



# Chapter six

## Supporting victims and survivors

We want to be thoughtful in our use of language, but this is not always straightforward as, for example, there are different views about the terms ‘victims’ and ‘survivors’. Some people may use them interchangeably while others attach specific meanings to them. Sometimes, ‘victim’ may be used where there is a legal case and / or when the occurrence of abuse is recent. ‘Survivor’ may be used to focus more on life after the abuse and the process of healing and recovery. Some people may use terms such as ‘overcomer’, while other people who have experienced abuse may not identify with any of these terms. This chapter generally uses ‘people who have experienced abuse’, while recognising that individuals will choose to describe themselves in different ways and it is important to respect that.

The key principle underpinning good practice in this area is that all those who have experienced abuse, whether recently or in the past ‘will be listened to and offered the pastoral care and support they deem appropriate and relevant, irrespective of type of abuse, context, or when this occurred’ (General Assembly policy statement 2021).

### **Key practice points:**

- Each person’s experience of, and reactions to, abuse will be different, so responses need to be adapted to each individual’s needs
- Abuse has a long-term impact and people may need support over extended periods of time
- Those who have been abused have experienced a loss of control, and support should be aimed at helping them find their own preferred means of help
- Support is generally best provided at local level by those who are willing to listen to, and walk alongside, people who have experienced abuse
- Nobody should feel pressured into quickly offering forgiveness; there needs to be recognition that this can be a long and difficult process, and may never happen for some people.

### **Key responsibilities:**

#### Local Church:

- The Elders’ Meeting has responsibility for provision of pastoral care
- Be aware of local support services that people can be referred or directed to
- Ensure those in relevant roles attend appropriate training
- Seek advice from the Synod Safeguarding Officer about provision of appropriate support when necessary.

#### Synod:

- Advise local churches on the provision of support for those who have experienced abuse
- Provide relevant training
- Share information with Synod Pastoral Committees.

#### DSL / Denomination:

- Manage and develop the URC’s practice with regard to ensuring the voices of those who have experienced abuse are heard within the church
- Incorporate the perspectives of those who have experienced abuse into the ongoing development of policy and training.

## 6.1 Building a supportive culture

While the guidance in this section is focused more on local congregations, it is important to remember that the Church, at all levels, needs to be sensitive to the suffering, pain and subsequent issues facing those who have experienced abuse. One part of this is to raise awareness of abuse and help build a culture where people can feel safe in disclosing difficult experiences.

### Awareness

It is important to be aware that, at all times, there may be those in a congregation who are facing issues relating to current or past abuse. It is likely that there will be people within the church who may never have disclosed or come to terms with what they have experienced. This can relate to any kind of abuse in any setting. For example, those who have experienced abuse in the past may be re-traumatised by learning of another case of abuse in the church as painful memories resurface.

### Sensitivity in worship

There are a number of things within the regular pattern of worship that might present problems to those who have experienced abuse. For example:

- While most visitors appreciate a warm welcome, some who have been abused may find certain physical aspects of welcome uncomfortable
- Some people like to be invited to sit beside other members of the congregation, while others prefer a more solitary place
- Different words, actions, smells will set off memories for different individuals
- Special services such as Mothering Sunday or Father's Day can be difficult for some people.

*(Source: Responding Well to Survivors of Sexual Abuse, 2021, Church of England).*

It is not possible to prevent all triggers from occurring, but helpful approaches can include:

- Be prepared – and not surprised – that someone may react negatively to an aspect of church life or worship that most people see as normal
- Be willing to make changes and find ways to help people feel more comfortable within church
- Consider options for providing details of service content in advance, eg within notice sheets or orders of service or on the website, as this may be helpful preparation for those who might otherwise struggle with something within the worship
- Display a safeguarding poster so those who may need support in church know who to contact and know that safeguarding is taken seriously
- Have appropriate identifiable people available after worship to listen to those who want someone to talk to eg a minister or duty Elder.

### Signposting sources of support

Another element of creating a supportive culture is to publicise contact details for support organisations that people may wish to contact independently. Sometimes people may wish to contact a helpline or service without necessarily telling anyone in church.

- Have brochures and posters in visible and easily accessible places
- Provide contact details for local services and national helplines
- Some of this information could be placed in a private location, such as toilets, where people can process the information without fear of discovery.

## 6.2 Caring for individuals who have experienced abuse

The guidance here relates to provision of support and care for those who have experienced abuse. Procedures for responding to concerns or disclosures are covered in chapter four.

Some general principles are covered here and more information on specific topics (eg domestic abuse, modern slavery) can be found in the online Resources page.

### Pastoral care for individual needs

Pastoral care is one of the responsibilities of the Elders' Meeting, which is exercised jointly by the Minister(s) and Elders of the church. Ministers and Elders need to relate with compassion, kindness and within appropriate boundaries, taking slow steps to avoid raising expectations or causing additional damage by being unable to deliver what might be promised as a church.

Individuals may be seeking different outcomes when they disclose abuse or ask for help:

- For some, just being able to talk to a trusted person about their experiences can be a powerful, healing event
- Some may be seeking pastoral support from the Church
- Some may need advice about how best to seek professional help. This may involve support to access local specialist services. Children or young people who have experienced abuse will require specialist support. If you need advice about how best to support someone who has experienced abuse, please contact the Synod Safeguarding Officer.

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 needs, recognising 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 the abuser, the frequency, severity and duration of abuse, and the response to their first disclosure.

**'Relational and survivor-centred approaches mean prioritising the needs of victims or survivors. The responses recognise the trauma experienced by victims or survivors, and their potential to heal and recover with appropriate support. Conversely, an inappropriate response can compound the harm and distress that victims and survivors feel.'**

(From *Responding Well to Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, 2021, Church of England)

### Listening and building trust

Each church needs to have people ready to listen. Evidence suggests that those who have experienced abuse 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 recognises that abuse is not their whole story. They 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 withdraw their involvement if it is difficult for them and their needs change over time. Listeners also need to be aware of their own limits, however, and be able to signpost to other sources of support rather than trying to deal with everything themselves.

It is essential for those who have experienced abuse to know that they can trust those who are supporting them and it may take time to build up this trust. Many people will not readily disclose their experiences. Those who are affected by modern slavery or who have experienced difficult outcomes from statutory agency engagement may fear and mistrust their involvement. They may fear their involvement due to past experience in the UK or originating countries. They can lose

contact with family, friends and community through feelings of shame, manipulation or fear of reprisals, and social isolation can be an additional source of vulnerability. The absence of support may result in people returning to damaging situations, so taking time to build trust can be vital in preventing further harm.

Listeners should be alert to the fact that the person telling their story may disclose for the first time part of their abuse. Such new disclosure should be treated in accordance with the guidance in section 4.4 above, while also recognising the importance of empowerment (see next section below) and not taking control away from them.

For training and resources on developing listening skills, see the online Resources page.

## **Empowerment**

People who have been abused have experienced a loss of control, and it is important not to compound that by eg taking decisions on their behalf, ignoring their views or imposing particular kinds of 'help'.

Interventions that take power away from someone who has experienced abuse will not help to foster their recovery no matter how much it may appear to be in their immediate best interest.

*(Source: Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman).*

The principle of empowerment that underpins adult safeguarding work is therefore paramount ie people being supported and encouraged to make their own decisions. This can include:

- Providing information about relevant support services so that someone who has experienced abuse can choose what they feel comfortable with / find most helpful
- Accepting that someone may decline help or withdraw from support services at any time
- Helping someone work out options they can use to overcome barriers that may make it difficult for them to access support.

## **Provision of support in cases where no action is taken by relevant authorities**

If someone within the congregation has alleged abuse and the authorities have decided not to investigate further, it is important to continue to offer appropriate pastoral support to the individual and / or signpost them to specialist services with their consent.

## **Provision of support in cases where there is an ongoing / current case against the church**

Every situation will be different but some people may not want to discuss their needs with a church worker or accept support from a church body that they associate with a traumatising experience. Provision by other groups or organisations may be appropriate in such circumstances. In cases where a victim or survivor wishes to continue worshipping within the church, consideration may need to be given about how to limit contact with the alleged perpetrator and / or their family members.

Synods normally have a pastoral adviser / consultant who can offer support or advise on other appropriate means of help.

## Financial provision for professional help in cases of abuse committed by church workers

Decisions about funding for provision of counselling, therapy or other professional support can be made on an individual case-by-case basis, following advice from the Synod Safeguarding Officer.

The URC legal advisors may also need to be consulted eg about issues relating to insurance or liability.

### Formal apologies

In some circumstances it will be appropriate for local church / synod / URC trustees to apologise to a victim or survivor eg where a church worker has been convicted of abuse against them, or there is evidence that previous allegations were not properly investigated. The Designated Safeguarding Lead must be involved and will seek legal advice on when and how this should be done.

## 6.3 Forgiveness

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 should have the choice to work through if and when it is right for them. There should not be any pressure or expectation from the church on someone who has experienced abuse to quickly forgive, but rather a recognition that this will be a long and difficult journey and for some people may never happen.

For further discussion of this issue, see '*Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse*' from the Church of England Faith and Order Commission.

[www.bit.ly/forgivenessandreconciliation](http://www.bit.ly/forgivenessandreconciliation)

## 6.4 Summary: general principles for responding well and helping recovery

Recovery after any form of abuse is complex and will vary among individuals. The following aspects may be important for those who have experienced abuse (but not all will apply in every case):

- the opportunity to tell the story (to name the sin and share the experience)
- for someone to hear their story (that is, to believe and acknowledge the harm done and the fact that they are not to blame)
- receiving a compassionate response (that is, to 'walk with' the person rather than try to 'problem-solve' immediately)
- an effort to protect people from further harm (both the individual and any others who may be at risk)
- the community holding the perpetrator to account
- an act of restitution in so far as this is possible
- being made aware of support groups so they have the choice to engage with others who have had similar experiences if they feel this is helpful.

(Source: *The Faith Trust Institute*).



# Resources

These provide a range of supplementary materials including:

- Additional information and guidance on specific topics
- Codes of conduct
- Forms (not to be amended)
- Templates and model documents which can be adapted for local contexts
- Links to external resources and other organisations.

## Supplementary information

S1: The role of a Church Safeguarding Coordinator

S2: URC training matrix

S3: Roles which require a DBS / Disclosure Scotland check within URC

S4: Signs of possible dementia/memory loss

S5: Signs and symptoms of abuse

## Codes of Conduct

C1: Code of conduct for working with children (under 18s)

C2: Code of conduct for working with adults (over 18s)

## Forms

F1: Safeguarding concern form

F2: Self-declaration form

F3: Church Safeguarding Coordinator Declaration Form (CSC7)

F4: Annual church safeguarding returns form

## Templates and model documents

These are sample / model documents that can be adapted to fit local circumstances.

## Policies and procedures

P1: Template for local church safeguarding policy

P2: Template safeguarding policy statements for local churches

P3: Model church online safety policy

P4: Template for church policy statement on the recruitment of ex-offenders

P5: Local church safeguarding checklist

## Display materials

D1: Model church safeguarding poster

D2: Suggested safeguarding wording for websites

D3: Feel Safe poster

D4: Safeguarding summary for children



## **Safer recruitment**

SR1: Volunteer application form

SR2: Volunteer reference request form

SR3: Sample questions on safeguarding for interviews and discussions

SR4: Role descriptions

## **Safer activities**

SA1: Risk assessment template (with guidance)

SA2: Information and consent form

SA3: Request to administer medication form

SA4: Sample volunteer driver agreement

SA5: Template for a support plan

## **Guidance leaflets**

G1: Guidance on safeguarding for Local Ecumenical Partnerships

G2: A guide to adult safeguarding

G3: A guide to domestic abuse

G4: Guidance on the involvement in church life of people who may pose a risk to others

G5: Guidance on responding to allegations of bullying and harassment

G6: Guidance for staff facing safeguarding allegations

## **Useful links and external resources**

L1: Contact details for relevant organisations

Additional material may be added to this list of Resources as new topics arise or additional guidance is requested. This will all be available online at [www.urc.org.uk/safeguarding/](http://www.urc.org.uk/safeguarding/)

