

Statement for Heybridge St Andrew and St George and Langford St Giles

by the Venerable Elizabeth Snowden, Archdeacon of Chelmsford - 7 May 2017

I am here with you today to share with you the latest developments in the case of Peter Low, who had been vicar here. My first announcement to you was last summer to inform you that Peter had been suspended from all his duties as soon as the Church was informed of the Police investigation. At the beginning of April I confirmed that Peter had pleaded guilty in court to downloading indecent or prohibited images of children from the internet.

Peter Low returned to Chelmsford Crown Court for sentencing last Tuesday 2 May. He was convicted, following a guilty plea, of three counts of possessing indecent images of children and one count of possessing a prohibited image of a child. The charges related to images downloaded from the internet.

Peter Low was sentenced to a three year community order and 150 hours unpaid work. He was ordered to complete the Sex Offender Treatment Programme and ten rehabilitation activity days. He will be subject to a five year Sexual Harm Prevention Order.

This is a very serious matter and it is important that you should know how the Church is responding. The Diocese of Chelmsford has issued a statement in response to enquiries from the media about Peter's sentencing as follows:

"Mr Low was convicted, following a guilty plea, of three counts of possessing indecent images of children and one count of possessing a prohibited image of a child. The charges related to images downloaded from the internet.

The Diocese of Chelmsford, where he had been a vicar, worked in partnership with the Police throughout their investigation. He is now liable to a penalty, including prohibition from ministry for life.

We take a zero-tolerance approach to child abuse. The crime of online child abuse was no less serious because the victims were unknown to the perpetrator and did not come from any of the parishes in which he had worked. Child abuse is a crime that destroys childhoods. We are horrified by the devastating impact that online child abuse has on society.

We train people with safeguarding responsibilities in our parishes to understand their responsibilities and refer concerns appropriately. Anyone with any further information about this matter is asked to call Essex Police on 101.

We are offering pastoral support and are keeping all those affected by the situation in our prayers.

Mr Low was suspended from all his duties as soon as the Church was informed of the Police investigation. He resigned but remains suspended pending a streamlined disciplinary process which can now begin.”

I would just like to take this opportunity to explain what this means.

Firstly, all of us in the Church of England stand united against the abuse of children. In the Diocese of Chelmsford we employ and resource a professional Safeguarding team who are committed to keeping everyone safe. It is important that as parishes you continue to support your parish safeguarding representatives and also ensure you follow the guidance in the Diocesan Safeguarding Policy with regard to good practice.

Secondly, a number of pastoral concerns have been raised around baptisms and weddings. Both baptisms and weddings are still valid regardless of Peter’s actions and his conviction.

Thirdly, concerns have been raised about the welfare of local children. None of the indecent or prohibited images from the internet which were found on peter’s computer were of local children. However, this does not mean that this crime has not destroyed childhoods.

Fourthly, although Peter has resigned, he remains suspended. The police investigation and the court process are now completed. He will now, however, face a process under the Clergy Discipline Measure which will bring a penalty under the Measure.

Fourthly, we will continue to offer pastoral support and ongoing practical support to enable the life of these three churches to continue and to move forward. We, that is myself and other senior staff in the diocese are extremely grateful for the hard work and commitment of your three churches, especially that of the licensed lay ministers and churchwardens, through what has been an incredibly difficult period. We are planning to sell the existing vicarage and will work with you so that in due course there will be a new incumbent in a new Vicarage to serve and live in your parishes.

There will be copies of this letter available should anyone wish to have a copy. I will continue to offer pastoral support for members of these churches.

We pray today that our church will be a place of safety where each and every person can flourish.