



To whom it may concern,

This is a collective statement from a group of survivors of spiritual and church-based abuse to our respective churches.

What happened to us was wrong. The church's response to us was unfair and hurt us further; safeguarding practices in place have been woefully inadequate.

We are in no way accepting or condoning the ways in which we have been treated, but we are not looking to create sides either. This is not simply a letter of protest or challenge but an outstretched hand of peace.

We, as survivors, are offering our strengths, our gifts, our unique insights, and our prophetic voice to the church and asking the church in all its forms to be willing to listen open-heartedly. We are asking you to quietly, non-judgementally reflect on what we are saying, to try to climb inside our shoes for a while and appreciate things from the perspective of a victim/survivor. It is only through such dialogue and collaboration that our church communities can become trauma informed and survivor sensitive and work to create healthy thriving communities of faith.

A group of us have worked together to create a response to the question: 'What would you like to say to the Church?' Having already been disempowered by our abusers and then also by the processes supposed to support us we felt that it was important to use survivors' own words. Therefore, please bear in mind that when we're saying *don't do* something it's because it negatively impacts us; it makes us feel like outsiders and that we don't matter.

Some of our messages may feel strong, that's because they come from a place of trauma. This matters to us. A lot. It can be literally life and death.

We want to say get over yourselves, but we're going to be more polite than that. You get people laughing, you get under their skin.

What would you like to say to 'the Church'?

Face the pain

Let's start by recognising our common humanity. We're all made in the beautiful image of God; and we're all imperfect human beings who get things wrong. Please don't hide behind defensiveness, denial, disconnection. Join us in facing and working through the collective pain of institutional abuse and the trauma it causes.

"Stop pretending that you're perfect, start facing up to the flaws that you have."

"Work on your own self-awareness."

"Don't judge us for our natural human responses to the highly abnormal things that we have experienced."

"Stop spiritually bypassing pain. Do the work."

"Stop looking after the 99%. Dare to sit with the lost and hurt."

Live the Solidarity Gospel

Many of us have had the gospel weaponised and used to coerce, control and abuse us. When we come seeking help and healing, please don't use it to re-abuse us with victim-blaming message like:

- Take it to the cross and leave it with Jesus and it'll be ok.
- If you're not healing, if you're not doing well, it's because your faith isn't strong enough.
- God will keep you safe if you trust him.
- If you live a good Christian life everything you need will come to you.

This 'prosperity gospel' doesn't accept suffering as part of the world. It suggests that if we are abused, traumatised, there's something wrong with us. Instead, please walk with us in a Solidarity Gospel, living the Beatitudes with a bias for the poor, the captives, the oppressed.

"Take risks. Practice the faith you preach."

"You cheapen forgiveness when you demand we forgive our perpetrators. You leave no room for grace when you try to remove our freewill, to cover your backs."

"Let go of your fears and the need for the church to look good. Be humble and prepared to work on this with us."

Relinquish power and be accountable

Sometimes it can feel as though the Church doesn't deal in reality, but in fairy-tales. All abuse is a misuse of power, a betrayal of trust. Responses to abuse that focus on process rather than healing, on protection of the church rather than justice, are another misuse of power. Too often, we end up dealing with lawyers and insurers, not pastors and wise leaders. Too often, we bear the consequences of abuse, rather than those who abused us or failed to safeguard. There's no safeguarding without accountability.

"You don't own me."

"Recognise power dynamics and stop putting power above all else."

"Stop worrying about your hierarchies and protocols and start paying attention to those you're hurting. Stop the cover-ups."

"Start holding people in positions of power and authority accountable for their own words, actions, behaviours and attitudes."

Learn to listen, to really listen.

Listen to survivors, our uncomfortable truths. Listen to what we show you, not just what we say. Create a safe space when these stories of terror can be told, when healing can start through having a voice. You don't have to have the answers; survivors know best what we need.

"Listen rather than presume our response. Listen to what we actually say, to the words we actually choose to use."

"Stop saying that you are inclusive, when you're not."

"Stop offering things that you can't give."

"Dare to admit that you don't know what to say or what to do."

"Compassion is a verb, not a noun."

Our presence isn't an embarrassment, it's a privilege.

When you focus on survivors' strengths and gifts, instead of treating us as fragile, flawed and damaged goods, you'll find the treasure we bring. We're transforming our own trauma, and together we can transform yours too.

"You the church needs survivors. We can help to save you from yourselves."

"We're part of your community too."

"Survivors are coming here with far more awareness of what safety means"

"I've met more care and compassion from survivors than from you as the church."

We have an amazing capacity to love. Stop being frightened of loving us and loving yourselves.

