

Care of Adult Survivors of Abuse in the Church

Many adults in the Church may be suffering from the effects of abuse – abuse they suffered in childhood or as adults, abuse of different kinds. The Church has a responsibility to support those people who may feel very vulnerable and whose vulnerability may open them up to further abuse. Some abuse may seem trivial to an onlooker, but the severity of abuse needs to be seen in terms of how the person responded to the abuse both at the time and later.

1 Statistics

Although numbers vary, some reports show that about 1 in 4 girls, and 1 in 9 boys are abused in childhood. Key research in 21 countries found varying rates from 7 to 36 per cent of women and 3 to 29 per cent of men reporting that they had been sexually abused as children. One of the most rigorous UK studies found that 12 per cent of women and 8 per cent of men reported they had been sexually abused before the age of 16. There is some evidence that there is considerable under-reporting from boys and men.

2 Effects of Abuse

Some survivors cope well with life and are able to live apparently 'normally'. Some, however, although they present a 'normal' face to the world, may well be suffering and sometimes be unable to say what their problem is – or even to know why they feel ill at ease and unable to feel a sense of peace and joy.

Some may show a range of symptoms such as :

- repeated bouts of depression;
- exhibiting anger and hostility – or being unable to connect at all with feelings;
- behaving like a victim – low self-esteem and putting themselves down and constantly apologising;
- inability to get close to people, or wanting to be inappropriately close;
- disturbed sleep, nightmares and so on;
- tending to 'space out' (cutting off from reality);
- exhibiting fears, phobias and anxiety;

- self-harming (this is a way of coping, not something done ‘to get attention’);
- tending to feel an inappropriate amount of guilt and shame;
- sometimes relying on smoking, drugs, alcohol or medication;
- experiencing hallucinations and/or ‘flashbacks’ of the abuse;
- sometimes moving from one abusive relationship to another.

3 Loss of trust

Adults and children who are abused can lose trust in those around them, especially if the abuse was within the home. (Most abuse is carried out by people known to the abused person). The loss of trust will profoundly affect the life of the survivor. They may decide (often unconsciously) never to trust anyone ever again – and this is likely to affect their faith and relationships.

4 Why didn't you say so at the time?

Many survivors say nothing about the abuse for many years. Some have buried their memories so deeply within themselves that they have ‘forgotten’ what happened – especially if the abuse happened when they were very young.

Memories may be ‘triggered’ in a range of ways, for example:

- hearing about abuse on television;
- being in another abusive situation such as finding difficulties with a domineering employer;
- being in a situation where they feel powerless;
- feeling vulnerable, ill, under stress, or suffering from burnout;
- the death of their abuser or of one of their carers;
- the birth of their own child.

Few people can report their abuse close to the event and so often reported abuse is about events of years ago, leading to difficulties with finding any proof of what happened. It is often one person’s word against another, and the likelihood of the survivor getting justice is slim. However, some cases do go to court, but the experience can be devastating for both children and adults and they are likely to need considerable support.

5 Pastoral care of survivors

An adult (or indeed a child) disclosing abuse is in a vulnerable state. **Above all they need someone to listen to them – and also to believe them. They may need to be ‘heard’ in different contexts and over several years.**

If there is a complex pastoral situation when an adult discloses abuse (e.g. a young person in their twenties accusing a church worker of sexually abusing them), it would be appropriate to find some support for the different parties involved, such as another survivor to support the person making the allegations.

There is no quick fix for healing from abuse and it is crucial that survivors:

- Are not pushed into forgiving too early. Forgiving their abuser/s is a complex process, and considerable damage can be done by treating forgiveness as something that they must do unreservedly and now.
- Are not put in a position of feeling even more guilty than they already do. Survivors tend to feel that the abuse was all their fault, particularly when there was more than one abuser.
- Are accepted as they are, however full of anger they may be. Anger can be seen as one step along the road to forgiveness – at least if they are angry they are starting to accept that the abuse seriously affected them and this can be a good starting point to move towards healing.
- Are given a sense that those within the church community who know about the abuse are ‘with them’ along the road to recovery. The journey can be very long and supporters are essential.

Survivors can benefit from professional counselling if that is available, but also joining a self-help group can provide the kind of long-term support needed. Survivors helping other survivors can be powerful and effective.

6 Responding to disclosures by those who have experienced misuse of power, abuse or harassment

One of the consequences of speaking to others about the abuse is that they may have a responsibility to act. A family member may need to be sure that others in the family are safe. A friend may be aware that the abuser is involved with children or vulnerable people and be concerned for them. Organisations that work with children or vulnerable people will have policies with procedures that need to be followed if someone in the organisation becomes aware of allegations of abuse.

For some it will be important that the person is brought to account for their actions through the criminal justice system, and if a criminal act has been committed this may be a necessary action that the church must take in order to protect others. Following an investigation, the alleged abuser may

be charged and taken to court. It takes a lot of courage to give evidence in court and to accept the decision of the jury. Nevertheless many people feel relieved whatever the outcome that they have done their best and spoken out in public.

If the alleged abuse has taken place within the church the survivor may wish to make this known to someone in authority and this should be facilitated even in cases where a formal complaint is not made. If a formal complaint is made written statements will be required. If the case comes to a tribunal evidence may need to be given in person. It is important that the survivor is supported throughout this process: deciding what to do, making the formal complaint and giving evidence if necessary.

7 Survivors and church

Many survivors have problems with attending church and it can be that some of those on the fringes of church communities include survivors.

There are some specific things that can be difficult:

- Saying the Lord's Prayer (believing that they must forgive immediately or God will reject them).
- Specific words can trigger unwanted feelings or images, such as 'Father', 'sin', 'let Jesus come into you', 'overshadow'.
- The Peace can frighten survivors because they often don't want to be touched, particularly hugged.
- The emphasis on sin can be so difficult that some survivors leave the Church altogether.
- Anointing and touch is very difficult for someone whose body boundaries have been violated.

Holy Communion can be extremely problematic.

- Words such as 'blood' and 'body' can trigger memories of the abuse.
- Some can't cope with anyone behind them so queuing to get to the altar is difficult.
- Having to get physically close to others might lead to unwelcome smells, such as deodorant, aftershave or the smell of alcohol.
- It can be hurtful to kneel with a man standing over them delivering wine at crotch level.

Those who have been ritually or spiritually abused face particular difficulties. Triggers may include ritual symbols and equipment such as the altar, candles, chalice, crosses and crucifixes, the sacrificial lamb, etc. People abused by those in ministry may have been told it was ordained by God, a special service to those who serve the Lord, a blessing from God, Spirit-led, etc. Sensitivity, care and ideally

informed input are needed to help people work through these issues to discover the liberating truth of the Gospel.

The sense of pollution is frequently internalised. Some survivors even feel that if they go to church they will 'pollute' the service for others; such is their feeling of guilt and shame.

It is important to recognise the vulnerability and possible 'childlike' state of survivors, especially when they are in crisis or the early stages of healing. They can be over-compliant and easily manipulated. Power abuse within pastoral care is a real danger here.

8 Inappropriate responses to survivors

There are examples of inappropriate responses to survivors in the report *Time for Action* (pp.52 ff) and these stories could be a basis for discussion about care of survivors with staff or PCC members.

It is inappropriate to

- tell a survivor it is her fault that she has lost her virginity;
- insist a survivor must forgive before he or she comes to communion;
- say to them, 'It was all so long ago, why don't you forgive and forget'.
- Expect a survivor to move towards recovery without considerable support;
- tell a survivor that they cannot work with children or young people 'because abused people abuse others';
- have unrealistic expectations of healing such as 'We've prayed for you for over a year now so you must be better'
- try to arrange for the survivor to meet with the perpetrator or suggest reconciliation is a good thing – you could put someone in real danger;
- try to counsel survivors without having sufficient knowledge or awareness yourself of the dynamics and issues of abuse;
- use touch or anointing without clear boundaries and informed consent.

Survivors need time to work on their feelings and be able to accept that:

- it was not their fault;
- they haven't committed the unforgivable sin;
- they have no need to feel guilt and shame;
- God loves them unconditionally.

If the Abuse has taken place recently, practical needs might include:

- a safe place, protection and medical attention
- a safety plan, including personal safety devices (e.g. alarm, mobile phone, improved locks) – obtainable from the police or community care schemes
- a list of items to take with them, e.g. money, birth and marriage certificates, passports, benefit books, chequebooks, address book containing names and addresses of friends and family, children's favourite toys
- expert professional help
- childcare while seeking help
- DIY assistance, e.g. mending windows
- furniture, household and baby equipment, toys, etc. in cases of rehousing
- care for pets
- advocacy and support during the legal or financial processes such as getting benefits