Opinion
Guest Voices
Former Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury

Former Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury is pictured at Westminster Abbey in London May 6, 2023. He announced his resignation Nov. 12, due to failures in dealing with a clerical sexual abuse case in the Church of England. (OSV News/Andrew Milligan, pool via Reuters)



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The Church of England, the mother church of the worldwide Anglican Communion, was left reeling on Nov. 12 after the unprecedented decision Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby to resign.

Welby had at first seemed reluctant to accept what was apparent to nearly everybody else who has been following the decades-long saga of sadistic abuser John Smyth — that he would have to go. It came to a head last week with the publication of a long-awaited and damning report into the abuse and the church's attempt over many years to cover it up.

Welby, who is cited repeatedly in the review, failed to report the abuse by Smyth when he first became aware of it in 2013 and failed to fulfill initial promises to meet survivors. Smyth abused as many as 130 boys and young men. He moved to

Zimbabwe and South Africa, where the abuse continued until shortly before he died in 2018. There was at least one mysterious death of a boy in Zimbabwe.

Victims were recruited from elite institutions such as Winchester College, and the evangelical summer camps he ran and which Welby himself had attended as a young man. They were beaten to ribbons in Smyth's garden shed, some having to wear diapers for days afterwards to stem the flow of blood. Welby has repeatedly insisted he knew nothing of what went on during this time.

When the review was published, with its forensic analysis of Smyth's activities and inaction by the Church of England, Welby apologized but said that he had spoken to his advisers and did not intend to resign, given that he knew nothing of Smyth's abuse before 2013. The report itself says it is "unlikely that Justin Welby would have no knowledge of the concerns regarding John Smyth in the 1980's in the UK" but Welby remains adamant that this is the case.

As pressure grew over the weekend and on Nov. 11 for Welby to go, a killer blow was dealt by Rev. Giles Fraser, the influential Church of England cleric and commentator, on Nov. 12. He gave a powerful interview to BBC Radio 4's flagship "Today" program and also wrote an article covering similar themes on the Unherd website, He outlined the sadistic abuse he suffered as a child, not in church but in a secular context of a school. He spelled out to a transfixed nation the untenable position of the archbishop of Canterbury, given the content of the review. After that, it was only a matter of hours before Welby offered his resignation to King Charles III, supreme governor of the established Church of England.

Former Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury, Pope Francis and other ecumenical le

Former Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury, far right, Pope Francis and other ecumenical leaders pray before the tomb of St. Paul during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls Jan. 25. Also pictured, from the left are: Anglican Archbishop Ian Ernest, Archbishop Diego Giovanni Ravelli, Orthodox Metropolitan Polykarpos of Italy, Cardinal Kurt Koch and (CNS/Vatican Media)

Welby's ill-advised resolve to apologize but not to resign prompted incredulous outrage up to the highest levels of the establishment, and right through to the grassroots of the church. It was clear from Facebook, X, the Thinking Anglicans

website and other general news feeds that his number was up. More than 13,000 people had by Nov. 12 signed a petition set up by three influential members of the General Synod of the Church of England calling on him to go. That on its own would have been difficult to overcome. And breaking out from the normally closed ranks of the hierarchy, an actual diocesan leader intervened. Newcastle Bishop Helen-Ann Hartley told the BBC: "I think rightly people are asking the question 'Can we really trust the Church of England to keep us safe?' And I think the answer at the moment is 'no.' "

In his Unherd article, Fraser noted that as early as 1981, reports were being written about what Smyth was up to. Fraser said, "It was, the Makin Report concludes, an open secret amongst a whole variety of people connected with the Conservative Evangelical network, and badly kept. So the Makin Report is surely correct soberly to conclude it is unlikely that Justin Welby didn't know."

In his resignation statement, Welby admitted it was in the best interests of the Church of England that he step down.

"I hope this decision makes clear how seriously the Church of England understands the need for change and our profound commitment to creating a safer church," he said. "For nearly twelve years I have struggled to introduce improvements. It is for others to judge what has been done."

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So what happens next?

One man who chronicled Smyth's abuse in some detail in his book *Bleeding for Jesus: John Smyth and the cult of Iwerne Camps* is Andrew Graystone, who coincidentally wrote a feature in last week's Tablet about the Canterbury succession. Welby was due to retire in January 2026, when he turns 70.

There is growing speculation that now might be the time to choose the first ever female archbishop of Canterbury. Bishop Hartley, who had called for Welby to go, is among those Graystone named as a possible replacement, along with Bishop of Gloucester Rachel Treweek. Another possible female frontrunner is Bishop of Chelmsford Guli Francis-Dehqani, whose father was the Anglican Bishop of Iran, who survived an assassination attempt.

The appointment of the next archbishop of Canterbury will be made by the king after the name is passed to him by the prime minister, who will act on the recommendation of the Crown Nominations Commission. This is the body that will actually do the choosing, which will involve a lengthy period of consultation. The commission will submit one name to the prime minister and hold a second in reserve, in case the chosen candidate declines or for some other reason cannot take up the post. Given the present turmoil in the Church of England, with this latest scandal illustrating the difficulty it is having getting to grips with the demands of safeguarding in the 21st century, no outcome can be discounted.

But besides the plight of the victims, whose suffering at last has a chance of being properly acknowledged after decades of cover-up and denial, there are other serious — and interesting — implications of this terrible episode to be considered. King Charles III is passionate and well-informed about his faith, about the Church of England and especially the Prayer Book version, about Orthodox Christianity. While the future queen is likely to take an active part in the church, her husband, the king's son and heir, William, has never tried to hide his lack of real interest, although he will certainly do his duty. This week, the prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, notably failed to back Welby, instead commenting on how very badly Smyth's victims had been failed. Already, there is a growing clamor for the church's bishops to be ejected from the House of Lords. Disestablishment in some form is looking increasingly likely in a future that seems less distant by the day. That's if there's anything left to disestablish.