



**Christian Safeguarding Services**

# **Pioneer Trust Safeguarding Learning Review**

## **Executive summary**

**Review conducted by:**

**Laura Russell**

**Mark Long**

**Paul Harrison**

**Date: 20<sup>th</sup> May 2024**

## **Introduction.**

Christian Safeguarding Services (CSS) have been commissioned by Pioneer Trust (PT) to conduct an external, independent safeguarding review, arising from concerns raised about the ministry practice of their late founder Gerald Coates (GC).

CSS are grateful to all those who have contributed to this review. We especially recognise the input of those who took the time to recount painful experiences, which for some had been dormant for decades, and which were difficult to revisit and share with the reviewers. We are also grateful for the contributions of both current and past Trustees, members of the National Leadership Team (NLT) and staff who have answered all our questions and provided access to all the information and records that we have requested. This has been a challenging process for them too. Their cooperation and the candour with which our questions have been answered has greatly helped the process. Our impression is that the contributions have been open and transparent.

The full report has also been made available, but this summary seeks to capture the key findings and recommendations from what is, a lengthy and detailed document.

The review sought to understand as clearly as possible the extent and nature of inappropriate practice, and the response of Pioneer Trust to concerns that were known by them. The scope of the review did not extend to concerns about individual Pioneer Churches, as these are independent charities with their own trustees. It should also be noted that this review was not a wide-ranging culture review that aimed to hear both positive and negative experiences. Rather, it only sought to identify concerns. Consequently, the review reports focus on areas that require improvement. CSS recognise that there are many people who have benefited greatly from the work of PT. However, the harmful experiences that some have reported must not be minimised.

## **Context and background.**

Pioneer traces its history back to the late 1960's as part of what is often referred to as the New Church or charismatic movement. GC was a leading figure in this movement in the UK and beyond. By the mid-1980s, churches were connecting as a network of independent churches, giving rise to the development of the Pioneer Trust, an organisation that in its own words "connects, inspires and equips" its member churches. GC was prominent in PT and was the first national leader.

By 2014, several factors coalesced:

Firstly, approaching his 70's, GC had handed the leadership of Pioneer Trust to Billy Kennedy (BK) and GC himself had no official role within PT. As the founder of Pioneer, and someone who was recognised as having a prophetic gifting, he was still held in high regard within Pioneer and beyond, but the influence that he held was now informal and he did not act in an official capacity for PT. He continued to attend Pioneer Trust events and continued to minister within the local church context and beyond but did so in an independent capacity. By 2014, there was a growing concern amongst PT leaders that some of GC's ministry practices fell short of the standards that they expected. The leaders began to address these concerns with him. Throughout the process of addressing these concerns, which extended over a number of years, PT leaders sought, and followed, advice from Thirtyone:eight (formerly CCPAS) who are their external independent safeguarding advisors.

Secondly, GC had, since the late 1990s been concerned about the influence of an increasingly sexualised society on Christians in the UK and other places. He saw the use of pornography and related private sexual behaviours as a major challenge, both for the spiritual wellbeing of individual believers and for the health and spiritual mission of the church. In 2013, he published a book on the subject, which had already become a significant focus in his ministry.

Thirdly, GC was convinced of the need to raise up and develop a new generation of leaders in the church. The major focus of this involved young adults; usually late teens – mid 20's.

At this point, some further background information is worth noting. Three points in particular are worthy of attention:

1. GC had spoken during the earlier part of his ministry about his own early experiences of same-sex attraction; some participants reporting that he had described himself in public meetings as an “ex-homosexual”. At the time of his death, he had been married to his wife for more than 50 years. Having married in 1967, by this stage they had adult sons.
2. One of the key distinctives of the Pioneer movement, shaped by GC himself was the conviction that, as their website states, “We value the contribution of both women and men at every level of leadership”.
3. By the 2010s, understanding of safeguarding both children and adults, and national expectations in relation to safeguarding practice had developed significantly since the early days of GC's ministry.

The specific concerns that were developing within the PT leadership at the time concerned how GC related to young men; most of whom were young adults in their late teens – mid 20's. It is important to note that the concern was not that GC was behaving in a sexually inappropriate way, but rather that his conduct did not meet the standards expected at the time, that he was not respecting personal boundaries, and that his behaviour could be misunderstood as having a sexual motivation.

Two practices in particular are concerning. The first was that during public events and in public spaces, GC would, prophesy over and pray for young men. This in itself was not problematic, however, within this context, two main concerns were identified:

1. On some occasions, it was felt that the intensity and duration of these prophesy and prayer times was not in line with expectations.
2. Following the prophesy and prayer, GC would often seek to make personal contact with the individual; seeking to exchange contact details, or tracing and then approach them through social media.

The second was the use of the “Holy Kiss”. This involved a kiss on the cheek, not dissimilar to that which is practiced in many cultures, but which is not common in UK culture; particularly so when interacting with someone previously unknown to an individual.

### **Review conclusions and findings.**

It is important to note that this review has not, due to his death in 2022, heard GC's voice directly. While the reviewers spoke to people who worked closely with him over the years and who would describe him as a friend, his own voice is obviously absent. It is also important to recognise that it is impossible to judge motives and intentions and that particular care must be taken given that GC's voice could not be heard.

The review heard from more than 30 people; some of whom knew each other but most of whom, so far as CSS can tell, had not had previous contact. The information supplied suggests a consistent pattern of behaviour that falls significantly short of expected standards at the time. CSS affirm the concerns of the PT leadership and agree with the advice provided by Thirtyone: eight. PT acted upon the advice that they received, and GC did modify his behaviour to some degree, however, overall, the interventions were not as effective as would have been hoped.

One discernible pattern of behaviour was that GC would approach a young man, often after a public meeting and would share a prophetic word with them. This prophetic word was usually encouraging and identified in some way that God's hand was upon them, that they were special and that they would be future leaders in the church. He would then seek to establish contact with them; usually by offering, or at least appearing to offer

some sort of mentoring or spiritual leadership development. Establishing contact took varying forms including giving them his business card, exchanging phone numbers (at the time), or searching them out using social media later and approaching them, usually by Facebook message.

A second pattern was greeting them with the “holy kiss”, sometimes accompanied by a reference to scripture as a justification. This was done without prior consent or explanation.

Another identifiable pattern was that GC would approach young men that he had never met in person using social media. He would often offer a prophetic word of encouragement and then seek to establish ongoing contact.

Once contact had been established, he would start very quickly to question them about their use of pornography, masturbation etc. He would ask detailed questions about the type of pornography and about their accompanying sexual activity. This would happen without invitation in a conversation that the young man believed related to the prophetic word that they had previously been given.

On some occasions, Gerald apparently approached people indicating that he could be a father figure to them and that he believed God had called him to this.

As a result of this review, examples of all of the behaviours described, many of which were not known by PT leaders at the time, were reported. Most involved young adults, but there were 2 (possibly 3 as the age of one is unclear) who were in their mid-teens and one, who was aged 12-13, who it appears was contacted directly via social media. This behaviour would, both now and at the time that it occurred, be regarded as a safeguarding concern that should have been raised with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO).

While contact with under 18s is the most concerning behaviour from a safeguarding and legal perspective, contact with young adults was much more commonly reported. Some of these felt violated by the “holy kiss” but felt unable to object. Others were subjected to unexpected and detailed questioning about their sexual desires and practices. This conduct would in a similar professional context be considered unacceptable and a breach of trust. Others felt privileged to have received a prophetic word and an offer of mentoring from GC, but then felt let down when their expectations were not met.

It is important to remember that GC’s voice could not be heard, however there were consistent and discernible patterns. Some individuals appear to have been harmed emotionally, psychologically and spiritually, and attribute that to their contact with GC and / or PT.

Most of the accounts provided during this review were unknown to PT, however, some concerns were reported to them. PT sought and followed the advice of Thirtyone:eight (formerly known as CCPAS). PT leaders raised these matters with GC. While some of his behaviours were modified, concerns remained, and the interventions initiated saw limited success.

The single most significant missed opportunity reported to the reviewers involved contact with a 12–13-year-old. This is particularly concerning in light of the wider concerns that were known at the time. This event, even in isolation, should have been passed to the LADO. The incident came to light when it was reported to another local charity, who state that they raised the matter with both GC’s church and PT. The charities records were incomplete. Based on the partial records, CSS conclude that it is more likely than not that the events occurred broadly as described, however we cannot be confident that the young person’s age was clearly communicated. Neither the church, nor PT have either recollection or records of the conversations described. While it is impossible to say what the outcome of a report to the Local Authority would have been, the fact that none of the organisations involved reported the information was a significant failure and a missed opportunity to add weight to the actions of PT to address GC’s concerning behaviours.

Prior to 2018, charities which do not engage in regulated activity (i.e. working with children, young people, or adults with care and support needs (as defined in the Care Act) were not required to have safeguarding policies in place. PT had a policy and procedures in place from the early 2010's. The key question for the review was more focused on the effectiveness of the safeguarding arrangements.

As stated above, PT does not engage in any regulated activity, however churches within the network do. PT has invested considerable time, energy, and finance in supporting its churches to ensure that safeguarding arrangements are in place. However, in doing so, they have not analysed with sufficient clarity, the safeguarding risks that they themselves need to manage. The focus of activity and the policies and procedures are more suited to the individual churches than to the network organisation. All of the safeguarding arrangements need to be reviewed to ensure that the charity's own activity is adequately covered. Many of the review recommendations relate to this. There is undoubtedly a desire in PT to ensure that safeguarding is prioritised and that both the trust, and churches that are part of the network give safeguarding the attention it requires. However, this review raises questions about the role and responsibilities of the Trust, its relationship to its churches and the way that their theology impacts safeguarding; both positively and negatively. These "big picture" questions need to be addressed. From there, the Trust can and should proceed to review its policies and practices.

The review recommendations are provided at the end of this report.

## **Conclusions**

As has previously been stated, this review was not able to hear GC's voice. There is also a lack of documentary evidence to establish many facts. These conclusions must, therefore, be understood in that context.

There is no doubt that some of the ministry practices discovered during the review fall significantly short of the standards expected. CSS agree with the advice given by Thirtyone:eight and have seen evidence that the advice was not only sought but followed. PT had reached a decision that if GC did not adhere to the expected standards, they would dissociate from him. This had not been deemed necessary prior to his death in 2022.

CSS are unable to draw any conclusions in relation to GC's likely motives and intentions. There is no evidence to suggest that he attempted to engage in any inappropriate conduct beyond that described in the main review report.

Overall, CSS affirm that PT have expressed and demonstrated a serious commitment to safeguarding, were willing to take difficult decisions such as the in-principle decision to dissociate from their founder if he failed to operate in line with the expected standards, and have expressed a strong desire to learn lessons and strengthen practice. There is now, however, the need for this to be backed up with clear action to address the "big picture" questions with sufficient depth, precision, clarity of thought and analysis, and then to tailor the safeguarding arrangements to better reflect the activities and safeguarding risks that they themselves face.

Over recent years the prevailing view has been that safeguarding should be rooted in and shaped by the organisation's core values and beliefs. CSS believe that Pioneer could strengthen their practice still further with careful consideration of how their theology impacts safeguarding practice both positively and negatively.

Before proceeding to the recommendations, CSS wish to emphasise one final point. This review has identified weaknesses that need to be addressed, however, as stated in the previous paragraph, there is a strong commitment to safeguarding among the leadership of PT. CSS are aware that often in such situations, questions are asked about the leadership's suitability for their role on an ongoing basis. CSS are deliberately and consciously not recommending that any leaders should step down in response to the findings of this review. Not only do we conclude that this is not necessary, we wish to go further and state that we believe that the Trustees, staff and NLT have the necessary commitment to drive the change that is needed. It is our view

that to call for resignations would be inappropriate, unjust, and could potentially impact negatively on the action that is now required.

Once again, CSS wish to thank all of those who have participated in this review. It is our hope and prayer that this information will aid Pioneer Trust and its churches as they move forwards.

## **Recommendations**

In light of this review, CSS recommend:

1. That PT conduct a rigorous self-audit of all safeguarding arrangements across the charity. (CSS have an audit tool that can be downloaded from their website which may be helpful.)
2. That PT conduct competence and training gaps analysis to identify training and skills development needs and then address those gaps across the trust.
3. That PT conduct a thorough review of their policies and procedures, ensuring that they align with the trust's activities rather than simply adapting a policy developed for churches.
4. That the trustees of PT prioritise safeguarding and develop processes by which they can assure themselves of the implementation and effectiveness of the safeguarding arrangements.
5. That PT develops a plan to embed safeguarding into the organisational processes and culture so as to minimise the personal dependence upon a small group of individuals.
6. That PT adopts a proportionate but effective safe recruitment process for all staff and volunteers.
7. That PT leaders consider how they will keep their knowledge of safeguarding requirements and practice current and relevant.
8. That PT considers developing robust codes of conduct and ministry practice standards.
9. That PT carefully considers the implications of its theology and ministry practice for safeguarding; particularly when involved in ministry to children and young people.
10. That PT reviews its practices around recording, retaining, and sharing information.
11. That PT reviews its roles and responsibilities and clearly communicates its approach to working with other organisations including its network churches.
12. That PT considers setting clear standards of conduct and practice for the network churches and establish processes for addressing sub-standard practice.
13. That PT reviews its approach to information sharing with network churches where a safeguarding risk is identified.
14. That PT develop a clear action plan to monitor progress in these areas.