

Supporting the pastoral and spiritual needs of survivors of abuse – discussion paper

Introduction

This paper summarises the possible development of a ‘Chaplaincy for Survivors’. Early exploratory discussions with survivors themselves, Diocesan Safeguarding Advisers and others have identified a need for a pastoral response to some survivors, particularly those survivors with an ongoing faith, that is not currently met.

This paper opens a dialogue to be developed in co-production with survivors, DSAs, interested clergy, and others. The overall objective is to provide a framework through which pastoral and spiritual support to survivors can be put into place.

Case Studies

(These case studies are hypothetical but derive from the experience of survivors, DSAs and supporters)

Mark:

Mark, 35, is a survivor of child sexual abuse in a church setting. He is a Christian but has not been to church for years. He reported the abuse to the police twenty years after it stopped. The Diocese in which the abuse took place provided him with some funding for counselling during the investigation. The counselling was helpful, but as the counsellor was not a Christian Mark felt he could not discuss the questions he had about his faith as a result of the abuse.

Eventually Mark’s abuser was convicted. He received a letter of apology from the local Bishop and another letter from the DSA offering to continue funding for counselling. He did not hear from anyone else involved in the church. He told his wife that he felt that the church had kept him at ‘arms length’ throughout the criminal investigation, and that this was one of the most hurtful aspects of the whole process. Mark had hoped to return to church someday but decided he could not; he felt that church life was one more thing his abuser had stolen from him.

Helen:

Helen, 27, has attended the same church all her life. Her father is a churchwarden, and very close friends with the vicar who has been there for 30 years. Helen feels that these two men have dominated every aspect of her life since she was a child. During her teenage years in particular she felt that their control escalated, such that every choice she made - who her friends were, what she wore, what she did with her time - was taken to please them. She spent most of her spare time doing things at church, never as a leader but always helping with children's work, administration, music, and pastoral care. Her father told her that this was all part of living a 'disciplined life' for the Lord, something the vicar regularly preached about and spoke about when he visited the youth group Helen attended, which he did once a month. The vicar made clear that such disciplines were the only way young Christians could avoid the wickedness in the world.

Helen moved out of her parents' house at 26 and now lives alone. She does not attend church, as a result of which her parents and siblings have not spoken with her for months. She has one friend, a colleague, to whom she has started to disclose some aspects of her childhood. This person, a non-Christian, has made extremely derogatory remarks about the Christian faith and told her to "ditch the whole thing". Helen knows that she can never return to the kind of controlling existence she has just left but does not want to lose her faith. She wants to talk with someone who is a Christian, who can help her understand how much of her experience was 'normal': is all Christianity like this, or was it just her experience? But, she is terrified that whoever she speaks with in 'the Church', her vicar and her father will inevitably find out and then start exerting control in her life again.

Pointers to the need for informed pastoral and spiritual support for survivors

A great deal has been published about abuse in the form of books, reports, papers, blogs and websites, including extensive coverage of the needs of survivors. Four stages of abuse were described in a paper on 'Surviving the Crucible of Ecclesiastical Abuse' (Stein, 2016), which underpinned the analytical framework for a survey of survivors conducted by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE, 2019) focusing on how responses to survivors by the Church could be improved.

The SCIE survey and numerous other sources (e.g. MACSAS, 2011) point to the need for pastoral and spiritual support for those survivors provided by the Church itself. Need for such action was identified twenty years ago (CTBI, 2002) but survivors' needs persist.

Two forms of survivor need are strongly and consistently expressed:

- The need for safety and confidentiality; and
- The need to avoid conflict of interest (as perceived by survivors).

Survivors can be further protected by anonymity – for example, those speaking with cathedral chaplains need not give their names nor the diocese they come from; the chaplains in this case are often identified only by their first name and may never see the survivor again.

All this illustrates the need for informed, skilled pastoral support for survivors which understands their needs for safety, confidentiality and, where possible, anonymity. This is why this idea was raised in the Working Group on Restorative Practice attended by J. Stein and J. Chevous. It is time to take the matter further!

Psychologically-informed pastoral care can bring insights to bear upon the dyadic abusive dynamics between individual and corporate actors (Gardner, 2020), improving the capacity of the survivor to develop greater dignity and agency, much as Jesus encouraged the suffering to ‘get up and walk’.

Person-centred pastoral and spiritual support

Research undertaken with victim-survivors for the NST last year (Survivors Voices 2020) found survivors looked for a person-centred approach from the point of disclosure. This will vary across individuals: *“The Church needs to understand trauma & why we are disclosing. Do we want pastoral care or counselling, support to heal our wounded heart, not investigation?”* Most people thought the church should offer prompt access to (free) therapy, but also identified other support needs. These included emotional, pastoral and spiritual support, as well as practical help with the impact of abuse and trauma, be it financial, social etc. For some this should be completely independent of the church; for others, it should include support to continue to be part of the church community: *“The church will discuss with you how/if you would still like to worship at your church and enable this safely or seek other solutions acceptable to you.”*

This can be especially difficult for survivors of ecclesiastical abuse, from the trigger of being in the institution responsible for the abuse, to the damage to faith and theological understanding when your abuser is associated with your God. Christian survivors of all kinds of abuse struggle with such challenging concepts as sin, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing, and the Church often seems to lack the skill and understanding to respond well.

Some survivors do not wish to make a formal disclosure to the Church – yet still need pastoral and spiritual support. It is often possible to provide support that offers anonymity and confidentiality, whilst still following relevant safeguarding procedures.

Theological perspective and restorative process

In 2021, the NST brought together an expert working reference group of survivors and practitioners to create an action plan for developing Restorative Practice. They identified that survivors need an

‘accompanist’ to walk with them throughout the safeguarding and restoration process, beyond and alongside any formal investigation process, and/or therapeutic support. Church-based abuse generates deeply challenging questions about faith, but there is little theological or spiritual guidance or resource to assist survivors and their allies to grapple with these issues. When abuse happens in a local church, victim-survivors often need another safe space for such support. Spiritual as well as pastoral support is an important aspect of restorative practice in the Church. Chaplaincy - both lay and ordained - was suggested as one helpful model to provide this.

It has been argued that ‘applied Christianity’ has the ingredients for responding well to survivors of ecclesiastical abuse directly in a safer way than the procedural and legalistic approach that has evidently been so damaging to survivors (Stein 2020). A survivor-led group wrote a paper for the Senior Leadership safeguarding training (NST 2020) which identified four themes that run through Scripture powerfully and can help us begin to think theologically about safeguarding: care for the vulnerable, which is everyone's responsibility, challenging unhealthy power dynamics, and unflinching honesty about our nature. These provide a theological foundation and framework for our safeguarding work, and responses to abuse.

Trauma-informed pastoral care should bring the theological understanding and pastoral skills to meet survivors in this ‘messiness’ and support the journey of recovery and restoration to “life in all its fullness”. Recovery from abuse could be helped by Christian responses to the underlying causes of abuse, including psychologically-informed restoration of dignity and agency to the survivor.

Current Provision

A small number of Dioceses have ISVAs¹, IDVA²s or other individuals working with their safeguarding teams, either through a secondment or direct-employment model. Some Dioceses have made relational links with local ISVA teams but not formalised the co-working relationship. A number have Authorised Listeners in place, following the 2011 *Responding Well* policy. Most Dioceses have some form of arrangement to provide financial support for survivors (e.g. for therapeutic support), with a number having made links with local services; however, levels of support vary widely. Anecdotally, a number of dioceses appear to rely on members of their Safeguarding Teams to provide support to survivors, despite the fact that policy states support should not be offered by DSAs. (Survivors often identify a conflict of interest, such as when the DSA leads the core group). There is also the independent support offered through the Safe Spaces project, which provides a listening service, limited independent advocacy and limited support for survivor peer support groups.

Such ‘professional’ support to survivors comes from within the safeguarding, advocacy or therapeutic domains. Whilst some may have a clear Christian element, many if not most DSAs and ISVAs working in some capacity within the Church of England are not Christians. Additionally, DSAs and other professionals will (rightly) be reluctant to blur the boundaries of their roles by engaging in providing

¹ Independent Sexual Violence Adviser. Home Office guidance for the role can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-role-of-the-independent-sexual-violence-adviser-isva>

² Independent Domestic Violence Adviser. The role definition can be found here: <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/National%20definition%20of%20IDVA%20work%20FINAL.pdf>

Christian pastoral support for which they are not trained or employed. Moreover, survivors may perceive the church as ‘delegating’ or ‘outsourcing’ its caring role to (secular) service providers.

There is some evidence of pastoral contact between senior clergy, particularly Bishops, and survivors. However, often these meetings are ‘one-offs’ at a later point in a case, such as following a criminal conviction, the (very rare) upholding of a complaint in the CDM, or a settlement meeting at the end of a civil claim. These often occur years after the survivor first came forward to disclose their abuse. Survivors may interpret meetings at this late stage, only following a formal finding of fact, as (at best) somewhat begrudging from the Church. What evidence exists from meetings with senior clergy who were involved in cases suggests that the focus is on formal apology. Whilst this is certainly positive and wanted, it falls short of the need that some survivors have expressed for skilled pastoral care that **engages with them as survivors with faith**. Additionally, a pastoral meeting in these circumstances is unavailable to survivors who do not have a ‘finding of fact’ from a criminal or other formal process.

Good experiences are reported, for instance where survivors receive pastoral care from clergy, including bishops, who are not involved in their cases. Parish clergy and retreat guides are other helpful sources of pastoral and spiritual support and healing ministry. They can offer prayer and spiritual direction, sacramental reconciliations and blessings, and share in one-on-one eucharists much as they do for the housebound and parishioners in healthcare settings. However, finding suitable independent pastoral and spiritual support can be difficult for survivors, with few centres (such as Holyrood House) having the expertise in trauma and abuse. Access to independent senior clergy will be difficult for most survivors.

In summary, even for those Dioceses which have put in place significant professional support for survivors, there appears to be a significant gap in *pastoral and spiritual* support suitable for and developed in conjunction with survivors of faith.

Towards a model for practice

It is proposed that Dioceses can meet Requirement 6.1 of *Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse*³, and the guidance contained in the associated Good Practice Advice, by establishing a ‘Chaplaincy for Survivors’. It is suggested that this could have the following features:

- **Based in Dioceses:** part of the normal pastoral provision offered by a Diocese;
- **Linked across Dioceses:** chaplains can share learning, provide peer support, and provide cross-diocese support to survivors in certain situations;
- **Engaged with survivors:** service development, training, pastoral and theological learning should be co-produced with survivors. Survivors could also provide peer support through, or alongside, the chaplaincy provision;
- **Engaged with safeguarding provision** in the Church, particularly Support Persons, ISVAs/IDVAs, and Diocesan Safeguarding Teams;
- **Trauma-responsive:** able to work from the principles of trauma-informed practice and avoid re-traumatisation, including safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment and choice;

³ See Appendix

- **Trained:** undertake safeguarding training relevant to their role, co-delivered with survivors, including handling disclosure of abuse, responding to urgent psychological distress (e.g. suicidal ideation) and supporting survivors during formal investigations (e.g. not discussing evidence) as well as helping to restore dignity and agency to survivors through ministry;
- **Inclusive:** offered to survivors of all types of abuse, including that experienced as a child or adult, and spiritual and ecclesiastical abuse;
- **Person-centred:** through recruiting a team of chaplains, both lay and ordained, from different traditions, gender, ethnicity etc to provide an inclusive service, as well as promoting existing chaplaincy services available to survivors;
- **Developing a theological and pastoral ‘voice’** in response to and with survivors; contributing to the work on articulating a ‘theology from below’ focused on survivor experience, that is still emerging (in contrast, for instance, to Black Theology, Feminist Theology or Queer Theology).

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Appendix

House of Bishop's Practice Guidance

The newly-issued House of Bishop's *Responding to Victims and Survivors of Abuse* lists as one of its Requirements⁴ the following:

6.1 Church Bodies in which abuse occurred must offer spiritual and pastoral support to the victims and survivors. This should be discussed with the victim or survivor and they must consent to the support, using an appropriate consent form.

Responding... makes clear that the duty to provide spiritual and pastoral support is in addition to the more 'professional' intervention offered by the 'Support Person' role:

The pastoral response of the Church, and the responsibilities of the bishop who has the 'cure of souls' for their diocese, are not wholly discharged by providing a Support Person. The services of the Support Person should be in addition to, rather than a substitute for, the pastoral care provided by the diocese and the bishop...

...The DSA (or CSA) working with the Archdeacon, Area Dean and Spiritual Director should identify a pool of clergy with the skills and theological knowledge to undertake the work.

Learning and development

Survivors and chaplains should be involved in developing and delivering appropriate learning opportunities together, building on the core courses provided by dioceses and the NST.

Models exist, such as the educational Safeguarding Workshop run by Dr. Stein for Oxford Diocese, which covered topics such as the range of explanations for why clerical abuse occurs; examples of good responses to safeguarding disclosures and failures as well as to potentially abusive conditions, along with selected bibliographic and web resources. The workshop included small group discussions over lunch and ended with a plenary session covering feedback from the small groups and a short paper for further discussion. Evaluations were highly positive, with participants welcoming the opportunity to focus on safeguarding issues themselves rather than on administration and compliance with institutional requirements.

⁴ Under Section 5 of the Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline Measure, Church Officers have a duty to give due regard to House of Bishops' safeguarding guidance. A duty to have "due regard" to Guidance means that the person under the duty is not free to disregard it but is required to follow it unless there are cogent reasons for not doing so. "Cogent" for this purpose means clear, logical and convincing. Sections labelled "Requirements" in recently-issued House of Bishops' Guidance are those to which the duty to give due regard applies. They will comprise the mandatory parts of the Code of Practice when the forthcoming Safeguarding (Code of Practice) Measure obtains Royal Assent, which is expected in late 2021.

The recent “Trauma-informed Chaplaincy” workshop run by Survivors Voices for Norwich Diocese chaplaincy network enabled ministers to develop confidence and skills for their work with vulnerable people living with trauma, while remaining safe for self and the survivor. Throughout the day lived-experience stories were shared and listening and autonomic co-regulation skills developed. Topics covered included:

- Theory of trauma: events and their legacy in mental, physical and spiritual wounding.
- Neurobiology, trauma-theory, and survivors’ lived experience.
- Relational skills necessary to form a trusting partnership with survivors.
- Vicarious Trauma: what is it, how does it arise, how to spot it, and develop self-care practices to remain steady and able to continue offering support.
- Developing a trauma-informed theology to shape our response to survivors and their spiritual needs.
- Trustworthiness: how to be a trustworthy recipient of disclosure and offer safeguarding that does no harm.
- Recovery, Hope and Healing: better futures and examples of hopeful traumatic growth.
- " A big thank you for the chaplaincy day on Tuesday, it was fantastic, both life changing for myself and my ministry."
- “Unbelievably important to my role.”
- “It was tough, quite hard to hear and take a full part in due to personal experience, BUT that was because the content was good, insightful and thought-provoking.”