

# Paper R1

## Supporting adult survivors of abuse Safeguarding advisory group

### Basic information

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<b>Action required</b>	For decision.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>On behalf of the Church, Mission Council thanks survivors for their courage in sharing their thoughts and recommendations and instructs SAG:</b> a) <b>to oversee and support the work of the survivors' group</b> b) <b>to integrate their recommendations in the delivery of URC's Safeguarding Strategic Plan (2020-2025), and</b> c) <b>to review and advise the whole Church through Mission Council/General Assembly on how to continue fostering this sensitive area of pastoral care and support for adult survivors of abuse at the URC.</b>

### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	To draw attention to the needs of those who have experienced abuse and their suggestions as to how they might best be helped.
<b>Main points</b>	Consultation with survivors and pastors highlights the valuable help they can offer in improving understanding and responses to survivors across the denomination.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Learning Group Report, November 2018 Paper R2 at Mission Council, May 2019.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Survivors group drawn from the URC The Methodists Church The Baptist Union of Great Britain.

### Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	A sum of £5,000 has already been added to the 2020 budget to support consultation work with survivors at Assembly level. Further funds will be needed in the future to incorporate their involvement in all developments related to safeguarding, as the PCR learning group recommended to the Church.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	Continued consultation with partner Churches will help to share good practice, as will support from specialist external agencies

## Background

1. The Past Case Review (May 2015 to June 2017) concluded its work with the publication of a major and independently-authored report in October 2018. This report captured the learning generated through the two phases of the PCR and offered key recommendations and areas of improvement on safeguarding in the URC. Two recommendations referred to the need to instigate direct work with adult survivors of abuse and consultation with survivors and relevant organisations about ways to improve safeguarding in the URC.
2. Based on these recommendations of the Past Case Review Learning Report, there has been progress in respect of these recommendations. The Safeguarding Adviser of the denomination invited adult survivors of abuse and persons holding a pastoral role or position within the URC to attend consultation meetings. The intention of this contact with survivors of abuse was to listen to them and value their opinions in improving our ways of responding to those adults who have experienced abuse. Three meetings have taken place at Church House since November 2018. Three survivors and two more persons from their support network (a pastor/minister and an elder/wife of a survivor) were involved in this process. There was also an input from two synod safeguarding officers who attended some of the meetings, and from pastoral consultants who engaged with the Past Case Review in the capacity of listeners to survivors.
3. Survivors and pastors in these meetings identified the following essential elements in supporting adult survivors of abuse:
  - a) We need to establish a culture at the URC where people feel safe to speak about abuse. Adults survivors of abuse call the Church to accept that when one suffers, the whole body suffers. The scriptural mandate that entitled the participants to attend the meetings was justice and prevention: a personal sense of justice and peace for those who disclose abuse and action to prevent abuse and harm for all in the Church. The Church should recognise that abuse happened and might happen again in any congregation, synod, office, school, property and community of the Church. As disciples of Christ, everyone needs to be ready to act if abuse happens again. We can begin by talking openly about abuse. Being a survivor of abuse is an experience that we can speak about.
  - b) Survivors also mention the need to refer to them as survivors (not victims of abuse) as well as to use currently available resources of the URC (GP4's model policy and poster publicly displayed with clear information about how to access help) to produce new theological resources, prayers, leaflets, brochures and campaigns, to supply new material to local churches and to make people aware of the issues surrounding safeguarding adults.

Survivors recommend as a priority the production of a URC prompt card specifying procedures for reporting abuse. This can be done by drawing on learning from other denominations' experiences (such as Methodist Church's leaflet "Do not fear"). Bible conversations about this subject also need to offer questions rather than pushing people into a corner. The overarching aim should be to allow people space to wrestle with God within the Church without forcing any local church or other body of the Church to use particular liturgies or resources.

- c) The meetings with survivors and pastors recognised that child protection arrangements are more established in the Church but that safeguarding of adults requires further work. The proposed specific improvements in current safeguarding structures of the Church include embedding in our ethos the Christian duty of standing by survivors, making disclosure and grievance procedures more accessible to the wider public (such as by the use of section Q in the URC Manual) and introducing a denominational whistleblowing policy. It is the survivors' recommendation that the URC needs a policy which addresses wider whistleblowing concerns and issues of power that arise when people use and mis-use the existing structures of the Church. A whistleblowing policy would enable complainants to make statements that are taken seriously and responded to appropriately.
- d) The Church needs to be better at listening and have people ready to listen. The Church has found it difficult to listen when experiences of abuse are disclosed, and anger is expressed. Survivors from several research groups<sup>1</sup> point out that they do not need great experts to listen to them; just another human being who listens at their pace, does not push them too hard and recognise that abuse is not their whole story. They want people who can trust the survivor to be the expert in their own life and offer them the chance to say no to help and withdraw their involvement if it is difficult for them and their needs change over time. The views of survivors of this consultation resonate with the principle of empowerment that underpins adult safeguarding work: people being supported and encouraged to make their own decisions and informed consent (2013 Statement of Government Policy on Safeguarding Adults).<sup>2</sup>

Our conversations with survivors and pastors in the URC highlighted the importance of listening skills and the value of human connection with people who are well informed about what trauma and sexual abuse. Adult survivors of abuse also mentioned that disclosures and conversations should not happen online, as people can become more vulnerable. The web can be used for initial signposting, and people can then make personal contact and have safe conversations in face-to-face interactions based on the principles of confidentiality and integrity. We need an unbiased support system imbedded within the life of the URC that seeks resolutions and access to right support.

- e) As a church, we need to be aware of cases that don't "fit" some definitions and to be flexible in the way we offer support over time. It is important to cater for people's different care and support needs and respond to them in ways that are appropriate for them, recognizing that not everyone copes in the same way. Each experience is unique and personal, depending on the age at which the abuse happened, the relationship to abuser, the frequency, severity and duration of abuse, the response to first disclosure. It is re-traumatising for people to experience situations where their story is not believed or where the expression of anger is not allowed. Both the underlying power in the abusive relationship and the pain need to be acknowledged and healed.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale, P., *Adults Abused as Children: Experiences of Counselling and Psychotherapy*; NSPCC, East Sussex and Kent

<sup>2</sup> Good Practice 4 *Handbook for Churches*: p.82

- f) Pastoral support offered at the local church is paramount. As survivors of abuse pointed out, it is not easy to disclose and share, but it is important that there is pastoral care available as well as access to this support when they speak out. Pastoral care is one of the responsibilities of the elders' meeting, which is exercised jointly by the ministers and elders of the church. Ministers and elders need to relate with compassion and kindness within appropriate boundaries and to take slow steps, before they raise people's expectations and cause damage by being unable to deliver what might be promised as a church.

Similarly, pastoral support is vital when disclosures take place in another part and body of the church, including synods, Church House and associated groups of the United Reformed Church. Abuse can happen in all parts of the Church. This means that training of people and readiness to respond are vital elements to support those who experience abuse, wherever in the URC this disclosure happens. A compassionate and unbiased response to the survivor is required of everyone and particularly those in positions of power and leadership (church leaders, ministers and elders) acting with the individual in the journey of accessing pastoral care and support.

- g) When survivors experience childhood abuse by their parents/carers, attention is important within family and community groups and activities of the Church as well as in events around the time of Mother's Day/ Father's Day. Alarming evidence shows that sexual abuse happens within the family environment, with high proportions of males among those who perpetuate abuse. People have sometimes experienced abuse for years before reaching a point of disclosure. The University of Suffolk and the charity Survivors in Transition have published research looking at the impact of delayed disclosure and access to services and support for those who experienced sexual abuse in their childhood (2018).<sup>3</sup> Findings from in-depth interviews with 28 adult survivors of child sexual abuse show an average time span from the start of abuse to disclosure of 27.5 years. Survivors in this research reported that delayed disclosure resulted in complex issues related to the abuse, which had a detrimental impact on their mental health; and poor experiences of disclosure had acted as barriers to future support services. Therefore, the point of disclosure is one vital element that can contribute to life changes when responded to with compassion and sensitivity by a minister or an elder or a staff manager who will readily listen to disclosures within private conversations, home visits or other private church services.
- h) Survivors have been concerned to effect positive change and feed into the wider work and ethos of the URC. Although not all elders are specialists in offering pastoral support, and not all churches have ministers, at least either an elder or a minister can be accessed in any URC church. As a result, all ministers, elders and CRCWs of the URC can be appropriately trained to offer support and to follow existing guidance in the safeguarding policy of the Church (good practice four – Adults at Risk Section). Setting up a group for survivors and pastors to develop a course for ministers and elders on supporting adult survivors of abuse shows that the URC is a place of welcome and compassion where survivors and pastors can be given a specific role. The group will join up all the various pockets of the Church to produce and trial a training and resource pack for

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<sup>3</sup> "I'll be a survivor for the rest of my life: Adult survivors of child sexual abuse and their experience of support services", Research by the University of Suffolk.

ministers, elders and CRCWs in the next year. Support from external organisations (such as NAPAC/ National Association for People Abused in Childhood) has been already explored and sought, to give us direction.

i) The group will also work to help the Church take a standpoint about spiritual abuse. One survivor gave an example of abuse within Church where power was mis-used in trying to bully someone and using his or her vows to impose what was considered appropriate behaviour within the Church. Another example would be the reference to marriage vows in abusive relationships. Spiritual abuse is an increasing issue in society, and it can impact on specific minorities and groups, such as the spiritual abuse experienced in church by people who are not heterosexual. Any prescriptive doctrine that impacts on people's lives (e.g. a concept of forgiveness) can also be experienced as spiritual abuse. Pastors and survivors recognise that the risk of spiritual abuse needs to be acknowledged and urgently addressed more widely in the URC. Although objections are expressed over the term 'spiritual abuse', it resonates with survivors' experiences and describes their understanding of this experience.<sup>4</sup> It is not limited to one denomination or faith, however, as a recent book suggests,<sup>5</sup> nor is it bound by theology. Church leaders can also be victims of abuse by the people they are leading. General Assembly should consider adding to the ordination vows of ministers and elders a vow about making the church a safer place for all people. This would offer a way to exercise some monitoring of abuse (not only spiritual) and of inappropriate behaviour.

4. There are several cost implications (cross-committees, lack of a denominational budget, diverse synod structures) to developing this area of pastoral work and running the proposed working group. Supporting those who have experienced abuse and educating those with pastoral responsibilities and power to prevent abuse within the Church require some additional funding in the future. For this reason, the Safeguarding Advisory Group needs to keep this concern under review and to advise the whole church through Mission Council/General Assembly on how to oversee and foster this sensitive area of pastoral care and support for adult survivors of abuse.
5. The above elements for change in current safeguarding and pastoral care practices and procedures of the URC are going to require a co-production process with survivors and pastors of the URC. Safeguarding is about people and local churches working together to prevent and reduce both the risks and experience of abuse or neglect. No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster recovery – no matter how much it appears to be in his or her own best interest<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Oakley, L. and Humphreys, J., 2019. *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*. SPCK.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Herman, J. L. (1997) *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence* New York: BasicBooks