

Briefing Sheet on Safeguarding and Character References

This factsheet has been produced to provide further information about character references and the potential safeguarding impact when they are provided by individuals with reference to the Methodist Church or acting on behalf of the Church.

1. What is a character reference?

A character reference is a statement in which a person with knowledge of another, provides comment about their personality or behaviour. This is likely to include drawing conclusions about their disposition or presentation. This is different from an ordinary request for a statement of fact, such as when a police officer takes a statement to evidence a crime. The defining difference is that between known fact of circumstances and personal judgement of character.

2. When could I receive a request to provide a character reference?

In the majority of cases, defence solicitors will be seeking character statements to try to provide evidence of good character. The aim is to balance the prosecution case in court or to influence sentencing if the person has already been found guilty.

However, you may be called to provide character references for employment tribunals, immigration processes (e.g. applications for citizenship or right to remain in the UK) or in relation to employment matters or proceedings. Some parties have also been requested to provide character references during meetings with statutory agencies such as social care relating to safeguarding adults and children.

3. Why are character references so sensitive in safeguarding concerns?

a) The impact on survivors

The desire to stand by those who have long association with the Church and are known personally to congregations can be a strong call to action. However, survivors should be able to expect that the Church stands by them in public and private. The words and actions of the Church should clearly acknowledge the impact of abuse on survivors and condemn those acts, rather than seeking to counter balance what has been suffered and minimize the impact of the application of justice. Many survivors in congregations feel unable or do not wish to publicly share the harm they have suffered. They may suffer further pain and isolation if character references are made by those connected to the Church in a public arena, which seek to present those who are alleged to have carried out abuse in a positive light.

b) The impact on the individual giving the statement

While character statements are given with the best of intentions, they are often not based on fact and may over-emphasise positive attributes or behaviours. These comments may not be born out by very limited interaction with the subject of the statement. Those who give character references should expect that they might be called to provide further detail in court or other environments to evidence what they have said. They may also expect an impact on their personal credibility if they have made public judgements about character, which are later found to be contrary to the known facts. The evidence of someone connected to the Methodist Church might be given greater weight due to the moral expectations of the public. Great care should be given in providing any public statement of this nature.

c) The impact on the congregation

The Past Cases Review identified many cases where congregations were torn apart or people damaged by failing to apply appropriate respectful uncertainty to circumstances where safeguarding allegations are made. Where a crusade to support an individual goes beyond appropriate pastoral support, divided opinions may damage communities and isolate individuals. The provision of character references can play a part in this.

d) The impact on the Methodist Church

Those who have recently viewed the BBC's series on the Peter Ball case in the Church of England will be aware of the reputational damage to the Church and the monarchy that is likely to result in over-optimistic statements being made about the character of those facing abuse allegations. The perception of survivors and the wider public is that the Establishment supported abusers and colluded to avoid the scrutiny of public authorities. While welcoming everyone and making provision for those who may present a safeguarding risk, the Methodist Church condemns abuse and recognizes the devastating impact that may be suffered by survivors who are harmed by engagement in church activities. The provision of character statements can risk diluting this message and counter the efforts of all in the Church to build trust and confidence.

4. What should I do if someone asks or suggests that I should give a character reference linked to my knowledge of someone through the Methodist Church that may be relevant to safeguarding concern?

- Clearly define with the person requesting you to provide a character reference what they expect of you and whether this is as a representative of the Methodist Church. Find out whether it may be linked to formal proceedings, attendance at a meeting or the submission of a written report. Confirm whether they are seeking a factual account of circumstances e.g. someone's attendance at church or your personal judgement. Avoid agreeing your involvement before you have taken further advice.
- Always contact your District Safeguarding Officer as soon as possible, regardless of who has made the request. They will be able to provide guidance about current policy and procedures and give support. They will also be able to help you explain the Methodist Church's policy on character references.

The Safeguarding Policy, Procedures and Guidance for the Methodist Church (2019) notes that the lay office holders, employees or ministers should only give character statements in exceptional circumstances and then only with the input of the DSO and/or lay employment adviser (where applicable).

While members who are not office holders, employees or ministers may make personal decisions about the provision of character statements in a personal capacity, they are advised not to do and to take guidance from the DSO. It is important that careful consideration be given to the potential impact to themselves and others before taking action. If giving a statement in a

personal capacity, it should be clearly stated in the statement that it does not represent the opinion of the Church and is done so in a personal capacity only.

The Church will always work in partnership with statutory agencies to support safeguarding processes. The information provided in this document does not affect those situations where a party connected to the Church is legally required to provide information or attend proceedings in order to confirm a factual account.