

THE GUARDIAN

[Caroline Davies](#) Thu 28 May 2015

Methodist Church in Britain apologises for historical abuse

□ The Methodist Church in Britain says it wants to be open about the past to ensure stronger safeguarding procedures in the future.

The Methodist Church in Britain has issued an “unreserved apology” for failing to protect children and adults after an independent investigation identified 1,885 reports of physical and sexual abuse within the institution dating back to the 1950s.

In a 100-page report published by the church on Thursday, ministers or lay employees are said to have been involved in a quarter of the cases, which included sexual, physical, emotional and domestic abuse as well as neglect.

In the 200 cases concerning ministers, 102 were of a sexual nature. There were six ongoing police investigations.

The report, called *Courage, Cost and Hope*, follows a three-year independent review commissioned by the church to “learn lessons of the past” and to make the church “safe for all”. The report’s author, Jane Stacey, called for major and far-reaching changes “both in practice and culture”.

Children’s charity NSPCC described it as a horrifying catalogue of abuse.

Rev Dr Martyn Atkins, general secretary of the Methodist Conference, said it was “deeply regrettable” that the church had “not always listened properly to those abused”.

“On behalf of the Methodist Church in Britain I want to express an unreserved apology for the failure of its current and earlier processes fully to protect children, young people and adults from physical and sexual abuse inflicted by some ministers,” Atkins said in a statement.

“The abuse that has been inflicted by some Methodists on children, young people and adults is and will remain a deep source of grief and shame to the church.”

The review looked at safeguarding cases for which there were written records, and also cases recalled from memory by ministers and church members going back to 1950. Cases examined include those that occurred within a church context and those reported to the church but which occurred away from it. Alleged perpetrators ranged from ministers to church attendees.

It examined each case to review whether the church's response had been safe, pastorally appropriate and compliant with legislation, and whether it had been referred to police, if that was deemed appropriate, or if other remedial action had been taken.

Stacey, former deputy chief executive of children's charity Barnardo's, said religious ministers were in an "almost unique position of trust" often at vulnerable times in people's lives. She told BBC Radio 4's Today programme there needed to be more robust accountability structures.

One case concerned the grooming of teenage girls on Facebook; another involved a youth officer who had indecent images of children on his computer.

Among victims who came forward was a man in his 30s, allegedly abused in the early 1990s by a church youth worker, who is now a lay pastor and youth worker in four churches. The alleged perpetrator has been suspended while a police investigation takes place.

The review found four alleged victims of a minister jailed for sexually assaulting children. Two of the alleged victims had made complaints which are being investigated by police. The minister was allowed to retire on compassionate grounds, which caused great offence to victims and their families, the report said.

Of the 1,885 cases, 187 alleged perpetrators were still alive and known to safeguarding teams. More than half (1,011) of the cases were closed as there was no longer an identifiable risk, while 687 cases (36%) were open to further action. Around half (914) of all cases were of a sexual nature. In 241 responses the respondent felt that matters were not left safely and that there may still be a risk to children or vulnerable adults.

Children aged under 18 made up 34% of victims. Those over 18 made up 31%, and the ages of the rest were unknown. Almost half (46%) of victims in the cases were female, and 19% male but in 29% the gender of the victim was unknown.

One victim told the review team: "I have learned that it is impossible to recover from sexual abuse when no one recognises the seriousness of it. My church did not want a scandal, my parents did not want a scandal. I was left to feel worthless and devalued, while the man was left to get on with his life and, for all I know, repeat the crime with someone else. "

Others welcomed the report and opportunity to tell their story. "A candle is lit and it is no longer completely dark," said one. "I want to prevent the church and other people from handling things wrong in the future. I don't want other girls to suffer like I have".

Law firm Leigh Day, representing a group of individuals taking action against the Methodist Church who allege they were abused by a church missionary in Africa in the 1980s, welcomed the investigation. "It has taken my clients over 30 years to have the courage to come forward with their allegations of abuse against the Methodist Church," said Nichola Marshall, the firm's head of international abuse.

“They welcome this public acknowledgment by the Methodist Church as they have faced criticism and disapproval from members of the community for speaking out in the past”.