

Church Times Outlook Search

Title What it's like to be accused

Author Jan Loxley

Date 21 February 2003

Article More people than Sally Clark have been falsely charged with child abuse, says Jan Loxley

ON 29 JANUARY, the Court of Appeal found Sally Clark innocent of the murder of two of her sons. She had spent more than three years in prison, away from her husband and remaining son. Her innocence had been proclaimed in the House of Lords on 17 October 2001, yet she spent another 15 months in gaol.

Our 12-year-old son was with us in the Lords for this debate on false accusations of child abuse. He noticed with amazement that several bishops, present for a debate on the countryside, left when the first speech about children began. He knew that Christ cared for children, and had hoped that they were at least as important to his Church as foxes.

One bishop remained. Despite material we had sent, those who had briefed him did not even begin to understand the issues involved. The Churches have been so terrified of criticism that they have failed to consider the question of mothers falsely accused of child abuse. We asked for bread, but they did not offer even a stone in response. Letters to Lambeth Palace were never answered.

I had been the subject of a witch-hunt when our son developed post-viral fatigue, after pneumonia. This developed into chronic fatigue syndrome, known as CFS/ME. I was suspected of abusing our son, by inventing or causing his illness ("over-anxious parenting"). An expensive and time-consuming child-protection inquiry was undertaken, during which both our children were briefly on the "at risk" register, and we feared our son could be taken away from us.

He has a subtle form of autism. Pioneering work at Sunderland University has established that inability to metabolise gluten often underlies this. He was referred to University College Hospital, where a professor involved with the Sunderland research recommended the removal of wheat from his diet, thereby transforming his health, temperament and education. Nevertheless, this was cited as evidence of abuse, as wheat exclusion makes school dinners and children's parties more difficult.

Our social worker deliberately withheld explanatory information about allergy and immunology from the child-protection conference, just as, in Sally Clark's case, microbiology information was withheld from the court.

Many people believed that there could be “no smoke without fire”, and shunned our family. It was distressing that many were associated with our parish church, where we were married and our children baptised. The parish priest had been fed false information about us by social workers (who had never met the children), and sat unhelpfully on the fence throughout. We felt isolated and betrayed.

As in Sally Clark’s case, we were eventually cleared because we were educated and middle class, with connections. We could fight. Our children’s names were removed from the at-risk register when a senior councillor and our MP, both of whom knew us, spoke up. Most of the people wrongly accused have nobody to speak for them, and are not equipped to fight so well.

In November 2002, our local education authority (LEA) agreed a “statement of special educational need”, based largely on evidence disregarded during the child-protection inquiry, which makes excellent provision for our son. When we met senior officers of the LEA to plan this, we took with us our URC minister. He changed the whole tone of the meeting when he reassured the officers that he saw us as a normal family. His son played happily with our daughter, and he had observed our son’s difficulties, which he was sure were real. The officers relaxed, and we had a very productive meeting. We wondered afterwards whether the child-protection investigation could have been nipped in the bud had our former parish priest been prepared to speak up for us like this.

THROUGH the organisation Parents, Professionals and Politicians Protecting Children with Illness and/or Disability, I have been in contact with dozens of women, whom I believe to be innocent, but who have been wrongly accused of harming their children, on the basis of hearsay and fabricated or withheld evidence.

Several of these have church connections, but almost all have been shunned by congregations and church officials, who have taken the attitude “guilty until proven innocent”. I know of only one case in which the parish priest, the Revd John Guest, and the Bishop of Bradwell, the Rt Revd Laurie Green, have given their support to help a mother whom they believe to be innocent.

In the Lords debate in October 2001, several speakers drew parallels between false accusations of child abuse and medieval witch trials. On Thursday of last week, a BBC documentary, Cot Death Mothers: The witch-hunt, strongly criticised the part played by some expert witnesses, in particular Professor Sir Roy Meadow. Other experts are also being examined.

The witch trials ended when the judges refused to accept any more spectral evidence. The Churches today must put pressure on the Government and the judiciary to refuse to accept malicious rumour. Annual figures from the

Department of Health (for example, Messages from Research — Child Protection, 1995) suggest that more than 80 per cent of child-abuse claims have no substantive basis. The statistics are similar in the United States and Australia.

In a paper to the United Campaigns Against False Allegations of Abuse conference in November, the distinguished social-work consultant Charles Pragnell quoted research showing that false allegation causes long-term damage to children.

This was true for us. Our daughter, who was five at the time we were investigated, became fearful of being taken from me, and lost much of her independence; this has never been fully regained. I overheard two of her friends plotting how they would rescue her if she were taken into care.

The media are at long last asking questions about Angela Cannings and other imprisoned mothers. I urge people to examine the issue of false accusations of child abuse, and to seek evidence from the hundreds of parents and children who have suffered by being so accused. These families deserve the loving support of the Churches.