

# Appendix S

## A Guide to Supporting Adult Survivors of Abuse

*NOTE: This guide has been developed in collaboration with a group of survivors between November 2018 to April 2019 and will be reviewed on an annual basis. A relevant paper was shared with Mission Council in March 2019.*

### Introduction

This appendix is prepared to enable those who have experienced abuse in a faith setting or elsewhere, “survivors,” to find a compassionate, respectful environment within the United Reformed Church (URC), where professionals strive to work on the principle of co-production.

Abuse is an umbrella term to describe any form of maltreatment.<sup>1</sup> People who have experienced abuse may identify themselves as victims or survivors but for the purpose of this guide, the term “survivor” is used. The resulting emotional trauma of such abuse may impact for many years if not for a lifetime, especially if that abuse has been perpetrated within a faith setting, as the trauma may be felt more acutely and the survivor can lose their faith in God. Church should be a place of love and safety for all those who enter it, but we recognise that this has not always been the case and persons have been further traumatised by the Church's response to their disclosure.

Many survivors reported that they had not been believed, listened to or were actively avoided when they attempted to disclose. This behaviour re-traumatised them and had a significant impact on their physical and mental health as well as the health of their families. Survivors often reported that they do not always need to speak to a specialist. Survivors want someone who is willing to listen<sup>2</sup> and to connect with them on a human level. Survivors want people who can trust them to be the expert in their own life and offer them the chance to say no to help or to withdraw their involvement if their needs change. The principle of empowerment that underpins adult safeguarding work is thus paramount: people being supported and encouraged to make their own decisions.

### Responding to disclosure of abuse

There is no right way to respond when someone discloses that they have experienced abuse, but survivors have advised that there are wrong ways to respond. The point of disclosure can be a turning point in a person's life. It can be the moment where the survivor learns that they are believed, loved and treated with dignity and respect. Or it can be the moment where the survivor retreats into their protective shell and decides never to disclose their experiences again. Anyone could be the person that a survivor chooses to disclose to, and it is important the response is empathetic and compassionate, with active listening to allow the person the time and space to talk through their experiences. Silencing survivors is a form of abuse in itself, so active listening is

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of different forms of abuse and neglect can be found on pages 14-17 of *Good Practice 5* and more analysis is offered in [Appendix A6 Signs and Symptoms of abuse](#).

<sup>2</sup> Dale, P., *Adults Abused as Children: Experiences of Counselling and Psychotherapy*; NSPCC, East Sussex and Kent

vital, as is supporting the individual to feel safe in their environment. Empathetic listening includes paying attention to your reactions and your body language, if the disclosure is upsetting or engenders feelings of disgust. Your inappropriate response can be retraumatising to the individual, while allowing the person to talk or not is empowering, especially if the abuse has been perpetrated in a faith community. It is important to explain the role of the Synod Safeguarding Officer (SSO), the professional who is trained to support survivors or offer supervision to those who do, and who is aware of all of the resources the individual may need for their pastoral care. Confidentiality of disclosure is important and should not be shared with anyone other than the Church safeguarding Coordinator and SSO.

## **When to report a disclosure of abuse**

It can be incredibly difficult for a survivor to share their experiences. Their identity must be treated with the upmost respect and confidentiality.

However, when a person reports abuse that is currently being committed, or they report abuse against someone who continues to hold a position of trust within the church, this information must be shared with the Church Safeguarding Co-ordinator or the Synod Safeguarding Officer within 24 hours on a safeguarding need-to-know basis, as there is a possibility that further crimes could be committed and other children or adults may be at risk.

It is possible that someone may disclose historical abuse and may wish no further action to be taken against the alleged perpetrator. They may disclose abuse that was perpetrated within their family or by a person known to them but not associated with the Church. In these situations, the person may have come to church with the intention of receiving pastoral care and support, to feel believed and to start the healing process.

## **Spiritual abuse, forgiveness and healing**

Spiritual abuse, as defined by Oakley & Humphries (2019), “is a form of emotional and psychological abuse and is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it”.

This report<sup>3</sup> from the Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) confirms that trauma “can have a particularly damaging impact on victims and survivors, particularly where their religion provided the foundation to their morality, beliefs, social relationships and the way they lived their daily lives”.

Forgiveness and healing are crucial concepts in Christian life, work and teaching but they are not quick fixes. They are long and difficult processes which people must have the choice to work through, if and when it is right for them. Any action of the Church which presents forgiveness and healing as simplistic solutions without regard to people’s pain could be experienced as abuse in itself. The overarching aim should be to allow people space to wrestle with God within the Church without use of specific liturgies, resources or theological texts. Furthermore, many survivors find that they need to access specialist counselling services in order to make sense of what has happened and to start the process of healing. Useful resources can be found at the end of this document.

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<sup>3</sup> May 2019, [A Child sexual abuse in the context of religious institutions](#).

## Church's responsiveness

Alarming evidence shows that sexual abuse happens within the family environment, with predominant male alleged perpetrators. People have sometimes experienced abuse for years before reaching a point of disclosure. Research findings with 28 adult survivors of child sexual abuse show the average time from the start of abuse to disclosure as 27.5 years, with delayed disclosure resulting in complex issues and mental ill health. Poor experiences of disclosure further acts as barriers to future support services.<sup>4</sup>

The church needs to be aware that events such as Mother's Day, Father's Day and Christmas festivities may accentuate long-hidden memories of childhood abuse perpetrated by parents or carers. It is important to be aware that not everyone experiences pain in the same way, and those who have been abused may present with different behaviours that are not easily understood.

## Congregational response to abuse

Congregations may find it incredibly difficult to believe that abuse can happen in a church, their church, or indeed be perpetrated by those who are loved and respected within the faith community. However, there is an overwhelming body of evidence that abuse can happen within a church setting, as in every other organisation.

There is no blueprint for successfully dealing with these situations, and elders may feel ill-equipped to handle them. 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 respond with compassion and kindness whilst setting appropriate boundaries on confidentiality on a need-to-know basis. Some churches have found that being open and honest, whilst working within parameters of confidentiality, has maintained confidence.

The pastoral care of all is important – individuals who have disclosed abuse, those accused, concerned families and members of the congregation all require support. Balancing these needs is not an easy task and can be distressing for everyone involved. Navigating this area should be done in consultation with the person who has experienced abuse and the Synod Safeguarding Officer. It may also be helpful for the Synod to offer additional pastoral support to the local leadership team, providing a safe environment in which people can seek help if they wish.

## Care for self

Hearing people disclose abuse can be very difficult for the listener as well, and it is important to be mindful of how to look after yourself when you are offering support to someone who has experienced abuse. It may be that a disclosure of abuse is made to someone who also has experiences of being abused, and this can trigger feelings that have not been fully reconciled. It is important to utilise the support available in your local church/Synod and local authority, and ensure those who might witness disclosures are aware of this support, such as elders, ministers, Church-Related Community Workers as well as Church Safeguarding Co-ordinators and Synod Safeguarding Officers.

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<sup>4</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.

## Working with adult survivors of abuse in the URC

Church should be a place of love and safety for all those who enter it, but we recognise that this has not always been the case and that people have been further traumatised by the Church's response to their disclosures.

On behalf of the United Reformed Church, Mission Council instructed the Safeguarding Advisory Group to continue promoting pastoral care and support for adult survivors of abuse, and to oversee and support the work of a survivors' group in the URC. The Safeguarding Advisory Group initiated a project with survivors of abuse with the aim to involve them in all safeguarding developments and integrate their recommendations in the delivery of URC's Safeguarding Strategic Plan (2020-2025).

If a survivor or anyone who is interested in this work is willing to work with the safeguarding team on how we can prevent further abuse, please email [safeguarding@urc.org.uk](mailto:safeguarding@urc.org.uk).