can be difficult. Furthermore, the potential impact of damaged relationships within church upon the individual's relationship with God should not be underestimated. If a church were easy to walk away from, one would have to question the depth and substance of the relational bonds. As the Apostle Paul writes, '*if one member of the body hurts, all hurt*'.

Given the particular characteristics of church life, safeguarding people within a church setting has additional dimensions compared with safeguarding within other settings. Roles tend to be more loosely defined, boundaries tend to be less rigorously imposed; church members belong to church whether gathered together in a building for communal worship or scattered in the community on mission; the organisational structure is more fluid. Churches are largely voluntary associations, and most church activities are carried out by people who are not formally employed by the church.

---

[19] Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) – see: www.iicsa.org.uk

Keeping everyone safe in a church setting requires vigilance and sensitivity. Simply observing systems that have been devised with other settings in mind will be insufficient. Churches need safeguarding policies that are adapted to their particular local circumstances and ministries, that are in tune with their particular church culture and that are thoroughly integrated into their theological understanding.

10.1.2 Safeguarding children

Churches first began the safeguarding journey by implementing policies for child protection and the vast majority of churches have had child safeguarding policies in place for over a decade. Understanding of protecting children from harm and abuse has developed over the years within church communities. Research conducted for CCPAS (the former name for thirtyone:eight) in 2009 showed that child safeguarding policies and procedures had become a normal part of church life.

10.1.3 Safeguarding adults

There is less evidence of churches' confidence with regard to policies and procedures for safeguarding adults. In further research commissioned by thirtyone:eight and undertaken by Manchester Metropolitan University in 2014, it was found that a majority of church leaders and safeguarding coordinators lacked confidence when dealing with adult safeguarding issues.

It is the view of the reviewers that this lack of guidance and policy in relation to safeguarding adults has been a contributory factor to the concerns raised about TCH. They hope that the reflection and learning derived from the experiences of individuals who have participated in this review will be of benefit to the wider church community in the UK in underlining the importance of fully integrating the safeguarding of adults into safeguarding policy and practice.

Thirtyone:eight provides child and adult safeguarding training for churches, and trainers observe that churches are beginning to understand the particular vulnerabilities of adults with additional needs for care and support; these include adults with learning difficulties, dementia and various physical difficulties. They are less confident regarding providing pastoral care to people struggling with other mental health issues, addictions and those carrying hurt from the past.

10.1.4 Promoting safeguarding awareness

Ensuring that church cultures are safe and healthy requires more than a safeguarding policy, however comprehensive and diligently applied. It also requires more than training for children's workers and those working with adults with additional care and support needs. Protecting people from the risk of harm as a result of the church's actions, and remaining alert to the risk of abuse, including the abuse of trust and the misuse of spiritual authority, is a priority for everyone, especially church leaders and trustees. The church's teaching programme in small groups as well as in its gathered

congregation, needs to make reference to safeguarding, and theological reflection within the wider Christian community can enrich the church's preaching and teaching. The church safeguarding team needs to be publicly recognised and prayed for by the church at large and safeguarding within the wider community (teachers, social workers, health professionals etc) seen as an important and honourable calling.

10.1.5 Safeguarding and leadership

Many of the recommendations of this review relate to leadership, because this is where the evidence indicates some critical safeguarding failings at TCH. If church leaders do not see safeguarding as a priority and fail to model best practice about safeguarding in their own ministry and through pastoral care, then the church safeguarding policy is unlikely to influence the church culture effectively.

The trustees' safeguarding lead has a critical role to play in promoting a strong safeguarding culture, along with the leadership team and the church safeguarding coordinator. Safeguarding needs a team approach if it is to be a whole church priority. One of the major failings within TCH has been a disconnect between trustees and other church leaders. There has been a lack of independence and authority for those appointed as trustees as distinct from the spiritual and executive leadership of the church. Within different church traditions there will be different models of leadership and governance, but the distinction between the governance role and the operational role of church staff and volunteers is crucial, so that trustees properly oversee safeguarding in the way envisaged by the latest guidance from the Charity Commission.

10.1.6 Safeguarding employees and volunteers

Because of the nature of church as an informal, grass roots community organisation, it may lack the sort of human resources infrastructure and expertise common to larger organisations and, because much of the work is done by volunteers rather than employed staff, the protections available to staff and volunteers working in church settings may be not be spelt out formally as they would be, for example, in an employment contract. Similarly, the induction, support, supervision and on the job training that should be available to people doing a difficult job, may be in short supply in the church. However, some sort of baseline human resources policies and processes are required for the church to be sustainable and to protect employees and volunteers themselves as well as the wider church membership. If recruitment of leaders and staff are all done by the minister/senior leader then there are no safeguards against favouritism or nepotism and there is a risk that one individual will exercise an unhealthy and overly controlling influence over the whole community. When one powerful individual exercises undue control over the other leaders and staff and volunteers, the potential for the misuse of authority is considerable and the need for an independent complaints or grievance process even more pressing.

10.2 Creating and maintaining a safe and healthy church culture

This final section of the report examines learning for the wider church about creating and maintaining a safe and healthy church culture. A more detailed exploration of creating and maintaining safe, healthy Christian cultures can be found with 'Escaping the maze of spiritual abuse: creating healthy Christian cultures' (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019, p127-151).

All those who participated in this review willingly and graciously gave their time to talk about their experiences of church life. Their involvement in a church community that brought them experiences of shared life was clearly valued very highly. Being part of a church clearly mattered to them and they wanted lessons to be learned about how to '*do church*' in a way that brings fulfilment, gives a sense of belonging and fulfils Christ's mission for the church. Even amongst those who described themselves as having been harmed relationally, psychologically and spiritually, by experiences in TCH, most retained their belief that belonging to a community of God's people was something to be cherished. Their disappointment in feeling that they could no longer stay within a particular local church produced a sense of loss and deep regret. Although this did not appear, in most cases, to lead to disillusion with the church in general, there were some who struggled to connect with church again and some who found it very difficult to experience God's grace.

Churches are called to be inclusive and welcoming to all, within a biblical framework of what it means to belong to the church, but they are voluntary associations that people elect to join or to leave. There are many reasons why people who have been actively involved in a particular local church, decide that it's time for them to move on. The experiences described by those participating in this review show how, for some, this transition was extremely difficult and painful. Churches need to consider what they can do to help people to 'leave well'.

10.2.1 Leadership Accountability

Leadership is crucially important in any organisation and founders /innovators/church planters play a unique role in pioneering new projects and organisations. These individuals are often charismatic and gifted leaders, having a powerful personal presence which often attracts other young and emerging leaders. The skills required for the long haul involved in growing a church that is viable and resilient and that survives into the next generation after the departure of the founder, are different. These skills are to do with sustainability as well as mission and, for any organisation to outlast its charismatic founder, it needs policies and procedures, routines and administration. It also needs more than one leader. It needs a plurality of leadership with different gifts and ministries.

After the initial church planting phase, when often there may only be one pioneer leader, New Testament models of church appear to assume a plurality of leaders. This conforms to the biblical teaching about the '*diversity of spiritual gifts*' and the recognition that no one individual possesses all the talents required to build and nurture a growing church. In addition to completing the skillset required for growing a healthy church, a plurality of leaders provides a significant check on the decision-making power of any one individual. There may be a senior leader, but this person needs to be accountable to their peers as well as to the church members. For the minister or senior leader, it may require humility to seek the counsel of the other leaders, particularly if he or she has appointed them. However, this commitment to make oneself accountable to fellow leaders and the church membership at large is an important aspect of Christian, servant leadership.

Churches that belong to denominations, or structured networks, have additional sources of accountability for leaders which may be more, or less, formal depending on the church tradition. Independent churches can be vulnerable, particularly in times of transition, if they do not have any readily identifiable source of outside accountability and support. There are, however, parachurch organisations that can help and church leaders can deliberately seek out experienced and trusted colleagues from other churches to confide in and make themselves accountable to.

Most churches now are also registered charities, and this adds another layer of accountability, which has become increasingly explicit in recent years. Charity trustees are responsible for all the activities carried out by the charity and church leaders and staff, whether employed or volunteers, should be accountable to the trustees. The safeguarding aspect of the role of trustees, as outlined earlier in this report, has been given greater prominence in recent guidance from the Charity Commission. It is essential that this responsibility and accountability is fully embraced by all those in charity leadership.

10.2.2 Structural Clarity and Transparent Decision Making

Although some churches may deliberately aim to be non-hierarchical and egalitarian in nature, the church, in common with any other organisation, needs a structure and agreed ways of making decisions and exercising control. In the absence of a stable structure and agreed ways of making decisions and rules concerning the way the organisation works, no organisation could survive beyond one generation. These agreed rules and procedures may not need to be as extensive or as detailed as those in business or commercial organisations, but they need to be clearly understood by members and leaders alike.

Where churches lack clear and transparent ways of making decisions, power may be exercised by leaders or by members in a way that is manipulative and unethical. Power should be distributed rather than being concentrated in one or two influential people or a family dynasty. Neither church leaders nor members are immune from seeking

disproportionate power and influence and can conveniently claim that they have wisdom and experience and '*know the mind of the Lord.*' Checks and balances need to be in place to minimise such a misuse of power and the potential for abuse. Part of the role of trustees is to implement good governance practices, and in particular that those who have executive or operational power are held to account. Some trustees of churches conclude that the same individual should not be both chair of trustees and senior minister or overall spiritual leader. The risk of combining these roles is that independent oversight by the trustees is compromised such that there are minimal effective checks on executive power.

10.2.3 Mission and Pastoral Care

A church is not just a mission agency. Mission and making new disciples is certainly a central element in the church's purpose, but it is one facet of the church's ministry. The church must also nurture and train disciples and bind up the wounds of those who have been damaged in the storms of life, so that they can grow into mature men and women of God.

Christians who ignore their own emotional, material and spiritual needs and those of their families for the sake of mission, too often burn out and find out too late that they have neglected to nurture their marriages and their children. Then the good news they offer may not sound like such good news to those they are trying to reach.

Church members experience different seasons in their spiritual lives, some seasons of energetic activity and other seasons of waiting on God, times of sacrificial service and times of rest and refreshment. Wise church leaders understand that members' availability to do God's work is likely to vary according to their stage of life, to physical health and to family and work commitments. Leaders need to respect Jesus' call to learn '*the unforced rhythms of grace*' (Matthew 11, The Message Translation).

Pastoral care is an equally important facet of the church's ministry, care and support for church members in the ups and downs of their daily lives and for members of the wider community. There needs to be a balance in the church's teaching and preaching between challenge and support, between calls to service and calls to rest in God grace.

10.2.4 Followers of Jesus first

There is a mutuality at the heart of the Christian gospel; whether leader or member, we are all followers of Jesus first. We are members of one body. The images of the church presented in the New Testament are all pictures that emphasise mutuality and inter-dependence. There are different members with different gifts and these gifts are imparted by the Holy Spirit for the common good. When people are given roles in church life and appointed to positions, whether paid or not, these roles, however humble or exalted they may appear to others, are of equal importance and significance. A platform leader is no more important or beyond criticism than any other Christian, he or she is still no more than a disciple of Jesus, as frail and fallible as

anyone else. To use biblical language, the shepherd is still a member of the flock and under the pastoral care of the Good Shepherd.

If leaders are given, or take upon themselves, celebrity status, they and their followers are in a dangerous place, and if churches are lauded as being exemplary, or exceptional, within the wider Christian community, they may lose sight of an essential truth about their identity. As the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the church at Corinth:

> *Brothers think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things- and the things that are not- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him...*

A Christian leader is, first and foremost, a follower of Jesus and churches are, first and foremost, communities of God's people following Jesus together. In a very poignant interview with a former leader of TCH, his final comment, reflecting on the pain and turmoil that he perceived the church has been going though, was, '*I think that TCH needs to view itself as an ordinary church.*'

10.2.5 The Importance of Character

Biblical teaching on the qualities required of church leaders, whether their role is primarily practical or spiritual, majors on character. Character flaws in leaders can do tremendous damage and any amount of natural gifting or ability cannot compensate for deficits in character.

Kindness, gentleness and humility are often underestimated as virtues in a thrusting, urgent world where the desire to get things done can ride roughshod over the needs of the vulnerable. When these distinctively Christian virtues are more apparent among Christian leaders, then the likelihood of people being hurt by oppressive and overbearing leadership in churches is diminished.

10.2.6 Protection of the vulnerable

Thirtyone:eight's name derives from the mandate we take from the words in Proverbs 31v8: "*Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.*" We believe that God cares about all those who are vulnerable and therefore His people should do so too. Church should be a safe place where all people are welcomed and helped to thrive, and even people who have experienced harm are protected and can find hope and strength for healing.

The church culture at TCH failed to provide for protection of the vulnerable in a number of key areas outlined in this report. Perhaps, as more than one of the participants

commented, the vision became more important than the people. Perhaps the urgent desire to press forward in missional engagement with the community compromised the pastoral care and support afforded to those within the church who were struggling. Perhaps 'doing church' became more important than 'being church'.

Further features of a safe and healthy church culture are outlined in *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*, Oakley and Humphreys (2019) and these may be helpful for church leaders seeking to help their churches to develop and maintain a safe and healthy church culture. These hallmarks of a safe and healthy church culture are generic in nature and will need to be applied to the particular circumstances of each local church within the context of their tradition. What a safe and healthy church looks like will vary but some of the key hallmarks are:

- Respects, values and nurtures each person
- Allows questions and calm disagreement
- Guides and empowers through biblical teaching
- Guides behaviour whilst respecting choice
- Nurturing and nurtured leadership
- Values 'whole life' service
- Healthy accountability
- Models inclusion

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The review team and thirtyone:eight wish to thank everyone who has contributed to this learning review. The period since February 2020 has been extremely difficult for past and present members and leaders of TCH. The language used in the CT article and the events that followed its publication were shocking and deeply painful for many. Opinions quickly polarised regarding the validity of the allegations made in the article and the motives of those who contributed to it. At the time of the interviews, many participants were still trying to process the implications of all that had been alleged. The decision by the current leaders of TCH Sharrowvale to instigate this learning review was not an easy one as it caused further pain and division. Nevertheless, many participants, whilst saddened by the article, felt that it had been a necessary catalyst and supported the decision to hold the learning review.

Throughout the review process, the reviewers have also been mindful of Steve Timmis and his family. He has chosen not to participate in the review. Without his own narrative, the review team have had to rely on documents supplied and on the testimonies of others. In compiling this report, they have sought to demonstrate that

there have been a range of experiences and perceptions in relation to both Steve Timmis and TCH.

The reviewers have sought to honour all of those who have spoken either in their written statements or through interviews, recognising that many, including those who spoke to CT, have spoken from a place of pain. It has taken courage for some people to tell their stories and where these have been referred to in the report the intention has been as far as possible to preserve people's anonymity. There are further stories, just as important, that have not been referenced in the report, partly in order to avoid repetition and in some cases to protect the identities of the people concerned. Nevertheless, these stories have been heard and have helped to shape the report and its conclusions. The contribution of every single participant has been of value to the review, as together all these stories have brought a breadth of perspective, and together have ensured that consistent themes and learning have emerged.

It is clear from the evidence included within this review that there are a number of lessons to be learned from the past events taking place within TCH. The review team has sought to present the findings from this evidence fairly, openly and comprehensively in order to inform the learning process. These are now distilled into a range of recommendations that follow.

Recommendations

Following the publication of this report, there will need to be a time for people to assimilate the findings and their implications and the current leaders and trustees at TCH will need to consider how best to respond to all who may be affected. Thirtyone:eight will be available to offer further support and advice if required. FIEC and Maurice Kinnaird have already offered wise counsel and pastoral support and the reviewers recommend that they are invited to continue in this role in the immediate future. Trustees should advise the Charity Commission of the outcome of this review along with their plan to address the recommendations. The reviewers offer the following recommendations, fully aware that a change in culture is needed for them to be followed through.

1.TCH needs to become a 'listening church'

It is clear that in the past people have been prevented from asking questions and telling their stories. Experiences of hurt, harm or abuse have been minimised. For some participants, speaking to the review team was their first opportunity to tell their story fully. They may need to tell it again and this is likely to be yet more painful for them. Leaders and trustees may need to be available to listen without judgment.   This

may also be a painful process and they themselves may need to seek support outside. Some members, former members and leaders may need to seek professional counselling. This should not be seen as a sign of weakness or of departing from biblical principles but rather as a way of helping people to process difficult and painful events in order to find healing through the grace of God.

2. People should not be pressured into forgiveness

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian gospel. It is right to ask for forgiveness when one has caused hurt, been complicit in or turned a blind eye to others' hurts. However, it is not right to expect instant and unconditional forgiveness in return, and no one should be pressurised into forgiving those who have wittingly or unwittingly coerced or controlled them. God, by His Spirit, brings people to a place of forgiveness and it is important to understand that this can take time.

3. Leadership

It is important to remember that past and present leaders/elders across the whole TCH network are themselves subjects of this review and are having to process the findings and ask themselves some searching questions. The current elders at TCH Sharrowvale have responded in the best way that they have been able to in the face of considerable criticism. They need time and space to discern before God his purpose for them moving forwards from the review. In the meantime, they are seeking wise counsel from mature Christian leaders and this could benefit the whole congregation. The proposed appointment of a mature and godly person as a pastor, albeit for an interim period, could be timely and helpful to the church as it heals and seeks to review its vision. Leaders who are now leading other churches in the network need to continue to reflect on the impact of the TCH culture on their own leadership style and work to build the safest possible cultures in their own churches.

4. Accountability

A lack of accountability has been one of the overarching themes of this review. It was the single most significant factor in creating a climate in which nothing could be questioned. The current leaders of TCH have now made it clear they are willing to accept guidance from external sources. However, safeguards will be needed to ensure that various levels of accountability are put in place for the future, to ensure that old patterns do not re-emerge. This should include:

i. A genuine plurality of leaders
ii. Accountability to trustees
iii. Some framework of formal external accountability

5. Governance

It is important that trustees are now accorded their proper role as an oversight body and that they step into this. This should include:

  i.   A review of the skill set of trustees. Recruitment of new trustees to address any deficits should be considered.
  ii. Trustees should undertake specialist training relating to their responsibilities particularly for oversight of safeguarding and all employment related issues.[20]
  iii. A clear and documented understanding of the roles and responsibilities of those who are the trustees of the church.
  iv. A clear and documented framework for the trustees to be able to support church leaders but also to hold them to account.
  v.   One trustee should have an oversight of safeguarding and will need appropriate training.
  vi. A timetable for trustees' meetings through the year and safeguarding should be a standard agenda item, along with financial reviews.
  vii. The development of a comprehensive risk register, which appears to be missing currently. Guidance and templates are available on the Charity Commission website.

6.Safeguarding Policies and Procedures

It is important that all those in positions of leadership are champions for safeguarding and seek to ensure this is integral to every aspect of church life and ministry, both formal and informal and both in principle and in practice. The current leaders at TCH have recognised the value of appointing at least one designated safeguarding lead who is independent of the eldership and have appointed two trainee safeguarding leads who have safeguarding experience in other settings. This should include:

  i.   Training for new safeguarding leads to equip them for the specific challenges of safeguarding in a church setting. They should be publicly commissioned.
  ii. Further training for safeguarding leads and all those in leadership positions, particularly in relation to safeguarding adults, pastoral care and supporting survivors of abuse, domestic abuse and spiritual abuse/creating healthy Christian cultures/pastoral malpractice.
  iii. An overhaul of safeguarding policies, to include a comprehensive audit of safeguarding arrangements. This will raise awareness of expected standards and identify priorities that need to be acted upon.

---

[20]The Essential Trustee: what you need to know, what you need to do.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/866947/CC3_feb20.pdf

iv. The development of a new Safer Recruitment Policy that covers all paid and volunteer roles.

7. Recruitment and Management of Staff and Volunteers

TCH needs to build on the good practice in place for the recruitment of workers with children, young people and adults with specific care needs. A consistent process needs to be followed when recruiting to all roles, irrespective of whether they are eligible for a DBS check.   This prevents friends or family members slipping into roles as a matter of convenience and avoids any appearance of favouritism, bias or decisions being discussed and made outside the formal arrangements. A sound process should include:

i. A role description and a person specification
ii. A written advertisement of the vacancy
iii. An application form (or volunteer form)
iv. Taking up of references
v. A face to face interview (or potentially less formal conversation in the case of volunteers)
vi. A self-declaration-form and a DBS criminal records check if appropriate
vii. A contract of employment or a volunteering agreement, including arrangements for line management and/or oversight of the role.
viii. Following appointment there should be an induction and the person should have a review after three months.
ix. Where the role involves working with the young or vulnerable groups safeguarding training should take place as soon as possible

8. Reporting concerns, allegations and grievances

A constant refrain during the interviews was that people felt they had nowhere to go to raise concerns or grievances or report allegations. Attempts to do so were brushed aside or explained away. This has to be addressed if people's trust is to be restored and for the church to heal. This would be an opportunity to re-write the current narrative and embed improved messaging that contributes towards a safer, healthier Christian culture.

i. Safeguarding concerns or Allegations

The whole congregation should be made aware of the new safeguarding leads and that, in the first instance, concerns or allegations of a safeguarding nature should be reported to those safeguarding leads. The safeguarding leads can seek further advice and support from the thirtyone:eight helpline.

ii. Grievances, Public Interest Disclosures, Bullying/Harassment.

TCH produced a draft Grievance Policy for employees in 2019, but it does not appear to have been finalised. It is not clear how this was formulated, and the reviewers recommend external scrutiny of this before it is approved. A wider or separate complaints mechanism should also be considered. The draft policy is aimed at employees only (which is not unusual), but volunteers and members who are not employees need to know who they can go to with honest questions and concerns. In the immediate future, this may need to involve someone outside in addition to TCH leaders.

There appears to be no Whistleblowing Policy, through which more serious concerns could be raised. The reviewers recommend that one is introduced. A wider or separate mechanism should also be considered for volunteers and members who are not employees.

There appears to be no policy through which concerns of bullying or harassment can be raised and addressed. The reviewers recommend that one is introduced. A wider or separate mechanism should also be considered for volunteers and members who are not employees.

9. Pastoral Care

Concerns about the TCH approach to pastoral care has been a further recurring theme throughout this review. It is the opinion of the reviewers that these concerns have been justified and that there are two main areas needing attention in the realm of Christian pastoral care that will involve a cultural shift.

i. **Valuing, supporting and nurturing those who offer differing levels of commitment to the church as an organisation**.

Leaders need to recognise that at different stages of life, people offer varying levels and types of commitment to the local church. Being a 'whole life disciple' means living for Jesus in the family and in the workplace, amongst friends and neighbours as well as in the local church. Members should be helped to discern their gifts and ministries and how to use these, both within and outside the church. When people are navigating difficulties in their lives they should be confident that those responsible for pastoral care will uphold them in prayer and walk alongside them as they seek to find God in challenging circumstances.

ii. **Recognising the limits of competency when offering pastoral care.**

People who suffer with significant mental health issues or who have been traumatised by past events or abuse may need specialist support and care. The church should be able to recognise when it is appropriate to signpost people to

those who can help them best whilst offering to walk prayerfully alongside them on their journey.

Concluding Remarks

Not everyone will agree with all the conclusions and recommendations of this report. In writing it, the reviewers have endeavoured to balance the opposing narratives and perspectives without compromising the need to report the hurt that many have experienced. For some people there are parts of the report that will be hard to read. It is the hope and prayer of the review team that as people digest and process what has been written, they will find the God of all grace walking beside them.

It is also the hope of the review team that all those who have been affected by events that have taken place at The Crowded House will find healing. For the those who are still part of one of the TCH network churches and particularly TCH Sharrowvale, the challenge will be to move forwards as a Christian community and embrace a new culture.

Thirtyone:eight's vision is for the church to be the safest of places; where everyone may grow as mature and whole disciples of Christ. It is from this place of wholeness that the church can most effectively reach out to a broken world.

The review team affirm their thanks once again to all who have contributed to this review.

Helen Gilbert
Bill Stone
October 2020

Anyone who has been affected by the events that led to this review may find the following links helpful:

Thirtyone:eight Helpline: 0303 003 1111
Quoting: 'The Crowded House'

Minister & Clergy Sexual Abuse Service (MACSAS)
http://www.macsas.org.uk

National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)
https://napac.org.uk

The Survivors Trust
https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org

Samaritans
https://www.samaritans.org / or by phone on 116 123

British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)
https://www.bacp.co.uk

Association of Christian Counsellors (ACC)
https://www.acc-uk.org

Call us   **0303 003 1111**
email us   **info@thirtyoneeight.org**
or visit   **thirtyoneeight.org**

thirtyone:
eight

Creating safer places. Together.