

Article submitted to CHURCH TIMES.

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Original title:

“Sally Clark and other innocent mothers. How will the churches respond?”

Retitled “What it feels like to be wrongly accused”.

On 29th January this year the Court of Appeal found Sally Clark innocent of the murder of two of her sons. She had spent over three years in prison away from her husband and remaining son. Her innocence had been proclaimed in the House of Lords on 17th October 2001, when Lord Mitchell, who knew her father, had spoken during the debate on False Accusations of Child Abuse. Nevertheless, Sally spent another 15 months in jail.

Our 12-year-old son and his best friend were with us in the Lords for this debate. They noticed with amazement that several Bishops, present for the debate on the countryside, left the chamber when the Opposition Health Spokesperson, Earl Howe, stood to open the debate about children! Our son and his friend thought that Christ cared for children, and had hoped that they were at least as important to His Church as were the hounds, deer and foxes.

One solitary Bishop remained. It seemed to us that, 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 possible criticism that they have hidden in a bunker and failed to consider the question of the witch-hunt against mothers falsely accused of child abuse. We asked for bread but they did not offer even a stone in their response to this debate. Letters to Lambeth Palace were never answered.

After the debate we introduced our local URC Minister to a Baroness who had spoken in the debate. We told her of the welcome extended to us by his church and their support for the embryonic organisation “Parents, Professionals & Politicians Protecting Children with Illness and / or Disability” which aims to assist families wrongly accused of harming their particularly vulnerable children. She said that this was “a very proper role for the Church to take” .

Speaking at the United Campaigns Against False Allegations of Abuse (UCAFAA) conference in London in November 2002, Earl Howe told of a letter from a woman in North London (me), which had alerted him to the “parallel world of false accusation” and had prompted his research on this subject. His research had led to the Lords debate of 17 10 01 and to his pivotal role, with Claire Curtis Thomas MP. in the “All Parliamentary Group on False Allegations of Abuse” .

My letter told how I had been the subject of a witch-hunt, when our son developed post viral fatigue following pneumonia. This developed into Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, known as CFS/ME. I was suspected of abusing our son, by supposedly inventing or causing his illness. In the Lords on 17 10 01 the Countess of Mar said that: " I am reminded of the witch hunts of previous centuries. This time, the victims are frequently nice middle class families whose only fault is to be concerned about their child, who has ill-defined symptoms from which he or she does not rapidly recover. ..., some social workers.....are not prepared to consider that those conditions might be organic."

An extremely expensive and time consuming Child Protection Inquiry was undertaken during which both of our children were briefly on the " At Risk" register and we feared that they could be taken from us. This was at exactly the same time as neighbouring Haringey appear to have had insufficient resources to save the life of Victoria Climbié. Social workers appeared to prefer attending innumerable meetings to discuss families like ours rather than visiting children in real need like Victoria. Of course they did not have to fear they would catch scabies in meetings!

Our son has a subtle form of Autism. Pioneering work at Sunderland University has established that inability to metabolise gluten often underlies this condition. After his pneumonia our son was referred to UCH where a professor involved with the Sunderland research recommended the removal of wheat from our son's 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. In Sally's case microbiology information was withheld from the Court. I was accused of imagining or inducing our son's illness and disability. Sally went to prison accused of killing her sons.

Many people believed that there could be " no smoke without fire" and shunned our family supposing that Social Workers must be custodians of the truth. It was distressing that many of these were associated with our Parish Church where we were married and our children baptised. Information seeped from the Parish undermining my social standing and my role in social justice issues at Area level and beyond.

The Parish Priest had been fed hypothetical information about us from Social Workers (who had never met the children) via the Church School and therefore sat unhelpfully on the fence throughout the whole proceedings. Conjecture took precedence over the observations of parishioners who had known the children from the moment they showed as pregnant bulges. We felt isolated and betrayed

As in Sally Clark's case we were eventually cleared because we were educated and middle class with connections and could fight. Our children's

names were removed from the register when a senior councillor and our MP, both of whom knew us, spoke up for us. Most of the people wrongly accused are not so highly educated, have nobody to speak up for them and are not able to fight so well.

In July 1999 our Local Education Authority cited our fight for a "Statement of Special Educational Need" (which would recognise our son's difficulties and make specialised educational provision available to him), as evidence of abuse. In November 2002 they agreed a flexible, innovative "Statement" which makes excellent provision for him, based largely on evidence disregarded during the Child Protection inquiry. My subsequent relief has given me some insight into how Sally must feel on her release – at long last free of the stigma of false accusation! Christmas 2002 was the first time for four years that I was able to return to Midnight Mass.

Nevertheless the spectre of false accusation lives on in files and we still sometimes find day-to-day negotiation with health and education personnel difficult. Last week, on 12 02 03, Earl Howe pointed out in the Lords "Once the label of child abuse has been attached to a parent it is extremely difficult to remove. Yet we know that there are many hard to diagnose conditions that have been mistaken for parental maltreatment with devastating consequences for families."

When we finally met senior officers of the LEA to plan for our son's education, we took with us our URC Minister. The Minister changed the whole tone of the meeting when he reassured LEA officers that he saw us as a normal family with our understandable ups and downs and that his son played happily with our daughter and that he had observed our son's difficulties, which he was quite sure were real. The officers relaxed and we had a very productive meeting. We wondered afterwards if 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 at the start of the whole affair?

I have previous experience of campaigning for children's services and am determined that our ordeal was not in vain. "Parents, Professionals and Politicians Protecting Children with Illness and / or Disability" has a postal address of Finchley & Whetstone URC, Victoria Avenue, London N3 and an e-mail address on my computer. I have been in contact with dozens of women, whom I believe to be innocent, but who have been wrongfully accused of harming their children, on the basis of hearsay and fabricated or withheld evidence. Several of these have Church connections but have, almost all, been shunned by congregations and church officials who have taken the attitude "guilty until proven innocent". I know of only one case where the parish priest, Rev John Guest, and his Bishop, Rt Rev Laurie Green, have given their support to help a mother whom they believe to be innocent.

In the Lords on 17 10 01 Earl Howe, Lady Mar and Lord Tim Clement-Jones CBE each drew parallels between false accusations of child abuse and the medieval “Malleus Maleficarum” (Witch Hammer), or the Salem Witch Trials and the House Committee on Un-American Activities as portrayed in Miller’s “Crucible”. Lord Clement Jones said: “The line of cases through Rochdale, Cleveland and the Orkneys must surely convince us all of the dangers. Use by a powerful group of individuals--paediatricians, social workers and the police--of some dubious diagnostic technique or social work theory,.... can lead to massive injustice and family break-up without any objective justification at all.”

Media reports of Professor Sir Roy Meadows (BBC documentary on the Sally Clark case) and Professor David Southall (North Staffordshire “Sentinel”) portray them as our modern day Kramer and Sprenger (authors of the “Malleus”). Arthur Miller’s Millennium essay “The Crucible in History” provides further insight.

The witch trials ended when the judges refused to accept any more spectral evidence. The churches today must put pressure on government and judiciary to refuse to accept hearsay, malicious rumour and twisted words. Governmental figures produced in the U.K. (Dept of Health) and in the U.S.A. and in Australia show that over 80% of child abuse reports "Have no substantive basis" i.e. they are false accusations.

In a paper to the UCAAFA conference the Social Work Consultant Charles Pragnell suggested that being involved in child abuse investigations causes immense damage to children and families. He quotes research documents pointing out that the effect of false allegation is not a benign or neutral process but causes long-term damage to the children concerned. This was very true for us. Our daughter who was five at the time we were investigated lost much of her sense of independence in her fear of being taken from me; this has never been fully regained. Her best friend at the time was the daughter of a godchild of the then Archbishop of Canterbury. One day, after school, I overheard this little girl and another friend plotting how they would rescue our daughter if she was taken from them into care. Many innocent children thus lost their trust in adults who should protect them.

The media are at long last asking questions about Angela Cannings and other probably innocent but imprisoned mothers. I urge Church leaders of all denominations to examine the issue of false accusations of child abuse and to seek evidence from the many hundreds of parents and children who have suffered by being so accused. These families need and deserve the loving support and understanding of the churches.

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