



Independent Investigation of St Thomas Philadelphia Church in respect of a complaint by MD.



Final Report

30 November 2023

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Barnardo's Training and Consultancy

This report has been moderated by Julie Dugdale, Head of Business,
Barnardo's Training and Consultancy

Key

	<i>Individual contributors and/or people relevant to investigation</i>
Complainant	MD
Diocese of Sheffield	Bishop of Sheffield: Archdeacon Diocesan Safeguarding Advisor (DSA 3)
	 Safeguarding Officer
Network Church Sheffield Operating name of The Philadelphia Network Ltd ¹	Trustee.
St Thomas Philadelphia Church	C1 – C13
Contributors:	C1, C3 and C4 C14- C26

¹ *This is a Christian Church with Anglican, Baptist, and Free Church expression, operating from St Thomas Church Philadelphia and the Kings Centre in Sheffield.*

Important Notes

- i. Linda Richardson and Jane Sarre, both Safeguarding Consultants with Barnardo's, undertook this investigation and took the decision to use pronouns such as 'we' and 'us' throughout this report, for ease of reading.
- ii. The words and labels used in our society to describe people can have a powerful impact. Language about sexual orientation and gender identity has continued to develop as the visibility and awareness of different sections of the LGBTQ+ community has increased in recent years. We acknowledge the importance of being sensitive to these social changes and have tried to use the term LGBTQ+ throughout this report even though this term was not commonly used at the time to which this investigation refers. Where the term 'gay' is used, this reflects the conversations we have had with others or is a term used in documents or records we have accessed.
- iii. It is important to note that this investigation is not a forensic enquiry or an investigation into the practice of conversion therapy. The terms of reference for this investigation relate solely to MD's experiences and are set out in full in Appendix 1. MD's complaint contains 4 aspects:
 - a. In 2014 an invitation to attend the second year of the church's internship course [FORM] at St Thomas Philadelphia was not extended to him and in 2015 he was forced to step down from volunteering with the student leadership team at the church, after stating he was considering dating as a gay man.
 - b. In 2014 he experienced prayer ministry, which he considers to be an exorcism, and which attempted to change his sexual orientation from gay to straight.
 - c. In late 2015 he was given an ultimatum to either stop discussing his theological position on LGBTQ+ matters or step down from the student leadership team.
 - d. MD was not welcomed at the church after his removal from student leadership team.
- iv. The word 'orthodox' is a contested term when it comes to issues of human sexuality. 'The Church at the heart of this investigation designates its position as 'Orthodox' and 'Evangelical', by which they mean that they have a conservative or traditional perspective on same sex relationships. We have chosen to adopt this designation in the report but acknowledge that other churches and individuals will describe themselves as 'Orthodox' and/or 'Evangelical' but have a different perspective on same sex relationships and some other areas of theology and practice.

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the individuals who contributed voluntarily to this investigation and shared with us their views and experiences; their shared insights and reflections helped us gain a better understanding of the culture and practice in St Thomas Philadelphia Church between 2013 and 2016, the period to which this investigation refers. Thanks should also be extended to those individuals who made contact with us to explain why it was or remained difficult for them to contribute.

Structure of report

This report has been anonymised. Apart from references to those individuals holding current leadership roles in both Sheffield Diocese (**'the Diocese'**) and St. Thomas Church Philadelphia (**'the Church'**), all personal details or identifying features relating to individuals who have contributed to this investigation have been omitted. Where references are made to some individuals, they have been given an opportunity to comment on these and their views and comments where these have been made have been taken into consideration when finalising this report.

There are seven sections within the body of the report and a final section which provides a response from MD, the Church and the Diocese to the findings and recommendations.

Section 1 provides a brief introduction to the Church and its relationship to the Diocese of Sheffield and the Yorkshire Baptist Association.

Section 2 describes the detail of the complaint and the responses of both the Church and the Diocese to that complaint.

Section 3 provides background detail to the commissioning of this investigation including the terms of reference and the methodology adopted.

Section 4: explains the challenges and factors that were considered in undertaking this investigation.

Section 5 offers a brief description of the culture and practice in the Church between 2013 and 2016 and provides the context in which this complaint was made.

Section 6 presents the findings from the investigation in relation to each of the four aspects of the Complaint.

Section 7 provides some concluding comments.

Annexe 1: provides a chronology of events as understood by the investigation team.

There are five appendices:

- Appendix 1** Terms of Reference and Process
- Appendix 2** The Church's Theological Position on Human Sexuality, December 2021
- Appendix 3** Documents seen by the Investigation Team.
- Appendix 4** Information about Barnardo's Training and Consultancy
- Appendix 5** The Investigation Team

1. Introduction

1. Barnardo's was commissioned in early 2022 to undertake an independent investigation into a complaint made by MD. The complainant alleged he was discriminated against by the Church because of his sexuality and that he had been subject to a form of exorcism² in 2014 in an attempt to change his sexual orientation.
2. The Philadelphia Network Limited, known locally as Network Church Sheffield ('NCS') is a Christian Church with Anglican, Baptist, and Free Church³ expression; it is a charity registered in England and Wales and operates from two sites, the Kings Centre, and St Thomas Philadelphia church. The aim of NCS is to share the gospel through the movement of missionary disciples, working in communities with vulnerable adults, students, youth, and children's groups in and around Sheffield.⁴
3. NCS is part of the Yorkshire Baptist Association and the Diocese of Sheffield, and although there have been moves and intentions in the past to strengthen and formalise partnership arrangements between all three denominations, there is no Local Ecumenical Partnership⁵ currently in place. We were told however, by all parties, that the Church adopted and worked to Diocesan safeguarding policies and procedures.
4. The Church currently has around 25 employees, and over 300 volunteers, eight of whom are Trustees and who provide managerial oversight of the Charity. MD was a volunteer with the Church between 2013 and 2016.
5. We were told that until 2019, the Church offered young adults an intern opportunity called FORM which was managed and led by [REDACTED]. The two-year programme included teaching on discipleship, regular weekly sessions learning to listen and respond to God and regular mentoring by [REDACTED] to develop and practise leadership skills for application in the Church. If having successfully completed the first year, a number of students would be invited to join FORM2 during the next academic year, where there was an even greater focus on preparing interns for leadership roles in the Church.

² See Appendix 3 for explanation of terms used.

³ A free church is the title given to religious bodies which are not part of the Church of England or Catholic Church.

⁴ Charity Commission Register Charity Number 1134973

⁵ In https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England_and_Wales, a local ecumenical partnership (or LEP) is a formal and legal arrangement to develop unity between churches of different denominations.

2. The Complaint

6. In November 2019, MD submitted a formal complaint to the Church and to the Bishop of Sheffield which alleged that:
 - a. In 2014 an invitation to attend the second year of the church's internship course [FORM] at St Thomas Philadelphia was not extended to him and in 2015 he was forced to step down from volunteering with the student leadership team at the church, after stating he was considering dating as a gay man.
 - b. In 2014 he experienced prayer ministry, which he considers to be an exorcism, and which attempted to change his sexual orientation from gay to straight.
 - c. In late 2015 he was given an ultimatum to either stop discussing his theological position on LGBTQ+ matters or step down from the student leadership team.
 - d. MD was not welcomed at the church after his removal from student leadership team.

MD's desired outcome

7. MD requested an apology from the Church and an assurance that further work would be undertaken to ensure that no other gay person would be subject to the exorcism-style prayer ministry that he had experienced in 2014, which delivered to rid him of demons. MD also asked the Church to be more transparent about the barriers in place which would prevent some adults from holding leadership positions roles and requested the Church consider how LGBTQ+ Christians could be better supported within the Church. MD also asked for restitution, including for example '*a substantial donation to a LGBT+ charity of MD's choosing, an offer of funding for external counselling for those who have been affected*' [by the Church's position] *or other suitable action of restitution.*'

The Response by the Church to the Complaint

8. Following receipt of the complaint in November 2019, we were informed that the Church had contacted local solicitors who had a specialist team supporting charities. We were told ██████ that the advice given was that the Church should undertake an internal investigation and develop and introduce a Complaints Policy.⁶

⁶ *Complaints Policy approved by the Trustees January 2020*

14. SO1 undertook a desktop review of all the documentation sent to him by MD whom he interviewed at the end of January 2020. There is no evidence that he spoke to anyone else. The subsequent report¹² produced by SO1 was not dated but referred to MD's concerns about the way in which the Church had responded to his complaint and that he had not been interviewed as part of the investigation process. SO1's report supported MD's request that his complaint be reinvestigated so the rationale for the Church's decision not to uphold his complaint was made clear.
15. Unfortunately, it would appear that possibly due to staffing changes in the Diocesan safeguarding team, and the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, no further action was taken by the Diocese of Sheffield during 2020. It was only in November 2020 that DSA3, who had previously been unaware of the outstanding report, took action to locate it. SO1's report was eventually shared with the Archdeacon and the Diocesan legal secretary in December 2020. The findings from that report were such that the Archdeacon, one year after the initial complaint had been made, decided to convene in line with Church of England guidance, a Core Group¹³ to decide how best to address the safeguarding concerns referenced in MD's complaint.
16. An initial Core Group meeting was held in February 2021¹⁴ and was attended by the Archdeacon from the Diocese, DSA3, the Director of Strategic Communication in the Diocese, the Regional Team Leader and Safeguarding Lead and the Safeguarding Administrator from the Yorkshire Baptist Association. Those present agreed that there were some significant safeguarding concerns referenced in MD's complaint relating to practice within the Church. Whilst it was noted that NCS had for a number of years adhered to Church of England guidance and policies, the information provided by MD suggested that there were possibly some unsafe practices taking place in the Church which had the potential to harm individuals, including some who could be regarded as vulnerable.
17. Those present at that meeting also queried whether a report had been made to the Charity Commission by the Church Trustees in respect of MD's complaint. The Charity Commission requires charities to promptly report to them any 'serious incident' which is described as an '*adverse event, whether actual or alleged, which results in or risks significant harm to the*

¹² Confidential Victim Disclosure Record of Complaint [REDACTED] Undated.

¹³ The purpose of the core group is to oversee and manage the response to a safeguarding concern or allegation in line with House of Bishops' policy and practice guidance, ensuring that the rights of the victim/survivor and the respondent to a fair and thorough investigation can be preserved. Practice Guidance: Responding to, assessing, and managing safeguarding concerns or allegations against church officers. Church of England 2017.

¹⁴ Core group minutes 04.02.21

charity's beneficiaries. The Charity Commission clearly states that a charity's trustees are ultimately responsible for ensuring there are measures in place to protect the people who come into contact with the charity from harm. This includes '*beneficiaries, staff and volunteers*', and anyone else who comes into contact with the charity through its work.¹⁵

18. It was agreed by those present that the most appropriate person from the Church to attend future Core Group meetings to explore the details of MD's complaint would have been [REDACTED] at the time. However, [REDACTED] in the complaint document so a decision was therefore taken to invite [REDACTED] to attend future Core Group meetings as [REDACTED] in the document. The Core Group also requested that [REDACTED] be invited to attend future Core Group meetings.
19. Further Core Group meetings were held in March, May, June, July, and September 2021, as the group continued to address their concerns emerging from, and in relation to, MD's complaint. The Core Group was supported at later meetings by the Local Authority Designated Officer ('LADO')¹⁶.

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-report-a-serious-incident-in-your-charity#what-to-report>

¹⁶ *The role of the LADO is to provide advice, guidance or direction to employers or voluntary organisations when there are concerns or allegations about individuals who work with children or vulnerable adults.*

3. The Investigation

20. At the Core Group meeting in September 2021, a decision was taken to commission an independent investigation into MD's complaint; initial discussions with another church-based charity did not proceed as the complainant was not satisfied that the investigation would be sufficiently independent. In December 2021, MD supported the Core Group's decision to commission Barnardo's to undertake the independent investigation.
21. The two-part contract between Barnardo's and the Diocese of Sheffield acting on behalf of the Core Group, was signed on 27 January 2022.
22. Documents¹⁷ pertaining to MD's complaint were then shared by the Diocese with Barnardo's which included, in Appendix D, the names of individuals working for or on behalf of the Church who had been named by MD in his letter of complaint.

Terms of Reference

23. The terms of reference were determined and agreed by the Core Group and confirmed that Part 1 of the investigation was to focus on the four aspects of MD's complaint namely:
 - a. In 2014, an invitation to attend the second year of the church's internship course at STP (the church) was not extended to MD and in 2015 he was forced to step down from volunteering on the student leadership team at the church, after stating he was considering dating as a gay man.
 - b. In 2014 MD experienced prayer ministry, which he experienced as an exorcism, which attempted to change his sexual orientation from gay to straight.
 - c. In late 2015, MD was given an ultimatum to stop discussing his theological position on LGBTQ+ matters or he would be required to step down from the student leadership team.
 - d. MD was not welcomed at the church after his removal from student leadership team.
24. Further requirements were contained in the Contract, relating to how the investigation should be managed and these are replicated in Appendix 1.
25. The mutually agreed terms of reference stated that Stage 2 of the Contract was to be progressed only on full completion of Stage 1; this required the investigating team to review and assess current safeguarding arrangements in the Church to ensure that all areas of student and prayer

¹⁷ *These specific documents are referred to Appendix A, B, C, and D in this report.*

ministry are conducted safely and without causing harm to any individual whatever their sexuality or theological position.

Timeline and Approach

26. Once details of the complaint had been received, we prepared in February 2022, a tentative timeline in line with the initial expectation that the Part 1 of the investigation would be completed within three to four months.¹⁸ It was, however, acknowledged that the timetable needed to be flexible as it would depend on a number of factors including access to key documents to be provided by the Church and the Diocese, and, importantly, would also need to take into account the availability of any individuals who would be willing to contribute to the investigation.
27. In line with our usual way of working, we prepared introductory letters ready to be sent to those individuals from the Church who had been named in Appendix D, and whom we hoped would willingly contribute to this investigation. Individual meetings took place in March and June 2022 with MD, the Bishop, and the Archdeacon from the Diocese, both of whom played a key role in handling MD's complaint when it arrived in November 2019.
28. As email addresses are not widely shared at the outset of these investigations and in line with our usual practice, a secure email box with a bespoke email address for the investigation was created. This was to allow any individual who wished to contact us, to do so without having to first share information with MD, the Diocese, or the Church. We understand this information was shared with some individuals by MD.
29. In May 2022, we contacted the Church and were advised [REDACTED] that the Barnardo's contract was with the Diocese and not the Church. We were told that the Church had received legal advice that the issue was not a safeguarding matter, and they were therefore not obliged to comply with Core Group decisions or provide us with any documents or reports linked to MD's complaint as there were data sharing implications. The Church also informed us that they had been advised not to rely on 'legitimate interest'¹⁹ as that had not been sufficiently established. Numerous emails and discussions then took place between the Church, the Diocese and Barnardo's to try and resolve this issue.

¹⁸ *The contract details and terms of reference referred to Part 1 being completed by March 2022.*

¹⁹ *The processing of personal information must be in accordance with a declared and specified purpose that is not contrary to law, morals, or public policy.*

30. In November 2022, the Trustees requested a meeting with Barnardo's so they could be reassured that our work, at that stage, would focus only and solely on the terms of reference.
31. Progress continued to be delayed until further legal advice could be obtained by the Church as to the veracity of the data sharing agreement which had previously been agreed with the Diocese. The Church then maintained that additional data sharing agreements were needed, and this required further consultations with the legal advisors for all parties. Data sharing agreements were eventually put in place; however, this process did delay the start of the investigation, which did not commence until June 2023.
32. In June and July 2023, we began contacting individuals who were listed in our records and/or who had contacted us directly whilst waiting for agreement to proceed. We were advised In August 2023, that the Church had written to the individuals named in the complaint to ask if they would be willing to contribute to the investigation and seeking consent for their contact details to be shared with the us, as the investigating team. We were later informed by the Church that all [REDACTED] individuals had responded to the letter sent by the Church, some wanted time to consider the request, some asked for more information, and some declined to be involved; [REDACTED] individuals however agreed to meet with us. A [REDACTED] person provided answers to some pre-set questions as our report was nearer completion.
33. In total, we had contact with [REDACTED] individuals all of whom who had been associated or had contact with the Church between 2013 and 2016. Of these, [REDACTED] individuals from the [REDACTED] named in MD's complaint and [REDACTED] other individuals who are currently involved with the Church or had previously been associated with it, met with us.²⁰ There were other individuals who initially agreed to speak to us but later decided not to do so, reasons given were related to concerns about mental health and, personal implications if they were to contribute to the investigation. [REDACTED] individuals sent materials to us which they felt would be helpful to the investigation and [REDACTED] individuals from the Church confirmed in an email to us they did not wish to contribute.
34. A range of documents, emails, records, and minutes of meetings relevant to the period under review were accessed,²¹ from different sources including the Diocese and MD. This information, along with the conversations held with those who volunteered details or agreed to speak with us, helped us to understand the culture of the Church during the period under investigation and

²⁰ *Apart from the meeting with MD, all conversations were conducted online.*

²¹ *A list of these can be found in Appendix 3*

to clarify aspects of theological doctrine pertinent to the investigation and the work we had been asked to undertake.

4. Limitations and Considerations of the Investigation

35. As investigators we were acutely aware that MD's complaint related to events which happened almost a decade ago and we were mindful of the challenges this would pose. We have taken care to be as accurate as possible with the dates and timelines we were given although inevitably given the timespan, not all dates could be confirmed or verified. We reviewed in detail the information forwarded to us and carefully sought to ascertain, confirm, and triangulate facts; we have also drawn on research, current thinking and known best practice to reach the findings [and recommendations] contained in this report.
36. Verbal accounts could not always be verified due to lack of source materials and records. Individuals contributing to the investigation were for the most part relying on their recollection and memory about events that happened several years ago where there were neither personal nor Church written records of the events. MD was able to share with us an array of contemporaneous tweets, messages, and personal journal entries which along with some shared emails evidenced some of the conversations he told us he had with some individuals.

5. Culture and Practice in the Church between 2014 and 2016

37. The Church's orthodox views clearly underpins and drives the culture of the Church, its policies, systems, and practices.
38. Throughout the course of this investigation, we have learnt that some evangelicals believe that deliverance rites can exorcise the demons that cause homosexuality, and these rituals allow gay individuals to be 'healed'. This belief, held by the Church at the time that MD was a member, is not unusual or confined to this Church – there are many other churches who believe in demonic possession, but most have strict criteria that must be followed when such spirits are discerned and/or when an ecclesiastical exorcism is considered necessary. The Church of England, for example, gives clear guidance on what steps should be taken in such circumstances.²²
39. The investigation was to consider whether MD's complaints about discrimination were valid and whether the prayer session in which he willingly participated in February 2014 was conducted in such a way that, for him, the experience felt like an 'exorcism' aimed at removing from him of the 'sin' of homosexuality.²³ However, whilst press and social media reports referred to this investigation as being an examination of conversion therapy²⁴, the agreed terms of reference for this investigation required us to consider and make a response to MDs complaints specifically and not to comment on or give judgement about, the theological doctrine of the Church.
40. As investigators, we are and were acutely aware of the different ecclesiologies and their teachings about human sexuality. We understand and acknowledge that whilst some churches hold in balance a wide array of doctrinal positions on this issue, the evangelical position of the NCS teaches the traditional scriptural view that sexual relationships should only happen within marriage and between a man and a woman.²⁵
41. The Church's culture, traditional and orthodox views about sexuality at the time, are however highly pertinent to this complaint. We were told by [REDACTED], that people who describe themselves as gay were and are welcome and accepted in the Church. We also heard

²² <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-e-manual/safeguarding-children-young-people-and-vulnerable-adults/4-1>

²³ *Seen copy of Prayers 'Breaking Spirit, Soul and Body Ties (resulting from sexual involvement'*

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-61106998>

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/11-february/news/uk/sheffield-commissions-review-of-complaint-about-conversion-therapy>

²⁵ *See Appendix 2*

from some contributors that although gay people are welcomed, there is nevertheless, a firm belief that these individuals, in due course, with prayer and encouragement, will understand the need to be transformed to live in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox church teachings.

42. We also heard from some contributors that in their view there was far less acceptance by church leaders when there was evidence or rumours that gay individuals were dating or were known to be in same sex relationships. One contributor recalled a time between 2013 and 2015 when a male friend widely known in the Church to be gay, was repeatedly encouraged by church leaders to date a female without, it was observed, much thought given to the woman involved and whether she was aware of the man's sexual orientation. We were also told of another specific occasion when there were celebrations in the congregation because a parent stood up and spoke of an adult in their family, who had been '*delivered from the sin of homosexuality*'. The adult concerned was present at the time and the contributor recalled the prayers and joyous applause because the parent announced that evil entities/spirits had been banished from the family member.
43. The Church will rightly argue that it had a duty to affirm its position on the Church's teaching and to uphold the requirements for conduct which supports that position, and consequently, it was considered appropriate that individuals were asked to uphold and abide by the Church's teachings. We do not disagree with this view. However, where religion or expression is manifested in such a manner that they create the potential of significant harm to others, especially to those who are or may be vulnerable, the Church, as a charity had [and continues to have] a responsibility to exercise a duty of care as defined by the Charity Commission.
44. It is neither possible nor appropriate in this report to attempt to clarify in any detail the meaning behind the terms 'exorcism' and 'deliverance'; there are clearly some theological and denominational differences especially when it comes to ministry. It is important however for us to be clear about what we understand by these terms. Broadly speaking, we have taken the term exorcism²⁶ to mean the ritual of actively freeing a place or person from some form of negative spiritual influence and understand the term deliverance²⁷ as being more of a process of being saved or set free, by the casting out of demonic influences.

²⁶ *Exorcism is the religious or spiritual practice of evicting demons, or other malevolent spiritual entities from a person, or an area, that is believed to be possessed. Wikipedia 2023*

²⁷ *In its widest meaning, "deliverance" is part of pastoral care: it is the ministry of liberating, freeing, or delivering a person from a burden which they carry. Church of England. Safeguarding Manual 2021 EXPAND*

45. The similarities between the two, however, would seem to be their belief in the power of prayer and the supernatural, with the practice of both relying on faith and spiritual discernment to identify the root cause of the spiritual oppression and drive out the evil spirits. Exorcisms and deliverance ministries clearly share a belief that the power to overcome evil comes from God and that demonic influences can be defeated through prayer and spiritual warfare.²⁸
46. There are many churches, which accept the possibility of human possession and provide for specialist ministry in such cases. Within the Church of England, such 'specialist' ministries involving any form of exorcism may only be carried out by those authorised by the Bishop to do so. According to ■■■, there is no evidence that the Church has ever sought permission from the Bishop in this respect or has ever needed to do so.
47. The Church's 2016 policy, which was updated in 2018, states that: *'The church needs to be sensitive so that they do not, in their pastoral care, attempt to 'force' religious values or ideas onto people, particularly to those who may be vulnerable to such practices. Within faith communities harm can be caused by the inappropriate use of religious belief or practice; this can include the misuse of the authority of leadership, penitential discipline, oppressive teaching, or intrusive healing and deliverance ministries, which may result in vulnerable people experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual harm. If such inappropriate behaviour becomes harmful it should be referred for investigation in the usual way.'*
48. We found no evidence that MD's complaint was considered in line with the Church's allegation procedures but are aware that when the complaint was received the legal advice was sought and the Church was informed by their legal briefs that, legally the issue was not a safeguarding matter as MD was not a 'vulnerable adult'.²⁹
49. The Church's own 2018 policy in place at the time MD made his complaint, stated that *'Vulnerability is not an absolute concept but a relative one, which may change with time and according to circumstance. All human beings are subject to change and chance happenings which may affect their capacity to manage themselves and their situation...Some people because of their physical or social circumstances have higher levels of vulnerability than others,*

²⁸ *Spiritual warfare is a Christian concept which involves fighting against the work of demons and spirits thought to be intervening in human affairs and against the word of God.*

²⁹ *We moved away from the terminology of 'vulnerable adults' towards 'adults at risk of harm', usually shortened to 'adults at risk'. The Care Act (2014), an adult at risk is someone over 18 years old who: has care and support needs, is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect. as a result of their care and support needs is unable to protect himself or herself against the abuse or neglect or the risk of it.*

and it is our duty as Christians to recognise this and support those who are vulnerable in a way that affords them as much independence and autonomy as possible.'

50. Whilst free churches are not required to follow or accept Church of England theology or policies, they are obliged to comply with the Charity Commission safeguarding regulations which state that trustees of charities must manage any risk of harm to beneficiaries.³⁰ that might arise from the charities activities including the effective management of complaints, whistleblowing and allegations relating to child protection or adults at risk.³¹ This definition of safeguarding as it applies to charities is far wider than what is generally understood or applied by other organisations.
51. At the time MD's complaint was received, the Church did not have a Complaints policy and we heard from some individuals that they would not have known how or to whom they could complain should they have felt the need to do so. This would have made it very difficult for any individual to challenge or report any practices within the Church which they felt were unsafe, distressing, or oppressive. One individual told us that she felt uncomfortable about the way in which the Church responded to gay people but didn't feel able to openly challenge some of the things she observed and which she didn't understand.
52. It seems that even prior to MD's complaint being received in 2019, ██████████ felt that the [Church] was '*under attack*' not only from MD but also from some other individuals³² and we had a sense that the Church chose to quieten or discourage any open discussion around the impact of their doctrine on individuals who wanted to openly describe themselves as gay.
53. It is not our intention to challenge or disrespect the views and beliefs of those who hold specific theological doctrines relating to human sexuality. Our purpose in making reference to teaching materials, conversations and information shared with us is simply to highlight that the culture of the Church at the time of MD's prayer session was one in which the presence of evil spirits and '*ungodly soul ties*'³³ were believed to be the cause of homosexual thoughts, feelings and behaviour and prayers of 'deliverance' for homosexuals were not uncommon.

³⁰ *The Charity Commission regulations states that beneficiaries include people who benefit from the charity, staff, volunteers, and other people who come into contact with the charity through its work.*

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safeguarding-duties-for-charity-trustees#protect-volunteers-and-staff>.

³¹ *Safeguarding and protecting people for charities and trustees 2017.[updated 2023]*

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safeguarding-duties-for-charity-trustees#full-publication-update-history>

³² *Messages, notes, and email threads seen. March 2018*

³³ *Undated document seen by Investigators.*

6. The Findings

54. Each of the four parts to MD's complaint have been considered in turn and our findings and rationale for these together with an outline of the evidence we have accessed, are produced on the following pages, so they can be more easily understood as separate lines of enquiry.

MD 's Complaint

'In 2014 an invitation to attend the second year of the church's internship course at St Thomas Philadelphia (the church) was not extended to him and in 2015 he was forced to step down from volunteering with the student leadership team at the Church, after stating he was considering dating as a gay man'.

Evidence gathered: Online postings on social media, extracts from twitter accounts, screenshots of messages, emails, notes from conversations with individuals who are or were associated with the Church between 2013 and 2019.

55. MD joined the Church's leadership training programme (FORM) in September 2013³⁴ apparently having spoken with ■ on a number of occasions about his sexuality. He informed us that he received a certificate signed by ■ to confirm his first year of internship had been successfully completed. According to MD, he was told informally at the end of the year that he and four other student interns were being invited back to join the second year of the leadership programme.
56. MD consequently returned to his hometown to prepare for his entry to FORM2 in September 2014. According to messages uploaded into social media, MD sent off his application form for FORM2 in July 2014 and made all the necessary arrangements for his return to Sheffield, finding accommodation and employment in the city and buying a car. MD returned to live in Sheffield at the end of August and posted a message on FORM2 web page describing his excitement to be joining the second year, with ■ replying *'we can't wait to have you'*. We have seen a request from MD to ■ asking for the timetable but was told by ■ he had not yet finished it.
57. An email thread seen by us confirms that during a meeting with ■ in late August/early September, MD discussed with ■ some blogs he had posted about his emerging views about gay theology and that he was beginning to believe it was possible to date another man and still be a Christian. The following day ■ sent a message, seen by us, to MD thanking him for sharing the link to his blogs; ■ posted a message on Facebook, saying he had enjoyed *'hanging out'* with MD that afternoon.
58. It has not been possible to garner ■ with us but having seen copies of the tweets and emails between him and MD, we are satisfied that

³⁴ *Emails and messages September 2014*

at that point, i.e., late August to early September 2014, there was a clear expectation by both parties that MD would be joining the second year of FORM in September 2014.

59. MD recalls he met with [REDACTED] a few days later and the meeting this time was attended by [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. According to MD, he was told then that he would not be allowed to join FORM2 as having a leader who believed in gay relationships would be a bad influence on first-year interns. We understand there are no notes from that meeting to explain this decision and the Church has no record of the meeting taking place, although it is accepted that such a conversation did happen. We found ourselves wondering to what extent MD's candid conversation with [REDACTED] about gay theology and his emerging views that he could date another man and yet still be a Christian, had influenced the decision to withdraw MD's invitation to the second year of FORM2, given we were told it was common knowledge that he described himself as a gay man throughout his first year as an intern.
60. We asked [REDACTED] if he was aware of any discussion which might have taken place between [REDACTED] and church leaders; whilst [REDACTED] acknowledged that reflective discussions do take place, he was not aware of any specific conversations about MD which took place at that time. MD asserts he was never given any indication that his sexuality or views would be a barrier to him holding any leadership positions in the Church and had frequently discussed his sexuality with his [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Notes from MD's journal and his messages posted on social media describe his distress at not being allowed to join FORM2 as he had expected.
61. In conversations with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], views were shared that the Church is orthodox in its teachings and its theological doctrines are clear and would be known by those who came to the Church. It was accepted however that whilst gay individuals were and always would be welcome, there was no document in place at the time which clearly stated that individuals who challenged the Church's authority on this issue or who could not commit to celibacy would not be permitted to hold leadership roles in the Church. [REDACTED] indicated that [REDACTED] hoped this would have been made clear to MD in his early conversations with [REDACTED] but was unable to say for certain that this issue had been addressed. We have been unable to confirm whether such a conversation happened; MD has no recollection of it, and we have no evidence to confirm if such a conversation did indeed ever take place.
62. We were told, on more than one occasion by different individuals, that it was unspoken but understood, that a gay person who could or would not commit to celibacy would not be offered a leadership role in the Church. This view was later confirmed and validated by the Church in a

68. MD agreed to take on the role of volunteer with the Student Leadership team and was provided with a Job Description.³⁶ The document made no reference to issues of sexuality or expected codes of behaviour in relation to MD or other volunteers.
69. MD continued in this role for the remainder of 2014 and for most of 2015. There is evidence that MD continued to make known his challenging views about the Church's doctrine on same sex relationships and regularly uploaded these onto social media. Sometime around February 2015, we understand that the Church restructured its leadership team [REDACTED] [REDACTED] across the Church.
70. [REDACTED] wrote to us and advised us of a meeting with MD and [REDACTED] later that year when MD was asked [REDACTED] to 'stop posting his views about gay theology as it was at odds with the Church's theological position'. [REDACTED] wrote that MD was also told that whilst it was acceptable to have a differing view, as a 'leader of the Church' it was not appropriate for him to voice these views publicly.
71. We were told by MD that later that year, he became friendly with a first-year intern from the 2015 intake; they were seen by [REDACTED] in a coffee shop together, sometime in early autumn 2015 and according to what we have been told, it somehow became known that MD had invited this intern to an event in MD's hometown. MD told us he met with [REDACTED] again around this time and was informed that if he chose to continue 'promoting' gay relationships online and in person, he would not be able to continue his role with the Student Leadership team. MD informed us that he was offered instead work with the Church's Social Action Project [REDACTED] but recalled being told that he could not work with young adults or children as they were in their formative years, the implication being, from MD's perspective, that he might be a bad influence, MD recalls the word 'dangerous' being used.
72. The Church could provide no account of this meeting, although notes taken by [REDACTED] as part of the initial investigation into MD's complaint, do refer to one individual explaining that the use of the word 'dangerous' had referred to the messages being broadcast by MD rather than it referring to him personally'. [REDACTED].
73. We have had sight of entries in MD's notebooks which we believe were written by him contemporaneously following the meeting he had with [REDACTED]. They describe his distress at being given such an ultimatum. MD advised that several meetings took place with [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] over

³⁶ Copy of Job Description for MD seen

the next few weeks during which time, according to MD, he repeatedly declined to refrain from talking openly about his sexuality and the need for the Church to openly state that whilst gay people were welcome, they would not be allowed to hold key leadership roles.

74. At some point around late October/early November 2015, MD said he had arrived at a student worship evening to be informed that the student team had received a text informing them that MD was not allowed to attend student events. We have been unable to verify that this text was sent and by whom. According to MD, his response was to continue to attend these events as he felt he was part of the student family.
75. Whilst discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010, religious organisations can exclude individuals from participation in certain activities or from holding specific roles, if they can show it is necessary because of its religious aims, or to avoid offending people who share its religious aims. In which case the actions of the Church in denying leadership roles to MD were discriminatory but were not unlawful.
76. It is fact that MD was prevented from holding or continuing to hold leadership roles in the Church; according to MD he was told that this was because he was a gay man. It is our view that this decision was also influenced by MD's challenge to the Church's theological doctrine. We have not been provided with any other accounts or written evidence from the Church to explain why MD's leadership role ended with the student team and from the evidence available to us, we uphold MD's complaint that he was *'forced to step down from volunteering with the student leadership team at the Church, after stating he was considering dating as a gay man'* is valid.

FINDING 1:

In relation to MD's complaint (a) that

'In 2014 an invitation to attend the second year of the church's internship course at St Thomas Philadelphia (the church) was not extended to him and in 2015 he was forced to step down from volunteering with the student leadership team at the Church, after stating he was considering dating as a gay man'.

This aspect of MD's complaint is substantiated and is therefore upheld.

80. It is clear from information provided to us that deliverance ministries in relation to homosexuality was endorsed and supported by the Church. Contained within the previously mentioned book are statements which state that there are *'many different ways in which people can become infested with evil spirits [and] Satan will gain entry wherever there is a place of vulnerably [and] 'a homosexual spirit will call to another'*. We heard from other contributors of times when they were present and heard about or observed ministries which sought to 'heal' homosexuals. ■■■ recalled that some years previously they had attended a session in which a homosexual had his demons cast from him and he was no longer gay; ■■■ told us of a work colleague who was gay and had been told by a Church leader that he needed to be 'cured'. It is our view that the theological doctrine which teaches that homosexuals need to be healed and can be cured through prayer and the banishing of evil spirits supports MD's description of the prayer session he experienced in February 2014.
81. As part of the FORM programme in the first year, interns were expected to take part in an 'Encounter with God' weekend. Our understanding from our research and from listening to individuals who contributed to this investigation was that these weekends were seen as a time of teaching, fellowship and prayer and gave students an opportunity to have a deep personal encounter with Jesus. The weekends, we were told, also had a specific focus on inner healing and on *'breaking free from the past'*.
82. Interns were asked, prior to attending these weekends, to complete a detailed questionnaire. This document required them to provide highly personal information about their past life and childhood; they were asked to detail any experience of abuse and describe their struggles and traumas and any challenges they were trying to address in their adult lives. These questionnaires were then passed to the Prayer Ministry team so two individuals from the team could prepare a bespoke prayer session with individual interns.
83. The sessions were also attended by another note-taking intern. We understand that the role of Prayer Ministry team at these weekends, was to assist individual interns to connect with God for healing of their unmet needs, unhealed wounds, and unresolved issues. We understand these individuals were selected by church leaders but were unable to confirm what criteria was used to select who should be part of a Prayer Ministry team and what training or guidance, if any, was provided.
84. One contributor who had been actively involved with NCS, told us that during the time of their involvement, individuals in Prayer Ministry teams were lay people who were often unlicensed,

with no [background checks] but who nevertheless were given a lot of pastoral responsibility in a way that would be unusual in the Church of England. The contributor recalled some exorcisms being carried out many years ago which were similar to the experience described by MD, and said they were often spoken about by church members. This individual had however left the Church by the time MD had joined in 2013.

85. Research tells us³⁸ that the impact of adverse childhood experiences is cumulative and can lead to toxic stress in children which can adversely impact on the emotional and physical well-being and mental health of the adult they will become. These adults are likely to have increased levels of vulnerability. In our opinion asking interns to disclose such personal information, including answering questions about past harms and trauma, to individuals who have no training in understanding or assessing the impact of vicarious traumas and disclosures carries a significant risk of not only triggering and retraumatising the individual but also rendering some individuals even more vulnerable. One contributor recalled that they were encouraged to share *'really traumatic things, lots of talk about vulnerability, spiritual healing and what physical symptoms could emerge if there was unforgiveness.'*
86. The use of the questionnaire at these weekends was also raised at the Core Group meeting in February 2021 where concerns were noted about *'the potential safeguarding risk if those reading the form did not have the professional competency to deal with any issues raised.'*
87. MD completed his questionnaire for the Encounter with God weekend in which his struggles to accept and understand his sexuality within a Christian context were made clear. In response to being asked to state for what issue he would like to receive prayers, MD responded by referring to his physical and emotional attraction to men, whilst also acknowledging that he was fearful of what being *'freed'* from this aspect of his personality might mean.
88. MD's prayer session took place in February 2014 and [REDACTED], another intern, was in attendance taking notes. We understand that as senior church leaders, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] had responsibility for the weekend, and it was they who determined who should administer the prayer sessions and to whom. MD told us that he was assigned [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] to administer his prayer session which he interpreted as meaning his was a *'super-serious case'* as [REDACTED] [REDACTED] were apparently well known as *'carriers of God's Spirit'*. The initial investigation into MD's complaint did not, as far as we are aware, seek to ascertain the identities of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and without the cooperation of

³⁸ <https://www.bmj.com/toxic-stress>

■ and ■, or any relevant Church records it has not been possible to locate or make contact with these individuals.

89. MD recalls in his notebook that during his prayer session he was told he was not taking responsibility for his own choices, and this was due to the fact that he had inherited from his family a *'Hereditary Demon'*. According to MD's handwritten notes and those taken by ■, the prayer team delivered Sozo³⁹ prayers. MD was told he needed to renounce his homosexual lifestyle and needed to speak to the demons inside him as if they *'were a dog'*. ■ refers in his notes to ■ calling out *'any associated demons GO'*. MD asserts that ■ exclaimed that *'demons [can be seen] coming out of [MD] and leaving hand in hand, marching through the window'*. As the session was coming to an end, MD's notes refer to ■ advising that one more prayer was required if MD was to be 'healed' and MD was asked to repeat a prayer which would indicate he had broken off *'his agreement with Satan'* and which would free him of his homosexuality. MD described to us in some detail the physical and emotional impact that session had on his well-being which he nevertheless hoped had cast out the 'demon' of his homosexuality.
90. From the descriptions provided by MD and other contributors these prayer sessions were highly charged and emotionally intense and we were told, when asked, there was an assumption that support would be offered in their 'huddles', described as sort of brief daily get-together to share thoughts and experiences. We found no evidence that any other support systems were in place or any requirement for assessments to be undertaken for anyone subject to prayer sessions who may have referred to abuse or trauma on the form submitted to the prayer weekend. With the exception of the individuals from the Church, no other contributors with whom we spoke could recall whether the Church had a safeguarding officer in place at the time.
91. Some contributors with whom we had contact, referred to their own experiences and recalled that their [prayer] experiences seemed to be designed to increase their emotional vulnerabilities. Some described having a visceral/physical reaction to the experience, which was then regarded by the prayer team as proof of spirit possession.
92. The prayer session to which MD was subject in February 2014, clearly sought to banish demons and spirits, and attempted to 'rid him' of his homosexual inclinations as a result. Although MD had agreed to attend the session and did not remove himself from it and indeed considered

³⁹ Sozo ministry is described as a unique inner healing and deliverance ministry aimed to get to the root of things hindering a person's personal connection with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. <https://www.bethelsozo.org.uk/>

that a burden had been lifted from him, it is equally clear that the session caused MD confusion and distress. MD's experience and the way in which it was conducted is however consistent with what many individuals would describe as a form of exorcism which could fall under the definition of spiritual abuse.⁴⁰

93. The notes taken by ■ during the initial investigation into MD's complaint, include statements which state that MD did *'not complain'* after the prayer session in February 2014, suggesting to us that this was seen as evidence that no harm had been experienced at the time. Certainly, from the notes taken by ■, comments were clearly made by two unnamed church leaders which inferred that MD *'didn't have an issue with what happened'* [on his Encounter with God Weekend] and another note stated that [MD] *'made no complaint about the exorcism/adverse thing'*.
94. Talking with MD, it became clear that there was also a question in his own mind as to whether having asked for prayers to be focused on his sexuality and feeling after the experience that *'a burden had been lifted'* he could then, five years later complain he had been subject to an experience which impacted on his mental health.
95. Several contributors who talked with us said they had reflected on their past involvement with the Church, in some cases after starting therapy, and recognised that they too, when younger had been subject to similar experiences to MD which had at the time or had later on impacted on their mental health. For one individual this was brought to the fore having watched a Netflix programme *'Pray Away'* in 2021. In learning more about the experiences of some contributors it became apparent that although adults under the law, some of these individuals were actually quite vulnerable at the time they were involved with the Church.
96. We were struck by how many of those who spoke with us referred to their own vulnerabilities at the time, either because they had family issues, were lonely or just seeking *'a home'*. Some described being diagnosed with mental health problems, some suffered from anxiety, but all spoke about their desire and need to belong to the Church and be part of a *'family'* and in this respect it could be suggested they were all vulnerable in some way. One contributor said, *'looking back I feel I was a very vulnerable person at the time and really wanted to fit in'* and another said *'I was a desperate student [wanting to belong]*. Another told us that looking back they now thought the *'culture of the Church, was to 'break people down and was a form of*

⁴⁰ *It is acknowledged that the Evangelical Alliance does not agree that this would be described as such.*

control' and another said *'with ■■■ and ■■■ if you were vulnerable, it was very hard not to accept things.'*

97. MD may have had the mental capacity to consent to the prayer session but in our view, the context, and the way in which the prayer session is reported to have been administered, together with MD's background, his need to belong and be accepted created a significant imbalance of power which heightened MD's vulnerability.
98. There are multiple and pervasive barriers to overcome when individuals decide to tell others about experiences which have, in retrospect been abusive, distressing, or harmful. This is especially so when the experience was not recognised as being harmful at the time either by the subject or by those around them. We have acknowledged that the culture of the Church was rooted in orthodox and traditional teachings where prayers and the laying of hands to rid a person of evil spirits was accepted practice. We were not made aware of any safeguards in place between 2013 and 2016, which would have ensured follow-up care and support was available to those individuals who received such ministries and who were or may have been significantly affected by the experience at that time.
99. When any such experiences are felt by individuals to be distressing or with hindsight harmful, it is not always possible, for a variety of reasons, for them talk or complain about what happened to them. Sometimes individuals, despite their appearance or demeanour can be fragile and traumatised and are not ready emotionally and psychologically to come forward until at a later date they are asked or feel compelled to do so. It is here that the practice of the Church falls within the remit of safeguarding; as a charity the Church has an obligation to ensure that its beneficiaries, including volunteers and staff are not harmed by any of the Church's activities and this includes deliverance ministries.
100. It is important to understand the relationship between an overarching culture and environment of non-agreement with LGBTQ+ views within some faith communities and an individual's desire to be accepted and to fit in to a church community where faith, belonging and family are integral parts of their life and self-identity. From conversations with MD and other contributors, we understood that these were certainly factors which influenced why some individuals looked to suppress their identity and 'consent' to practices or prayers which sought to remove the sins they were told they carried.

101. MD told us of the struggles and difficulties he encountered as a gay man during the time he was a volunteer with the Church and said that his experiences during that prayer session had a lasting impact on his welfare and mental health. Most of the contributors who spoke with us recognised MD's description of the prayer session and were not surprised by it, one individual said, *'it could have happened as MD described given the [views and beliefs of] leadership and people in place at that time'*. We also heard from one ordained contributor who said when they were involved with NCS, before MD joined the Church, some church leaders, including some ordained by the Church of England, did publicly preach sermons about individuals afflicted by demons and these sermons included explicit descriptions of performing exorcisms or prayers for deliverance. Given this information and other examples shared with us and without any evidence to suggest otherwise, we are of the view that the individuals involved in administering prayer ministry to MD did so in ways which can reasonably be described as an exorcism.
102. It is a supported fact that MD was subject to a prayer session in February 2014. The experience he describes, supported by notes taken by █████ who was present at the time, was in our view a form of exorcism and although he had agreed to the prayers being said for him, the experience left him vulnerable and confused. We have not been provided with any other accounts or written evidence from the Church to explain why the prayer session took the form it did, how it was administered and by whom. From the evidence available to us, it is our view that session, took place as described by MD and prayers were administered with the intention of changing his sexual identity.

FINDING 2

In relation to MD's complaint (b) that

'In 2014 [MD] experienced prayer ministry, which he considers to be an exorcism, and which attempted to change his sexual orientation from gay to straight.'

This aspect of MD's complaint is substantiated and is therefore upheld.

MD's complaint (c)

'In late 2015, MD was given an ultimatum to stop discussing his theological position on LGBT matters or he would be required to step down from the student leadership team'.

Evidence: Screenshots of messages, emails, notes from conversations with individual contributors currently and previously associated with the Church, notes from the initial investigation undertaken by the Church in 2019.

103. To some extent, this aspect of the complaint has already been addressed in paragraphs 63 – 74, however some additional information is worthy of note.
104. We have been unable to speak with [REDACTED] who may have been able to provide information about the Church's perspective and the context in which this ultimatum was given. Although anonymised, we have received copies of redacted notes taken by [REDACTED] during the initial investigation into the complaint. According to these notes, one church leader seems to have discussed with [REDACTED], MD's *'aggressive campaigning and lack of respect for anyone holding a traditional viewpoint* and confirmed that MD *'couldn't [be a leader] if he held this viewpoint'*. This individual also seems to have implied in his conversation with [REDACTED] that they had communicated the Church's theological position to MD at a meeting stressing that he could not be a leader in the Church if he was pursuing a same sex relationship. This latter point is reiterated in the investigation notes with [REDACTED] and further supports Finding 1 above.
105. Notes from another conversation recorded by [REDACTED] also confirms that MD was told that he could have a [place] but only if he refrained from actively promoting the LGBTQ+ agenda which he refused to do. The notes from the investigation shared with us are not detailed and are written in a way which makes it difficult to establish a clear timeline and understand who said what, and when. The notes from all [REDACTED] interviews which seem to relate to the period between September 2014 and April/May 2015 do, alongside some of the conversations we have held, provide sufficient information for us to be satisfied that MD was given an ultimatum to stop discussing his theological position on LGBTQ+ matters or he would be required to step down from the student leadership team.
106. According to MD, he continued to work with the student team throughout most of 2015 during which time he also continued to promote his views and upload information on social media. In October 2015, MD said he arrived at a student worship evening to be informed that the student

team had received a text informing them that he was not allowed to attend student events. It has not been possible to verify this information and confirm from whom the message was sent.

107. MD apparently continued to turn up at student events until around November 2015, when he met with ■ who allegedly told him he was not welcome at these sessions and were he to turn up in future, he would be 'physically removed'. ■ following the leadership line and advised MD that he was not to post information on the Student Facebook page, as to why he would no longer be part of student family in the Church. We were told that MD's access to the Student Facebook page was, removed soon after this conversation.
108. The Church has every right to determine who works and volunteers for them. This issue is not in dispute. However, the Church had not, during the time of MD's involvement, publicly declared its position that open and public challenges to the Church's orthodoxy and teachings were not appropriate and consequently, there was no leadership role in the Church for those who could not accept this.⁴¹ One individual who met with us stated that in his view 'any individual who did not toe the line would be side-lined'.
109. We have not been provided with any other detailed accounts or written evidence from the Church to explain the context in which this ultimatum might have been given and why. Neither have we heard from the Church their view as to why MD left the church completely in 2016, despite being an active member of the student team for over three years. From the evidence available to us, it is our view that MD was asked to stop discussing his theological position on LGBTQ+ matters and when he refused to do so was told he could no longer be involved with the student team and was not allowed to attend any student events.

Finding 3

In relation to MD's complaint (c) that:

'In late 2015, MD was given an ultimatum to stop discussing his theological position on LGBT matters or he would be required to step down from the student leadership team'.

This aspect of MD's complaint is substantiated and is therefore upheld.

⁴¹ A position statement in relation to the Church's position was produced in 2021. See Appendix 3

MD's complaint (d)

'MD was not welcomed at the church after his removal from student leadership team.'

Evidence: Notes from conversations with individuals who are or were associated with the church, notes taken from conversations held with [REDACTED] individuals named in MD's complaint.

110. It is our view that church leaders must have found it frustrating and challenging to manage and contain MD's forthright views about gay theology between 2014 and 2016. Notes from the investigation conducted by [REDACTED] describe views held by church leaders about MD's *'aggressive campaigning'* and his *'lack of respect for authority'*, MD's allegation that he was told by [REDACTED] that he was *'dangerous'* [to others] is explained in the anonymised notes shared with us as meaning the message he was giving to others was dangerous rather than him personally.
111. We have heard described during several of our conversations that many people within the Church, both past and present were believed and known to be *'good'* caring individuals; MD himself provides testimony of some helpful support he received from many individuals who did not share his views but were willing to listen and talk with him about his struggles in believing himself to be a gay Christian still *'worthy of the love of God'*. MD describes as do some of the church leaders spoken to of several pleasantries exchanged after MD left the Church sometime in 2016, after which one church leader said things *'went frosty'*. It is not known whether this was on the part of MD or the Church.
112. Conversations are about open exchange. Where there is suspicion and mistrust, where depths of disagreement suggest an unbridgeable divide, the barriers to conversation are considerable. There is evidence of this in relation to MD's attempts to open and pursue a debate about an issue which firmly and clearly sits outside of the Church's teaching but the requirement for Church leaders to enforce the moral doctrines of their faith must be acknowledged and in this respect some of their actions can be understood within that context.
113. Some key church leaders named in MD's complaint refused or did not feel able to meet with us to share their views and observations about MD's complaint, even though many continue to actively work in nearby churches or projects. We were surprised that they did not want to discuss their beliefs and the evangelical doctrine, which is so fundamental to how the Church functions, and which may have helped us to better understand the context of MD's complaint. Their insights and perspectives were hugely important and would have been immensely helpful

to any learning emerging from the investigative process. The investigation has continued and will unfortunately, be concluded without their input.

114. It is our view that notwithstanding some occasional supportive and caring conversing with church leaders during 2014/2015, it is highly likely, given the tone of the conversations recorded in ■■■ notes, that MD was not popular with church leaders because of his persistence in voicing his views, and his challenge to the authority and teaching of the Church. MD himself reflected to us that despite the challenges he has experienced in getting his voice heard, perhaps he could have handled his challenges more sensitively at the time.
115. As our investigation drew to a close and when we had almost completed our report, we were forwarded a letter by ■■■ which had been received by the Church in February 2022. The author wanted to contribute to the investigation and described how, during the spring and summer of 2014, they and their partner had attended the Church with a view to becoming members. They met ■■■ and ■■■ and soon after were invited to a meeting where they were told that ■■■ could not be certain they would be made welcome in the Church, as they were a gay couple. The author stated they were encouraged not to be part of the Church and it was made clear they would not be welcomed unless they would be willing to change [from being a gay couple] and accept being changed. They did not join the Church and moved away.
116. The contents of this letter strengthen our view that although individuals may have exchanged pleasantries with MD at times, the Church did not make MD feel welcome after he left the student team, resulting in him leaving the Church completely in 2016.

Finding 4

In relation to MD's complaint (d) that:

'MD was not welcomed at the church after his removal from the student leadership team.'

This aspect of MD's complaint is substantiated and is therefore upheld.

7. Concluding Comments

117. This investigation and the learning emerging from it would have been significantly strengthened if more of the key individuals named in MD's complaint had been willing and able to meet with us so their reflections, observations and insights could have been included in this report. This, together with the lack of any helpful Church records to substantiate or refute any aspect of MD's complaint meant we have had, to a large extent, to rely on the personal reflections and contemporaneous notes taken by the individuals who spoke with us. Access to what might be described as 'hard evidence' to support MD's complaint was consequently difficult to locate.
118. However, having considered the evidence available to us and other information provided in the form of records and emails shared with us by MD and having triangulated these with our conversations with MD and other contributors currently and previously associated with the Church, our findings lead us to conclude that on the balance of probabilities the events referred to by MD in his complaint happened in the way he described and are therefore all substantiated.
119. This complaint was first brought to the attention of the Church and the Diocese in November 2019 and related to events which took place almost a decade ago. Sadly, the complaint has taken 4 years to conclude, and this has not been in the interests of MD or any other parties or individuals who have expressed an interest in the outcome of the investigation or who were asked to contribute to it. The investigation offers a stark reminder of the importance of safeguarding the welfare and well-being of all of the charity's beneficiaries, including LGBTQ+ individuals.
120. The conclusion of Part 1 of this investigation now invites the Church to consider its response to the findings and decide how it will respond to MD as the complainant, given all four aspects of his complaint have now been substantiated through an independent process.

Chronology of Events as understood by the investigation team.

Date	Event
Pre-Sept 2013	MD applies for Internship. Shares information about his sexuality with [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
Sep 2013	MD receives official invite to join FORM 2013/2014. MD has discussions with FORM
2013- 2014	MD volunteers at university promoting Church
Jan 2014	Request from [REDACTED] [REDACTED] to complete detailed questionnaire in preparation for Encounter with God Weekend
Feb 2014	Encounter with God Weekend. MD attends prayer session led by two Church Volunteers/Employees? Session is observed in line with usual practice by [REDACTED] who takes notes.
June 2014	Certificate sent to MD by [REDACTED] [REDACTED] confirming successful completion of course. MD leaves Sheffield following informal conversations with [REDACTED] [REDACTED] who indicates MD will be accepted on FORM 2 later that year. No church notes of this meeting
July 2014	MD posts application form for FORM2.
Aug 2014	Twitter message from [REDACTED] to MD. "Can't wait to have you join us [FORM 2]. MD moves house and finds employment to support second year in Sheffield.
Aug 2014	Informal meeting with [REDACTED] MD shares thoughts about different theological perspectives relating to his sexuality. [REDACTED] tweets 'loved hanging out with MD this afternoon' No notes of this meeting
Sept 2014	Formal meeting with [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] also present. MD advised he will not be allowed to continue into second year of FORM2. MD offered volunteer role to work in Student Team with University Students. No church notes of this meeting
NB:	Information Pack for new intake to FORM 2015 apparently includes referred to the need to be 'sexually pure'. <i>Information not verified</i>

Feb 2015	MD meets with ■ and ■ [who acknowledge MD struggles to be accepted by the Church regardless of his sexuality]. MD writes he felt he was given permission to 'exist'
Oct 2015	Meeting with ■ who advises that MD continues to promote gay relationships, he cannot continue working with student team. No church notes of meeting.
Oct 2015	Meetings with ■ and ■ MD allegedly told [he/his views] were a 'danger' to children and young people. MD feels he is seen as a 'bad' influence on others. Told he cannot attend student events but can volunteer with ■ working with homeless people.
Nov 2015	MD writes to ■ ■ ■ ■ asking for help as he is struggling to cope with all that has happened. Meeting takes place where MD is allegedly reminded of the Church's theological teachings.
Apr 2016	MD is informed by a Senior Church leader? that as he is continuing to challenge and criticise the church's position, he cannot attend any student events and if he does so he will be asked to leave.
Dec 2017	MD writes to ■ asking for Churches position around LGBTQ+ Christians.
Jan 2018	MD contacts ■ saying he had no reply to previous letter
Mar 2018	Email from ■ to ■ 'my understanding was that MD was told he could not be [on leadership team] if he was in a gay relationship
Apr 2019	MD submits formal subject access request to the Church
Apr 2019	■ sends email to ■ that in line with church policy all records pertaining to MD were destroyed two years ago.
Nov 2019	MD submits complaint to Diocese and the Church.
Dec 2019	Church undertakes investigation into complaint and concludes none of the four aspects are upheld
Dec 2019	Diocese seeks advice from ■ who arranges for further enquiries to be undertaken.
Jan 2020	Church Trustees approve new Complaint s Policy
Jan 2020	SO1 interviews MD and undertakes a desktop review of documents relating to Complaint.

Dec 2020	Report from SO1 shared with Diocese
Jan 2021	Core Group established to consider complaint
Jan 2022	Barnardo's commissioned to undertake investigation. Data Sharing Agreement agreed, and Contract signed.
Feb 2022	Complaint Documents shared Investigation Team
Mar 2022	Investigation timeline prepared. Individual Interviews arranged with MD, Bishop, and Archdeacon of Sheffield.
Apr 2022	Request from Sheffield Adult Safeguarding Board that findings from investigation are shared
May 2022	Church shares legal advice with Barnardo's stating that information cannot be shared under the existing data sharing agreement. Church has been advised MD's complaint is not a safeguarding matter.
Nov 2022	Meeting between Barnardo's and Trustees of Church confirming that Barnardo's cannot ask for current Church documents and policies ahead of Stage 2.
Jul 2023	Data Sharing Agreement between the Church, the Diocese of Sheffield and the Yorkshire Baptist Association and Barnardo's agreed and signed
Aug – Oct 23	Interviews, Desktop review of documentation
Nov 2023	Draft Report shared with MD, the Church, the Diocese, and the Yorkshire Baptist Association.
Nov 2023	Requested amends from MD, the Church, the Diocese, and the Yorkshire Baptist Association discussed and addressed, where appropriate.
30.11.2023	Final Report shared with all parties. Copy sent to Right Reverend Pete Wilcox, Bishop of Sheffield as per terms of reference.
Dec 2023	Stage 2 commences

Terms of Reference and Process ⁴²

A two-part, sequential investigation has been commissioned in relation to a complaint by MD which alleges that:

- a. In 2014 an invitation to attend the second year of the church's internship course at St Thomas Philadelphia (the church) was not extended to him AND that in 2015 he was forced to step down from volunteering on the student leadership team at the church, after stating he was considering dating as a gay man.
- b. In 2014 he experienced prayer ministry, which he considers to be an exorcism, which attempted to change his sexual orientation from gay to straight.
- c. In late 2015 he was given an ultimatum to stop discussing his theological position on LGBT matters or he would be required to step down from the student leadership team.
- d. MD was not welcomed at the church after his removal from student leadership team.

Part 1:

- A. Interview to be sought with MD.
- B. An investigation into the facts in relation to points [a- d] as four separate lines of enquiry.
- C. In respect of each line of enquiry the investigator will form a view as to whether the complaint is substantiated or unsubstantiated.
- D. This view will be supported with a justification for the finding based on the evidence the investigation has considered (together with a rationale for inclusion or disregard of evidence as required)
- E. The investigator will contact the church and arrange to meet with appropriate individuals/witnesses. This will include those named in the synopsis and other individuals if a rationale (which in the investigators view is reasonable) is presented as to their direct relevance to points 3.1 – 3.4 (as appropriate).
- F. The church will make all reasonable endeavours, subject to information law and other legislation, to procure individuals (relevant to point D) to engage with the investigation, but persons cannot be compelled to engage with the investigation.

⁴² Copied from original contract between Barnardo's and the Diocese of Sheffield acting on behalf of the Core Group

- G. Evidence may include but is not limited to accounts of the respondent(s) and complainant(s), witness statements from third parties, contemporaneous notes, correspondence at the time and secondary documents directly relating to the events (this list is illustrative, and not exhaustive).
- H. An initial finding for each of the lines of enquiry, together with the supporting justification for the finding (see point D) will be presented to the church and MD. Once the initial findings have been presented, the church, MD, and the Core Group, will have the right to, within 5 working days make representations as to the veracity of the evidence and justification for the findings (but not into the finding themselves). The investigation will consider these representations and address them in the final report, outlining how they have taken these representations into account or their rationale for disregarding them.
- I. The final report will be sent to Rt Revd Pete Wilcox (Bishop of Sheffield).

Part 1 of the report, except for personal data, will be transparent to the Church, Core Group and MD.

The final report to be sent to the Right Reverend Pete Wilcox, Bishop of Sheffield.

Appendix 2

The Church's Theological Position on Human Sexuality ⁴³

1. We recognise that all of us are sinners, and that the only true hope for sinful people – whatever their sexuality or gender – is in Jesus Christ. Our earnest prayer is that his love, truth, and grace would characterise responses to debates on homosexuality and transgender, both now and in future.
2. We affirm God's love and concern for all human beings, whatever their sexuality or gender. We are encouraged many Christians now recognise and deeply regret the hurt caused by past and present failures in their responses to those who experience same-sex attraction or those who are transgender.
3. We believe that the creation narrative speaks of two distinct and compatible biological sexes. We believe that cross-gender identification is unbiblical as it distorts the creational order of male and female. We believe that we are not merely persons but at a fundamental level, we are men and women. (*Genesis 1:27*). We do not accept that holding these theological views on biblical grounds is in itself transphobic.
4. We affirm that marriage is an institution created by God in which one man and one woman (see point 3) enter into an exclusive relationship for life. Marriage (as defined in the previous sentence, not legally) is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations and homoerotic sexual practice is incompatible with His will as revealed in Scripture. We do not accept that holding these theological and ethical views on biblical grounds is in itself homophobic.
5. We want to be a community of grace in which those who experience same-sex attraction or are transgender and seek to live faithfully in accordance with biblical teaching are welcomed and affirmed (for example: same sex attraction or gender dysphoria is not sinful, sexual activity outside of marriage (see point 4) is sinful, as much for heterosexual couples as same-sex couples). All Christians need churches which are safe spaces where they can share and explore their faith with fellow believers as they support each other to grow together into maturity in Christ.
6. We do not permit leadership in ministry within the church for those who habitually engage in or pursue homoerotic sexual activity without repentance, (or any habitual sinful practice without repentance) or who publicly promote such activities.
7. We will not undertake church services of blessing for civil partnerships and other forms of gay and lesbian relationships as we believe they are unbiblical, and we reject any redefinition of marriage to encompass same-sex relationships.

⁴³ This position statement on human sexuality was produced by the Church for Core Group members in December 2021

8. We commend and encourage all those who experience same-sex attraction and have committed themselves to chastity by refraining from homoerotic sexual practice. We believe they should be eligible for leadership within ministry, recognising that they can bring invaluable insights and experience to the sphere of Christian pastoral ministry.

9. We commend and encourage all those who experience gender dysphoria but are not acting on it. We believe they should be eligible for leadership within ministry, recognising that they can bring invaluable insights and experience to the sphere of Christian pastoral ministry.

10. We believe both habitual homoerotic sexual activity or the pursuit of such activity without repentance (or any habitual sinful practice without repentance) and public promotion of such activities are inconsistent with statutory Network Church Sheffield membership.

11. We welcome everyone to church. However, we do so in the expectation that they, like all of us who are living outside God's purposes, will come in due course to see the need to be transformed and live in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox church teaching.

December 2021

Adapted from Evangelical Alliance Resources.

Appendix 3

Documents seen by the Investigation Team

What	Subject	Date (where known)	Source
Invite to FORM 2013/2014	FORM invite	Undated	MD
Email from ■ to MD with official invite	FORM invite	Sept 2013	MD
Encounter with God Weekend	Timetable including slot for Prayer Ministry	Feb 2014	■
Example (dated 2009) of letter to Prayer Ministry Team Re Encounter with God Weekend	Info to Prayer Ministry Team	Jan 2009	■
List of suggested topics for Encounter weekend	For Prayer session	undated	Sent in email from ■
Encounter with God weekend Questionnaire blank	Questionnaire	Jan 2014	MD
Encounter with God weekend MD's completed questionnaire	MD's questionnaire	Jan 2014 (approx.)	MD
Copy of 'Breaking Spirit, Soul, and Body Ties	Prayer	undated	MD/■
Notes from Feb 2014 Prayer Session	Taken by Intern in attendance	Feb 2014	■
Message posted by MD	Expressing excitement at joining 2 nd year '	July 2014	MD
Message posted by ■	'We can't wait for you to join us '	July 2014	MD
Message posted by MD	Referring to meeting with ■ and passing on links to his blogs about gay theology	Aug 2014	MD
Message posted by ■	Good to 'hang out with MD' this afternoon'	Aug 2014	MD
Message to ■ from MD	Asking for timetable so 'I can book' time at work	Sept 2014	MD
Message to MD from ■	'On it. Thanks for blog links'	Sept 2014	MD
Journal Entry	'Scared that as I come out as a gay Christian, I may lose everything'	Sept 2014	MD
Extracts from Journal	Upset at being told he was not permitted to attend Form2	Sept 2014	MD
Volunteer Job Description for MD – Student Worker	MD's Job Description	Undated, prob. Sept 2014	MD ■
Audit of student leaders (MSC) with student team	Includes MD	Jan 2015	MD
Email from ■ to Admin	Asking for key leaders list	Oct 2015	MD

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Emails from Admin to ■ confirming leaders	Attaching leaders list includes MD	Oct 2015	MD
Email MD to ■. MD 'struggling'	Concerned about Church not accepting him as gay and being a leader	Nov 2015	MD
Interim Vulnerable Adults Policy 2016	Policy in place when complaint was made.	2016	■
List of archived documents	Includes MD	Apr 2017	MD
Email from MD to admin	Asking for apology because he was forced to step down from student work	Dec 2017	
Email thread between MD and ■ (several)	■ states Church's stance on sexuality and the decision not to produce a position paper on this issue. Urges MD to speak with ■	Dec 2017 – Jan 2018	MD
Email ■ to ■	'My understanding was that MD was told he could not be in team if he was in a relationship'	Mar 2018	
Email from ■ to ■	Need to access all documents as SAR has been submitted	Apr 2019	MD
Email From ■ to ■	Confirming that all materials sent to Prayer Team in 2014 has been destroyed 'In line with policy)	April 2019	MD
Document Sex, Sexuality and Sexual Identity	Written by ■ 'School of Inner Healing and Deliverance	Nov 2019	MD
Possible Occult Demonic Entry Points	Circulated at course at STP	Undated	MD
Book: Inner Healing and Deliverance Praying to bind up the broken-hearted and set captives free	Pat Newton. Circulated at a course held in the Church November 2019.	Nov 2019	■
Letter to Bishop and the Church	Complaint	November 2019	DSA 3
Details and Summary of Complaint	Attached to Letter	[Nov 2019]	DSA3/MD
Email from Bishop to MD	Acknowledgement	November 2019	MD
Transcript of Manuscript document (1) Interviewee unnamed	Notes taken by ■ in respect of Investigation into Complaint	2.12.2019	■
Transcript of Manuscript document (2) Interviewee unnamed	Notes taken by ■ in respect of Investigation into Complaint	undated	■
Transcript of Manuscript document (3) Interviewee unnamed	Notes taken by ■ in respect of Investigation into Complaint	undated	■

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Transcript of Manuscript document (4) Interviewee unnamed	Notes taken by ■ in respect of Investigation into Complaint	undated	■
Transcript of Manuscript document (5) Interviewee unnamed	Notes taken by ■ in respect of Investigation into Complaint	5.12.2019	■
Letter to MD from Trustee	Complaint not upheld	10.12. 2019	MD ■
Interim Complaints Policy 2019	Policy adopted in January 2020	Dec 2019	■
Copy of Volunteer Agreement with NCS	Marked as Appendix 3 (may be from Sfg Policy?)	undated	■
Email from ■ to MD	Confirming that the DA2 team will undertaking further enquiries.	15.01.20	MD
Report from SO1	Recommendation	27.01.20	MD Diocese of Sheffield
Notes of Discussion between DSA 1 and Diocesan legal secretary	Need to follow up on report	Jan.21	DSA 3
Notes of Discussion with the Archdeacon	Need to establish Core Group	Jan.21	DSA3
Core Group Meeting	Minutes	04.02.21	DSA 3
Emails with LADO	Notes of discussions re safeguarding	Mar 2021 (01.03.22)	DSA 3
Core Group Meeting	Minutes	11.03.21	DSA3
Core Group Meeting	Minutes	04.05.21	DSA3
Core Group Meeting	Minutes	21.06.21	DSA3
Core Group Meeting	Minutes	26.07.21	DSA3
Core Group Meeting	Minutes	16.09.21	DSA3
Rationale for confirming that Complaint includes safeguarding concerns	Notes	05.10.21	DSA 3
Core Group Meeting	Minutes	16.12.21	DSA 3
Church's Position on Human Sexuality	Adapted from Evangelical Alliance	Dec 2021	DSA 3/ Barnardo's
Contract between Diocese and Barnardo's	Bundle	Jan 2021	
Complaint Papers shared including Terms of Reference and Appendices A- D	Agreed between the Church, the Diocese, and the Baptist Association (Core group).	Jan 2021	DSA3/ Barnardo's
Appendix D	Names Church individuals who should be asked to contribute to Investigation.	Jan 2021	DSA3/ Barnardo's

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■ Amendments to Appendix D	Some info in complaint is incorrect	Dec 2021	DSA3
Correspondence with Charity Commission	Reporting Serious Incident (but not on behalf of the Church)	Jan 2022	DSA3
Core Group Meeting	Minutes	09.06.22	DSA 3
Letter to Church	SAR request.	Mar 2022	MD
SAR Papers	Details and Church Response including 'Show Me' request in July 2022	Apr – July 2022	MD
Letter to MD from ■	Asking for permission to share contact details with Investigation team	14.07.23	MD
Letter from Bishop Diocese of Sheffield to Trustees	Concern about continued delays in being able to progress	July 2023	DSA3
Contact with individuals who asked or who agreed to contribute to Investigation.	Confidential Notes	June – November 2023	LR/JS
Bringing Me back to Me	Book published by MD	2020	Amazon

Information about Barnardo's Training and Consultancy

Barnardo's is a leading UK children's charity with over 150 years of history and experience in supporting the most vulnerable children, young people, and families across the country. In 2021/2022, Barnardo's supported work with over 357,000 children, young people, parents, and carers across 794 services and partnerships throughout the UK.⁴⁴ From day one, Barnardo's ambition has remained the same: to achieve better outcomes for more children and young people and ensure no child is left behind, regardless of their circumstances.

Barnardo's Training and Consultancy

Within Barnardo's, our Training and Consultancy is a well-established and experienced provider of Consultancy activities. Informed by our extensive expertise and in line with Barnardo's core mission and corporate strategy, our objective is to provide independent consultancy advice and support to other organisations to promote improvements and encourage best practice in safeguarding children, young people, and adults at risk. On a daily basis we are concerned with supporting other agencies to continuously improve.

Our team undertakes independent time-limited reviews and audits to help other organisations understand what is working well and what needs to change or improve; we are skilled in not just identifying areas of improvements but also in helping others understand why changes might be needed and making suggestions as to how best to achieve the change needed. Our focus is on ascertaining whether safeguarding arrangements are sufficiently robust or not, and in identifying what changes are necessary to enable progress and achievement of good practice.

We also undertake reviews of policy, procedures, and practice, historic and current, as well as independent investigations; this work helps us understand what can go wrong and ensures our delivery and audits of arrangements today is informed by lessons learnt. Ultimately, the focus of our activities is on ensuring

⁴⁴ *Barnardo's Impact Statement 2021/2022* <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/Impact%20Report%202021-22.pdf>

organisations can continuously improve their practice and embed a safeguarding culture to achieve better outcomes for any children and young people. Our team are highly experienced and have backgrounds in managing and advising on child protection. Each review and consultancy project we undertake is unique but what remains the same is our commitment to listen to the voices of those affected.