

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby to resign over handling of youth abuse scandal

by [David Paulsen](#)

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Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. (Photo by Neil Turner/for the Lambeth Conference)

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby will resign under pressure for his delayed response to extensive and devastating allegations of “physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual attacks” by a British lawyer on young victims he met at youth camps tied to the Church of England.

Welby, 68, [announced his resignation in a statement released November 12](#), acknowledging that a newly released investigative report “has exposed the long-

maintained conspiracy of silence about the heinous abuses of John Smyth.”

“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. As I step down I do so in sorrow with all victims and survivors of abuse,” Welby said.

“The last few days have renewed my long-felt and profound sense of shame at the historic safeguarding failures of the Church of England.”

Welby had faced pressure to step down since the November 7 release of [a 253-page report detailing the independent investigation](#) led by Keith Makin. The Makin report documented “prolific, brutal and horrific” attacks by Smyth on more than 100 boys and young men starting in the late 1970s. Smyth first participated in the Iwerne camps in 1964 at age 22. Invited by a camp leader who saw him as “a strong Christian and a gifted barrister,” Smyth “made rapid progress through the ranks” of camp leaders and began grooming boys for abuse around 1974.

“Several of the victims’ accounts indicate their experience of sexual abuse, particularly describing John Smyth kissing them, draping himself and/or his arms over them, nakedness and other indicators of sexual abuse,” the report found. It also cited instances of Smyth taking victims to a shed and beating them repeatedly with cane while they were partially naked.

Some Anglican officials were informed of the abuse as early as 1982 but did not report it to police or to higher authorities in the church, the investigation found.

The report says Welby and other top Church of England officials first learned of the allegations in 2013, the year Welby became archbishop of Canterbury. At that point, they “could and should” have followed up with police, but “there was a distinct lack of curiosity shown by these senior figures and a tendency towards minimization of the matter, demonstrated by the absence of any further questioning and follow up.”

Police eventually opened a criminal investigation of Smyth in 2017 in response to information made public that year in a TV documentary, according to BBC News. Smyth died in 2018 at [age 77 in South Africa](#). At the time, he reportedly was in the process of being extradited from Zimbabwe to face charges in England.

In 2019, the Church of England’s National Safeguarding Team commissioned the independent investigation led by Makin. Last week, on the day of the report’s release, Welby issued a public apology for failing to ensure that “the awful tragedy

was energetically investigated” and for not meeting quickly with Smyth’s victims.

That statement was not enough to quiet calls for his resignation, and November 11, Helen-Ann Hartley, bishop of Newcastle, became one of the most senior church officials calling for Welby to step down. Separately, a petition drive on Change.org urging Welby’s resignation received 14,000 virtual signatures.

In his resignation statement, Welby said he had been told in 2013 that police had already been notified of Smyth’s abuse. “I believed wrongly that an appropriate resolution would follow,” Welby said. “It is very clear that I must take personal and institutional responsibility for the long and retraumatizing period between 2013 and 2024.”

The archbishop of Canterbury, in addition to serving as the head of the Church of England, also historically has filled the role of a “focus for unity” in the wider Anglican Communion and its 42 autonomous, interdependent provinces, including the Episcopal Church.

Welby said he had informed King Charles III of his decision to resign before announcing it publicly. Welby’s predecessor, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, also resigned before reaching the mandatory retirement age of 70. Williams, at a time of increasing schism over issues of human sexuality, said in 2012 he wished to return to academia.

The British monarch holds the title of [supreme governor of the Church of England](#), with responsibility for appointing archbishops and deans. Charles is expected to nominate Welby’s successor, with [advice of England’s prime minister](#), who also receives input from a 16-member Crown Appointments Commission.

“I believe that stepping aside is in the best interests of the Church of England, which I dearly love and which I have been honored to serve,” he said. “I pray that this decision points us back towards the love that Jesus Christ has for every one of us.”

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