



**SUPPORTING THOSE WHO  
HAVE EXPERIENCED ABUSE**

**The Baptist Union of Great Britain**

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## **FOREWORD FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY**

In our Baptist family we believe that our life together should express what is on God's heart. As we show compassion to those in need and difficulty, and as we care for the broken hearted, we become living examples of God's great love in action. We act to support justice and mercy, recognising this is part of demonstrating our hunger for God's coming kingdom, both within and beyond our churches and local communities.

Within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, we recognise that many individual Christians and local Baptist churches have been effectively supporting those who have experienced abuse, and have offered love, care and Christian fellowship to those who have survived abusive families and relationships. Yet we must also acknowledge that some churches have got it wrong. Sometimes we have not been equipped to help, and on other occasions we have not understood or minimised the extent of the harm done.

Encouraged by many good examples of support, and equally challenged by those who have experienced abuse but have not felt that the church provided the help and care they expected, we have produced this new guide. Aimed at the lay person as well as ministers and church leaders, it is a first step in a longer-term series of actions to improve the way in which we can support and walk alongside people who have experienced abuse.

I encourage you to read this guide and to discuss it in your church leaders meeting, your house group, your youth leaders meeting or in any other setting where your church offers pastoral care.

I also encourage you to be faithful in prayer for those who still live with the physical and emotional scars of abuse, praying that they may know the healing touch of God in their lives and be blessed with hope for the future.



Lynn Green  
General Secretary  
November 2018



## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the UK over the past few years we have seen a growing number of people reporting cases of historical abuse, particularly in light of the Jimmy Saville scandal and a seemingly never ending string of institutions and organisations who have failed in their responsibilities to protect the young and the vulnerable. Media attention has focused on so many cases where individuals have been damaged and traumatised by abuse, with long term and sometimes life-long impact. These stories of long term harm are deeply distressing.

This guide has been produced to enable churches to have an increased understanding of the issues surrounding sexual abuse and a greater confidence in what to do and how to do it should abuse be disclosed. It also highlights the breadth of resources available and details organisations that can give specific support and advice.

Throughout the document there are stories of people's experiences of abuse. These are fictional stories, but they reflect real life experiences that real people have had.

For the purpose of this guide, we will be primarily looking at those who have experienced sexual abuse. Supporting those who have experienced other types of abuse will be briefly covered in Appendix 1. For more detailed guidance about responding to other types of abuse, and further information about safeguarding in general, please refer to *Safe to Grow* and *Safe to Belong*.

### Who is this guide for?

This guide is for everyone in your church who has responsibility for, or involvement in, the pastoral care of others. This includes ministers, deacons, lay workers, volunteers and your church's Designated Person for Safeguarding.

For some who read this, there will already be an understanding and possibly an experience of sexual abuse. For others, it will be completely new territory. Unfortunately, this guide cannot provide all of the answers and each person will react and respond to abuse differently. It can, however, offer guidance, information and support as you journey through this experience, as well as signposting you to further help and resources.

### Language & terminology

Sexual abuse is an incredibly sensitive subject, particularly for those who have experienced the pain and suffering that comes with it. In light of this, every effort has been made to be as sensitive as possible in the language used throughout this guide, without diluting its meaning. Terms such as 'victim', 'survivor', 'perpetrator' or 'abuser' can hold strong emotions and connotations, and may result in unfair judgements on those involved.

*Daphne was sexually abused as a child. Since that time she has got married and is now raising her own family. While she will never forget the abuse she suffered, she does not appreciate the label 'victim'. She has moved on. She has survived. She has thrived.*

*Louise is in her 40's, has a job and is supporting herself. After hearing about the death of her childhood abuser, she has started having paralysing flashbacks and panic attacks.*

*During these flashbacks she is immediately transported back to the point of abuse. It is terrifying. Louise is not ready to be called a 'survivor' as she doesn't feel as though she has survived. Not just yet. Until then, she is only 'existing'.*

This guide will therefore use the phrases '*people who experience abuse*' and '*people who abuse*', as we endeavour to not define people by things they have done or had done to them.

The words and terminology used in relation to sexual abuse may be difficult to read and use, shocking even, and may cause offence. It is not vocabulary commonly used, particularly in a church context. However, watering down the language and subsequently the reality, is not helpful to those who have experienced abuse.

The book *Time for Action* by CTBI (see Recommended Resources, Section 6) puts it this way:

*"We ourselves do not lose our innocence in gaining such knowledge; we lose our ignorance and become more able to support and be a part of the healing process."*

### **Supporting effective responses**

Churches have the potential to provide much needed social support, spiritual encouragement and practical assistance, functioning as an extended family system for those who have experienced abuse. However, churches also have the potential to minimise, justify, deny or ignore disclosures of abuse and/or those involved (both those who abuse and those who have been abused).

How disclosures of abuse are responded to is vitally important. Responses should support the provision of a safe and effective environment, which is restorative and protective for all those whose lives have been, or could be, touched by these experiences. Disclosures require an openness and ability to hear things which may provoke shock, distress or disbelief. There needs to be recognition of the impact and potential for multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives and complex implications. This can require a range of responses, both within and beyond individual churches.



## 2. SEXUAL ABUSE

### What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is any non-consensual sexual contact. It includes any sexual contact or activities with a child under the legal age of consent, which is always a criminal act. It ranges from inappropriate touching to penetration. It also includes the use of indecent images, both printed and electronic. Please refer to *Safe to Grow* and *Safe to Belong* for a more detailed definition.

Sexual abuse is not carried out just to gain emotional and/or physical gratification, but is often associated with a sense of power and control over the person who experiences it. People can be vulnerable for many reasons, such as intellectual and emotional difficulties, physical or mental disability, previous experiences in relationships or current power dynamics at work, church, etc.

- Sexual abuse can be a one-off event, or it can occur many times
- Sexual abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of age, gender or social status
- The person who abuses can be anyone; male or female, a relative or a stranger
- Sexual abuse can take place anywhere

**The essential feature of abuse is that it is not welcome, mutual or consensual.**

Data on the prevalence of sexual offences is extremely difficult to find and verify, and statistics can only account for the incidents of abuse which have been reported. Here are some facts and figures about sexual abuse, which have been compiled from a range of sources\*

- Abuse often takes place within the home and is perpetrated by someone within the family, or by a known person who holds an expectation of trust and care
- One in four children experience sexual abuse before they reach 18 years' old
- Children with disabilities are three times more likely to be abused than those who do not have a disability
- Adults are more likely to be abused at vulnerable points in their lives, such as times of crisis, bereavement, depression, illness or incapacity
- Fewer than 5% of sex offences are known to involve female perpetrators, although the prevalence is almost certainly higher
- Fewer than 40% of rapes get reported to the police
- There is no direct link between being abused and going on to abuse
- Fewer than one in fifty sexual offences lead to a conviction
- Non-consensual sexual activity within a marriage or relationship is still sexual abuse
- False allegations of rape and sexual abuse are no higher than false allegations for other crimes

\*Including Time for Action, The Church & Sex Offenders, Ministry of Justice, Home Office and the Office for National Statistics, One In Four UK

### **Sexual abuse of adults**

There is a great deal of media coverage and public awareness concerning abuse against children, but adults can also be sexually abused. Although there is generally an increasing awareness of 'elder' abuse, there can appear to be significantly less compassion for those who are abused in adulthood, as though they should have somehow known better than to put themselves in risky situations or get caught up in abusive relationships. Abuse is wrong at whatever age it is experienced and should always be condemned. Everyone who experiences abuse deserves compassion and appropriate levels and types of support.

### **Sexual abuse of men**

In western culture, men are often viewed as needing to be strong and assertive and so it can be extremely difficult for them to show vulnerability and share their experience of being sexually abused.

There is often the added issue of doubt and confusion around sexuality and abuse - the mistaken idea that if sex between two men is homosexuality, someone is gay if they have been sexually abused by another male. There may be a fear of disclosing abuse in case people think or assume that it was because they are homosexual. This unspoken pressure and doubt can be particularly distressing within a church setting, leaving the man who has experienced abuse feeling lost, guilty and confused.

### **Staying silent**

Many people who have experienced abuse do not tell anyone what happened until years later, with around a third of people abused in childhood waiting until adulthood, or even old age, before they share their experience.

For some, the delay in disclosing the abuse is because they were manipulated into keeping quiet with threats and intimidation from the person who abused them. Ministers who abuse will often use spiritual threats, such as *"You'll go to hell if you tell anyone"* or *"You will hurt God if you tell"*. There is such a great fear of the consequences of telling – what the abuser will do to them, their family or someone they care about, that they continue to believe in the power of the abuser long after the abuse has stopped, and even after the abuser has died.

Children who are abused from a young age may not even know that what they are experiencing is abusive behaviour. If the abuse is carried out by someone known, trusted or loved, there may also be a desire to not get someone they care about into trouble, and so they keep quiet.

For some, it is the nature of the abuse that causes them to stay silent. Guilt, shame, disgust, self-loathing and the belief that they allowed it, or even wanted it to happen, can cause someone to retreat further into the silence.

Others may have buried their memories of the abuse so deeply within themselves that they 'forget' what has happened. This is more common when the abuse happened at a very young age, but can happen for other reasons, too. Years later, an external factor (something on TV, being in another abusive situation, the death of their abuser, the birth of their own child, etc) may trigger the repressed memories.

### 3. SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE CHURCH

The idea of abuse within the church context, particularly perpetrated by someone in ministry, is so threatening to the confidence held in both the church and in God, that a common reaction is to refuse to believe the person who has experienced abuse. It can feel far easier to reject the accusation as lies, attention seeking, being mistaken or even malicious, rather than to have the pain and discomfort of questioning and challenging our beliefs in God, the church and those who minister to us.

#### Sexual abuse by ministers

Ministers are people in whom we put our trust and faith. We know that the vast majority of those who are ministers within our churches uphold the trust that we have in them, acting with integrity; guiding, teaching, supporting, encouraging and caring for us. Sadly, this isn't always the case, and research tells us that the level of sexually abusive behaviour in the church by ministers or religious professionals is higher than in any other comparable caring profession.

Statistically, most sexual abuse within the church is committed by adult heterosexual men against adult heterosexual women, often where the issue of consent is misunderstood. Meaningful consent does not occur in relationships shaped by power and role differences, such as between a minister and someone for whom they have pastoral responsibility. Therefore, it is unethical for a minister to pursue or agree to sexual contact within such a relationship.

**It is the responsibility of the minister to ensure that boundaries are respected  
and that sex does not enter into the pastoral situation**

When someone seeks the help or support of a minister at times of stress or crises in their life, they are emotionally vulnerable and it is easier for the minister to take advantage of them or exploit them. The minister is automatically trusted and so it can be difficult for someone to be aware that they are in fact being groomed, as sexual 'grooming' by a trusted minister can disarm the usual defences of the person experiencing abuse.

When visiting a minister for guidance, advice or as a person in need, it should never be expected that an individual is encouraged to enter into a sexual relationship. It is never the church member's responsibility to maintain the boundaries, no matter how ambiguous they appear. It is always the minister's duty to keep professional boundaries.

It is vital for ministers to be self-aware of their potential for sexual abuse. For most in ministry, the sexual temptation is not an obvious one, but rather comes in the gentle relationships a minister has with those they love. They therefore need an awareness of their own power and influence, and of personal and professional boundaries that need to be respected.



Some warning signs which may indicate that a minister is crossing professional boundaries with a member of their congregation include:

- Purposely spending time with them alone
- Sexual comments about their appearance, their body or their private life
- An inappropriate interest in their sex life
- Seeing them late at night, when there is no one around
- Increased visits to them at home for no specific reason
- Inappropriate touching – anything that feels uncomfortable, is confusing or upsetting
- Discussing their own problems
- Sexual jokes or innuendo, or sexualising the conversation
- Encouraging the individual to become dependent upon them
- Hugging them more frequently and more intimately
- Sitting very close to them
- Giving them personal or inappropriate gifts
- Attempting to destabilise an established relationship they may have with a partner

Adults who experience abuse by a minister can feel intensely mixed feelings towards them. These may include appreciation, affection, confusion, distrust and anger. There is often a tension between reporting the abuse and not wanting to hurt the person who is abusing them. They frequently feel responsible for what has happened and may fear reprisals if they report it.

### **Sexual abuse by ministers is profoundly confusing and damaging**

It should be noted that it is not just ministers who misuse their power and position to perpetrate sexual abuse in a church situation. Anyone who has pastoral responsibility within the church, or a specific area of church work, has the potential to commit abuse. This includes youth and children's workers, pastoral leaders, deacons and prayer leaders.

### **Spiritual justifications**

An aspect of abuse within the church setting which is particularly harmful is when God, the Bible or other spiritual justifications are used to explain why the abuse is right and should take place. People who have experienced abuse have told us some of the language that was used to justify sexually abusive behaviour by those who abused them. Some of these include:

- God has brought us together
- God has called me to help you sexually as a way of healing your abuse in childhood or your other relationship problems
- We should sin boldly so that grace might abound
- For you to be healed from past sexual abuse, intrusive sexual involvement is required to purify orifices which have been contaminated by evil or the devil
- Love can never be wrong, and this is what love looks like
- Sexual activity is holy and therefore not a sin
- As a minister/youth worker/trustee, etc, God is my guide and so I can do you no harm

- God brought me into your life so that I could heal your sexual difficulties and intimate problems
- I need spiritual nourishment, which I gain when you have sex with me
- Praying before or after the act of abuse or saying you're an answer to prayer
- By giving to me sexually, you are empowering me to minister to others

These spiritual justifications are always wrong. There is no justification, spiritual or otherwise, for abuse. By adding in the spiritual pretext, it can profoundly impact the beliefs and spiritual life of the person experiencing the abuse, such as developing a fear of God and eternal damnation.

## 4. THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse is a physical, emotional, mental, psychological and/or spiritual assault that has a wide range of repercussions. The traumatising effect of sexual abuse is felt most intensely by the person who has experienced the abuse. However, the abuse's impact will also ripple out to others including the families, friends, groups, networks and wider communities of the person who experienced the abuse and the person who abused.

People respond to sexual abuse in different ways. Assumptions should not be made about rating how serious or damaging various forms of abuse are. There is no hierarchy of abuse; what one person might consider to be less serious, may have a deeply damaging impact on someone else.

### On the individual who has experienced abuse

The impact of abuse on a person will be specific to them. It will depend upon their personal circumstances, now and at the time of the abuse, as well as the nature of the abuse suffered and the identity of the abuser. The abuse may have a lasting effect on the person who has experienced it and the impact may include:

- Flashbacks (vivid pictures and memories of a traumatic experience, which may include sounds, smells, touch or taste)
- Nightmares or sleeping disorders
- Avoidance and detachment, or dependency and over attachment, often on one individual who is 'trusted' or becomes the 'perfect' parent/carer
- Numbing and restricting feelings or extremely intense and painful feelings
- Being on guard and always alert for danger
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (a natural reaction to a deeply shocking or traumatic experience). This can lead to many of the other potentially problematic issues. There can be extreme opposites evident and these sometimes fluctuate between, as well as within, individuals. For example, difficulty in concentrating and poor performance (studies, work, day to day tasks) versus obsessive focus and high achievement.
- Eating disorders
- Headaches
- Low self-esteem, depression, poor mental health, obsessive behaviours
- Dissociation (traumatic experiences and associated thoughts and feelings are separated from ordinary awareness)
- Drug or alcohol problems
- A commitment to promoting the safety of others
- More willing to take risks
- Feelings of loss or betrayal
- Outbursts of anger, verbal and/or physical, against objects and/or individuals
- Feeling suicidal, suicide attempts, self-harming
- Panic attacks and intense fear
- Vulnerability to further forms of abuse
- Difficulty in relating to other people, isolation, broken or inconsistent relationships

### On the families

The impact on the families of those who have experienced abuse differs for each family and each family member. It will be influenced by the relationships and dynamics within the family unit, and may include the following:

- Fear for themselves or another family member
- Guilt that they could not prevent it or did not stop it
- Distress that someone they love has been harmed
- Disbelief that this could have happened
- A loss of confidence in their ability to protect or to discern unsafe situations or people
- A sense of betrayal
- Anger
- Feelings of powerlessness
- Loss of innocence
- Divisions within the family
- Sadness and/or loneliness
- Difficult, inconsistent or broken relationships
- A deep sense of shame
- Harboured feelings of revenge

*Richard was sent away to live with his father after he disclosed that his stepdad had been sexually abusing him. He felt angrier at his mother for not believing him than at his stepdad. Richard's mum could not believe that her husband was capable of such actions until a few years later, when Richard's younger brother disclosed that he had also been abused by the same man.*

It is important that the people close to those who have experienced abuse, such as family and friends, are encouraged not to downplay or side-line the abuse. How loved ones' respond can be hugely significant in the recovery and healing of the person who has experienced abuse.

It may be appropriate and necessary for the family members of someone who has experienced abuse to receive pastoral care and support themselves. It is important that they are encouraged to be supported and cared for, as well as the person who has directly experienced the abuse.

### On the church

When abuse occurs or is disclosed within a church setting, its impact often affects the wider congregation, as well as the individuals immediately involved. This impact will be different for each church and each situation, and may include some of the following:

- Feelings of loss, confusion, helplessness and being overwhelmed
- Denial of the abuse or the seriousness of the abuse, particularly if it is viewed as 'minimal' or happened a long time ago
- Attempts to justify the abuse biblically
- Divisions in the church with split support for the abuser and the person who has experienced abuse

- A loss of confidence in one another
- Questioning of their own judgement
- Deep discomfort at the challenge of their belief system
- The loss of trust in the leaders and structures of the church
- A loss of confidence in role of the church
- Feelings that the church as a place of sanctuary has been tainted
- Anger at having the church's dirty laundry aired
- Fear and anger at repercussions on the church's reputation
- Anger towards the perpetrator and also towards those who did not prevent the abuse
- Feeling betrayed and let down by the abuser
- Feelings of shame towards the person who has experienced abuse

### A congregation can take a very long time to recover

A process of sharing information with the congregation, where appropriate, may help to avoid the spread of harmful gossip. What information is communicated must be carefully considered and planned, with consideration of how the church can move on. Thought should be given to the pastoral care and healing that is offered or given to the congregation. The Local Baptist Association Safeguarding Person should be contacted for advice and support.

Additionally, safeguarding procedures may need reviewing and/or strengthening, particularly around the person who committed, or is alleged to have committed, the abuse. Contracts may be required, and suspension from or restrictions placed on certain roles/tasks. Finding ways to manage the needs of both parties can be very challenging to negotiate. The congregation's first duty should always be to the victim. It is also important that the abuser, or alleged abuser, is given appropriate support and care within the church setting wherever this is compatible with this aim and can be achieved safely. Suspending belief and remaining objective, constructive and supportive to all is vital.

#### **Future ministerial support**

A minister will need a great deal of support when they move to a church which has experienced abuse. They should be made aware of the history and support should be put in place before they arrive. This support structure is even more important if the abuse was perpetrated by the previous minister or someone in leadership, as a new minister may be viewed with suspicion, anger and distrust.

#### **Ongoing support and healing**

It can take a congregation a very long time to recover from abuse, and it is important that the church continues to provide ongoing support. This recovery may be aided by healing services and a sense of reclaiming the church as a sacred place. Training on safeguarding and how and why abuse happens can also help a congregation to process what has occurred. It may also be helpful to be aware of anniversaries of key events. By being aware of these triggers, support systems can be proactively put into place for all who may need them.

## Faith

The impact that abuse can have on an individual's faith will vary from person to person. In addition, there are a number of themes and practices within the Christian faith which can actively work against the recovery and development of those who have experienced abuse. These may include:

- **Suffering and self-sacrifice**

The idea that suffering is what a good Christian must undergo in order that they and others might live. This glorification of suffering can encourage those who have experienced abuse to be more concerned about the person who is abusing them than about themselves. It can prevent their healing/recovery journey if they feel there to be some perceived 'value' in their suffering.

- **Obedience to authority figures**

There is a strong Christian message that there should be obedience to figures of authority, which can be particularly difficult if the abuse was perpetrated by a minister. Children are taught to honour their father and mother, which can be problematic in a family home where abuse occurs. In both cases, the idea of obedience can stifle the ability to challenge, question or report their abuse experience.

- **Sexual purity**

Christian girls, in particular, are taught to guard their virginity and remain pure. Subsequently, girls who are raped or abused can feel great shame that they perceive they have allowed themselves to become violated and dirty, or impure.

- **Repentance and Forgiveness**

Forgiveness may be the most problematic Christian theme for those who have experienced abuse. There is the common concept that you must forgive and that the forgiveness should be unconditional. Those who experience abuse may be considered weak, lacking in faith and generally to blame if they cannot forgive, and in some cases, forget. When the church asks them to forgive it is suggesting that they are responsible for clearing up the mess that the abuse has made. It is important for the church to remember that forgiveness is a process, and often a slow one at that, and that it is not the only element of someone's recovery.

Many people who have been abused cannot forgive, not because they don't want to, but because the injustice and trauma that they experienced has never been acknowledged or put right. Forgiving someone is not the same as reconciliation, which may not ever be appropriate or possible. For example, forgiving someone who doesn't ever admit that what they did was wrong or someone who is now deceased.

A useful way to approach forgiveness is the concept of '*letting go, and letting God*'. It is a huge journey, but important in the sense of forgiving oneself and letting go of the experience so that it has less and less of an impact on an individual's current life.



- **God's protection**

The Bible tells us that God is our protector and defender and that we need not fear any dangers at night (Psalm 91, Good News Translation). Those who have experienced abuse find it difficult to understand why God did not protect and defend them from the abuse, particularly when they may have had much to fear at night.

- **God as father**

The concept of God being our heavenly father is commonplace, which can be a barrier to faith when a person's earthly father was the person who abused them. Many Christians who have experienced abuse at the hands of their fathers perceive that God is their abuser. Changing the gender of God to female is not always a helpful alternative, particularly if you think that your mother didn't protect you. It is therefore perceived that the male God abused you and the female God betrayed you. Pastoral support here can usefully focus on not all fathers/mothers being like this, particularly around fear or anger towards specific genders. Love and how that is displayed are amongst key themes for ongoing support.

- **God as a lover**

The use of the metaphor of God or Christ as a lover can be another source of pain and difficulty for those who have experienced sexual abuse.

- **Family**

The Christian faith places a strong emphasis on the family structure, including the idea of Christians all being brothers and sisters in Christ. For those who have an abusive experience of family this concept may be challenging, and it can devalue the person who doesn't feel able to engage in 'family life', whatever that looks like.

- **Twisted concepts**

On hearing of abuse, some Christians find it helpful to use the Bible to try and justify what has happened to the person who has experienced the abuse. For example, "[Love] .... endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13: 7 New Revised Standard Version). Such use of scriptures is generally not helpful and can result in more confusion, guilt and shame as people who have experienced abuse are aware of the disparity between the text, their experience and how they feel.

*After being raped, Sabrina struggled to keep hold of her faith. She found that the Bible had become meaningless to her – it was just words which had lost their power and impact. Every time she tried to pray she just thought about how God had abandoned her in the one moment she needed him, and then found herself angry and unable to go on trying to communicate with this God who she believed had let her down.*

*John's faith had been paramount in getting him through his childhood abuse. He knew that he couldn't survive what was being done to him without God's strength and support and unconditional love. It gave him hope that life would get better.*

*Rebecca came to faith long after she had escaped the person who had abused her. Her weekly church attendance was a world away from the horrors she had experienced until one day when the minister spoke*

*passionately about suffering like Jesus did in order to gain salvation, and not complaining about it, as Jesus never complained about the cross he had to bear. Rebecca struggled with what this meant for her. Was she supposed to have suffered at the hands of her abuser? Was that God's plan? Should she not complain about it and not report it? Is that the Christian thing to do? Was her abuser fulfilling God's will? Should she have suffered more in order to serve others as Jesus did?*

*As soon as Poppy told someone at church that she had been sexually assaulted, one of the first questions they asked her was "Have you forgiven him yet?" She feels guilty because she doesn't really feel anything towards her abuser, and doesn't even know if she has forgiven him or not. But what she does know is that she can never forgive her best friend for not believing her. Her betrayal is insurmountable and forgiving her feels impossible.*

Just as the impact that abuse can have on faith will be different for each person, the impact that church activities can have will also affect people differently. For some, the physicality of sharing the peace or even being enthusiastically welcomed can be difficult, whilst others struggle with a lack of contact. Liturgy can be a helpful tool for some and a hindrance to others.

Whilst it may be impossible to mitigate for all potential triggers, it is good to be sensitive to the needs of those in the congregation:

- Be inclusive in the language that is used throughout the worship
- Give permission for people to engage in church life in ways that are meaningful and helpful to them (where they position themselves, who with, what they do when, ease of being able to slip into/out of a service at key points without it being 'obvious', staying seated during the sharing of the peace, etc).
- Recognise that special services, such as Mothering Sunday or Father's Day can be painful and difficult for some.
- Consider adding a special prayer time around the subject of abuse
- Be aware that there may be some who find that kneeling in front of someone to receive communion brings back painful memories or difficult emotions
- Ensure that there is space for people to talk confidentially and that conversations that warrant privacy are not held over coffee for all to hear and gossip about
- Service sheets given out before a service can allow those who might struggle with certain themes or aspects of worship the opportunity to prepare for it or leave if necessary
- Ask permission to touch others, for example, during prayer ministry

*"Knowing that we are loved, seeing ourselves as lovely and lovable are common difficulties for survivors, who often feel unlovable, ugly, unloved, dirty and ashamed. The possibility that I am loved enables me to know that I am loveable and can love others".*

*(Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain)*

## 5. HOW TO RESPOND

Please see your church safeguarding policy for guidance on how to respond to concerns or disclosures of abuse of adults at risk, which is based on *Safe To Belong*. The information in this guide is based on the assumption that a Safeguarding Incident Form has been completed and that your church Designated Person for Safeguarding has been informed.

The church's role in responding to those who have experienced abuse is in supporting the individual to express what they want to happen, and who can do what to support that. This is not always easy or simple and the needs of the individual may change over time.

Revd Dr Marie Fortune has identified seven essential elements to the process of recovery for those who have experienced abuse, as detailed below.

The **opportunity to tell the story** (to name the sin and share their experience)

For **someone to 'hear'** the story (that is, to believe and acknowledge the harm done and the fact that the victim is not to blame)

Receiving a **compassionate response** to the victim (that is, to 'suffer with', to walk with the person rather than try to 'problem solve')

An **effort to protect the vulnerable** from further harm (both the victim and others who might be at risk)

The community **holding the perpetrator to account**

An act of **restitution** in as far as this is possible (though this does not necessarily include institutional or financial liability)

Unambiguous **vindication** (being cleared of blame or suspicion)

It is important for the church to establish a culture and environment where people are able to express any fears, anxieties and concerns without the fear of ridicule, rejection or any retribution. Relationships should be developed where people can communicate about harm or abuse they have experienced.

Once someone has shared the abuse they have experienced, they are likely to feel nervous and fearful. Some will withdraw following an initial disclosure, feeling that they've said too much, or 'checking out' to see if they're still welcome. They may feel some relief that at last some things are now out in the open. They should continue to receive support and have opportunities to disclose any harm or abuse they have experienced at their own pace. They may need to revisit their story time and again, sometimes adding more details in the retelling.

Communicate with them in ways that take account of the stress and distress they may be experiencing. If their behaviour and condition give cause for concern, immediately seek advice from the appropriate people and organisations.

It should never just be assumed that someone who has experienced sexual abuse must receive counselling or therapy. Sometimes accessing more and more support may lead to dependency and/or restrict movement towards facing, addressing and changing the effects. In some situations, too much 'generalised' help, support and comfort without movement towards specific help can be counterproductive. Allow them to decide what response is best for them and support them in their choices. If necessary, signpost them to professional counselling or therapy and perhaps aid them in the logistics of receiving that help.

It is important that churches do not feel overwhelmed by trying to cover every eventuality. Part of the healing journey is helping the person to learn what they need when, and what they can do to manage the situation, with or without additional support. This is very important as it builds self-esteem and a sense of competent independence.

Churches should remember that despite the limitations imposed by these experiences, the individual will have many strengths and gifts to draw on, too. They are not just 'a person who has experienced abuse', but those recovering need frequent reminders and help to identify their strengths and abilities. In the early stages, the tendency towards dependency and inability can be significant barriers.

### **Historical abuse**

If someone discloses about abuse they experienced in the past, please follow the procedures set out in your church safeguarding policy, which should be based on *Safe To Belong*. They should be treated in the same way as someone who has more recently experienced abuse. Just because the abuse took place a long time ago doesn't mean that it no longer has significant and continuing consequences in their life. In fact, the consequences can be more complex and problematic in the long term.

### **Self-awareness**

It is important that the listener has a good level of self-awareness, with an understanding that their own background, experiences and beliefs may have an impact on their listening skills. It may be necessary to understand the power balance between the person who has experienced abuse and the listener, and how authority and influence, perceived or real, can impact on the supporting relationship.

There should be an understanding that conflicts or dilemmas may arise, either personally or within the church community. This is particularly relevant if the alleged abuser is known in the church.

Do not be afraid to identify any areas where you feel you or others need further support or training. It is important to recognise the limits to your knowledge, experience and expertise.

### **Confidentiality**

Any records of the abuse disclosed or witnessed should be written with accuracy, clarity, relevance and an appropriate level of detail. They should avoid opinions and hearsay, and should be kept confidential.

The person who has experienced the abuse should be in control of who is told about what has happened. Their right to privacy and confidentiality should be respected unless someone else is at risk of harm, or they do not have the mental capacity to make such a decision. If the account of the abuse needs to be passed on, make sure that the individual understands the actions you need to take and why.

### **External support**

Make sure that details about local facilities and services who specialise in support for those who have experienced abuse are available. It is advisable that the church Designated Person for Safeguarding collect the relevant organisation details and how to access them, before they are needed. Support information displayed in toilets can be a good way to enable someone to access details without having to draw attention to themselves.

The church should be quick to work in partnership with other agencies and professionals as appropriate, to provide the best possible support for the individual and those helping them. External support should always be sought in situations beyond your experience and expertise and is helpful in most situations, whether or not within your capabilities. There is no shame in acknowledging that you cannot singlehandedly support the person who has experienced abuse.

### **Boundaries**

You may feel that you would always want to be there to support and care for those who have experienced abuse. However, it is important that you do not allow yourself to be freely available to people 24 hours of the day, in order to avoid roles and boundaries becoming blurred. It will protect you and your wellbeing as well as that of the person who has experienced abuse.

It is a good idea to have a clear description of the role of a listener, which sets out their responsibilities, limits and boundaries, as well as who they are accountable to. This would help to prevent a listener becoming overburdened and would explain what listening support someone who has experienced abuse may expect.

### **Communication**

Be aware that the person's ability to recount their story will depend on age, culture, language, communication skills and disability. They may want to use their preferred spoken language, the use of signs, pictures, writing, objects of reference, or technology. It is important that the person who has experienced abuse can communicate in the way that they find most comfortable. The use of words/speech is often very difficult, even if the person is usually articulate.

## Disabilities

People with disabilities are more likely to experience abuse. If someone with a disability discloses abuse it is important that particular sensitivity and wisdom be shown. If there is any anxiety or doubt about how to respond appropriately, please consult your Local Association Safeguarding Person or a specialist service.

## Children

It is believed that around three-quarters of sexually abused children don't tell anyone about the abuse at the time, with many still not disclosing what happened to them until adulthood, if at all. If a child does share that they are experiencing abuse or have experienced abuse in the past, they will need ongoing care and support, just as adults do.

Please see your church safeguarding policy for guidance on how to respond to any concerns or disclosures of abuse by children, which will be based on *Safe To Grow*. The information in this guide is based on the assumption that Children's Social Care Services / the police have been informed and involved and that the child is in a place of safety.

Children will respond to their experiences of sexual abuse in different ways. This may depend on their age at the start of the abuse, how long it continued for and who carried it out. Your reaction to this abuse may be one of shock, horror, disgust and panic. However, it is important to try to remain calm. An adult's reactions to the disclosure of abuse, particularly with younger children, can have a significant impact on their recovery.

The secrecy and shame surrounding sexual abuse can significantly contribute to any long-term damage and pain caused by the abuse itself. Therefore, listening and allowing the child to talk and acknowledge what has happened, are vital aspects of their pastoral care and support. You should be sensitive to the needs of the child and must take your cue from them as to when they want to talk. It is most likely to take place with a children's or youth worker or leader, who they know and trust. It is not appropriate to ask lots of question or to investigate what has gone on. If the child does divulge any further information, make sure it is passed on to your church's Designated Person for Safeguarding and Children's Social Care Services / the police.

***It is important to remember that you don't have all the answers  
and you can't fix everything immediately***

## Reporting sexual abuse to the police

When an adult discloses that they have experienced abuse, as either an adult or a child, the decision about whether or not they report it to the police is theirs. From a legal standpoint there is no time limit to investigating abuse or bringing charges against someone who abused, and it is never too late to go to the police, if that is what is wanted.

Some people who have experienced abuse want to report the matter to the police, in order to protect other people, but they don't want to get involved in a prosecution case. The idea of having to retell and relive the experience in public, and then to be cross-examined and questioned about every tiny detail, is just too much to bear. It is worth noting that it is possible to report without taking it further, as in many areas there is a central intelligence hub which gathers data from numerous sources, and this may help.



Some people feel that little or nothing would be gained by reporting the abuse to the police. This could be because there is no longer any perceived risk, for example, if the person who abused is now dead. However, some may feel that the death of their abuser means that it is now safe to report what happened.

Other people who have experienced abuse feel strongly that the abuser should be brought to justice and should be punished for the crime they have committed. Whether or not someone reports their abuse to the police has absolutely no bearing on whether or not they are telling the truth about what happened, and they need to be supported in their decision.

If the person who has experienced abuse doesn't want to go to the police, it may still be necessary to inform the police or Children's / Adult Social Care Services. It is important that you discuss this with them fully before reporting anything, and it should only be:

- When the person lacks the mental capacity to make such a choice
- When there is a risk of harm to others
- In order to prevent a crime

If there are any concerns about when to report, professional advice must be sought to determine whether there is a duty to report or whether further professional involvement is required.

The recovery of the person who has experienced abuse is not simply completed at the end of criminal court hearings, and this process in itself can take several years, requiring additional pastoral support. Whatever the outcome, ongoing support and care will still be needed. In situations where the abuse occurred within the church, the wider church community will also need care and support through the following months and even years. In addition, there will need to be an assessment of risk within the church, as it must operate on a civil standard of proof (on the balance of probabilities, it is more likely than not to have occurred) rather than the criminal standard of proof (guilty beyond a reasonable doubt). This can cause confusion as the church will still need to take action even if the police do nothing or there is a 'not guilty' finding.

*Jane was raped whilst on holiday abroad. She decided not to report the abuse at the time as she didn't know who the attacker was and didn't speak the local language. She also knew that so few sexual assault cases ever get to court, and in the case of date rape, it would be her word against his. But even knowing all of this, Jane still feels guilty and ashamed for not having the courage to report it. She often wonders if he went on to rape anyone else, and if so, would it have been prevented if Jane had reported her experience?*

## **Supervision**

It is important that individuals supporting those who have experienced abuse receive pastoral support themselves. This support for the listener to talk and offload in a confidential setting is called supervision. Supervision helps you to reflect on what has happened and the actions taken, as you discuss how you are supporting the person who has experienced abuse. It can help you to gain a perspective in emotionally charged situations that you are not used to dealing with.

Caring for and supporting those who have experienced abuse can be emotionally draining. It involves listening to things which may evoke strong feelings, such as anger and disgust. Supervision gives you the

opportunity to consider your thoughts and feelings about the disclosed abuse, and to look at how you might best deal with them so that you are looked after. Churches should have arrangements in place to ensure that pastoral care and support is readily available for those who are supporting and listening to people who have experienced abuse. This may need to take place outside of the church in order to maintain appropriate boundaries and confidentiality.

## 6. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

There are some resources which have been useful in the writing of this guide and which we would recommend for further reading. These are as follows:

### 1) **TIME FOR ACTION: Sexual abuse, the Churches and a new dawn for survivors**

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (2002)

ISBN: 085169-281-8

This book specifically looks at the Churches' responsibility to pastorally care for those who have suffered sexual abuse. It includes suggestions for how to support in practical ways, the training and screening of ministers and the rehabilitation of sex offenders so as to continue to protect children and adults at risk against further abuse.

### 2) **The courage to be me**

Dr Nina Burrows (2014)

ISBN: 9781910318003

This book is an illustrated collection of five stories of women who have experienced rape or sexual abuse, and their courage, self-compassion and hope as they begin to rebuild their lives and have the courage to be themselves once again. The different illustrators portray a difficult subject in a way that enables those who have no experience with sexual abuse to begin to understand, and those with experience can often identify with.

### 3) **Goodbye Pink Room**

Jane Grayshon (2014)

ISBN: 9780745956466

Written almost entirely from a child's perspective, this true story gives unique insight into how abusers gain control of children and their families – and why children often cannot speak up.

### 4) **The Church and Sex Offenders**

A special report by The Methodist Church (2000)

### 5) **Responding well to those who have been sexually abused**

Policy and guidance for the Church of England (2011)

### 6) **Tracing Rainbows Through The Rain**

Report of the *Time for Action* Monitoring Group to Methodist Conference (2006)

## 7. KEY CONTACTS

Here is a list of organisations which may help in the support of those who have experienced abuse. It is suggested that some time is taken to find local support facilities and services, which could be displayed in church or are easily available when required. For example, Sexual Abuse Referral Centres (SARCS) and Local Rape and Sexual Abuse Centres. The Survivors Trust website has a directory of specialist organisations, searchable by area at [www.thesurvivorstrust.org/find-support](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/find-support)

### Association of Christian Counsellors (ACC)

ACC aims to facilitate provision by Christians of quality counselling and pastoral care by representing, accrediting and offering support to Christian counsellors.

Address 29 Momus Boulevard, Coventry, CV2 5NA  
Website [www.acc-uk.org](http://www.acc-uk.org)  
Telephone 0845 124 9569 / 0845 124 9570 / 024 7644 9694

### Thirtyone:eight

Thirtyone:eight is an independent Christian charity which provides support with all elements of safeguarding. They also produce 'Help' Leaflets which cover topics including what to do if you, your child or someone you know has been abused, which are downloadable from their website.

Website <https://thirtyoneeight.org/>  
Telephone 0303 003 1111

### FaithTrust Institute

FaithTrust Institute is a multi-faith, multicultural training and education organization with global reach working to end sexual and domestic violence.

Website [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)

### Help for Adult Victims Of Childhood Abuse (HAVOCA)

HAVOCA provides support, friendship and advice for any adult whose life has been affected by childhood abuse. It is run by survivors for adult survivors of child abuse.

Website [www.havoca.org](http://www.havoca.org)

### Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors (MACSAS)

MACSAS is a national organisation supporting women and men who have been sexually abused by clergy or ministers, as a child or as an adult.

Address PO Box 46933, London, E8 1XA  
Website [www.macsas.org.uk](http://www.macsas.org.uk)  
Telephone 08088 010340

### **One in Four**

One in Four is an organisation which offers a voice to and support for people who have experienced sexual abuse and sexual violence.

Website [www.oneinfour.org.uk](http://www.oneinfour.org.uk)  
Telephone 020 8697 2112 / 020 86978022

### **Survivors UK**

Support for survivors of male rape or sexual abuse.

Address: Unit 1, Queen Anne Terrace, Sovereign Court, The Highway, London, E1W 3HH  
Website: [www.survivorsuk.org](http://www.survivorsuk.org)

### **Let Your Light Shine**

Hosted by Shirley Warren Action Church. See the website for further details of their workshops, bi-weekly facilitated support group and annual service.

Address 107-117 Warren Crescent, Southampton, SO16 6AY  
Website [www.shirleywarrenactionchurch.org.uk](http://www.shirleywarrenactionchurch.org.uk)  
Telephone 023 8052 9634  
Helpline 07484 319936  
Email [letyourlightshine@swac.org.uk](mailto:letyourlightshine@swac.org.uk)

### **Respond**

Respond aims to lessen the effect of trauma and abuse on people with learning disabilities, their families and supporters.

Address 3rd Floor, 24-32 Stephenson Way, London, NW1 2HD  
Website [www.respond.org.uk](http://www.respond.org.uk)  
Telephone 0207 383 0700  
Helpline 0808 808 0700

### **The National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)**

NAPAC provides a range of services which offer direct support to adult survivors of childhood abuse (of all forms) and works to promote best practice and to improve the provision of those supporting survivors.

Address PO Box 63632, London, SW9 1BF  
Website [www.napac.org.uk](http://www.napac.org.uk)  
Telephone 0207 6141801  
Helpline 0808 801 0331

### **Pandora's Project**

Pandora's Project provides support and resources for those affected by rape or sexual abuse.

Website [www.pandys.org](http://www.pandys.org)

## **The Survivors Trust (TST)**

TST is a national umbrella agency for over 135 specialist rape, sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse support organisations throughout the UK and Ireland.

Address Unit 2, Eastlands Court Business Centre, St Peter's Road, Rugby, CV21 3QP

Website [www.thesurvivorstrust.org](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org)

Telephone 01788 550554





## APPENDIX 1

### Supporting those who have experienced other types of abuse

For more information about supporting those who have experienced other kinds of abuse:

- ***BUGB Guide to Domestic Abuse***
- ***BUGB Guide to Cyber Abuse***
- ***BUGB Guide to Understanding Self-Harm***

The following organisations may also be helpful in providing advice and guidance in supporting those who have experienced different types of abuse:

#### Action on Elder Abuse

A specialist organisation that focuses on the issue of abuse towards to elderly.

Address: PO Box 60001, Streatham, SW16 9BY

Website: [www.elderabuse.org.uk](http://www.elderabuse.org.uk)

Helpline: 0808 808 8141

#### Bullying UK

Bullying UK is part of Family Lives, a charity supporting and helping people with issues that are a part of family life.

Website: [www.bullying.co.uk/cyberbullying](http://www.bullying.co.uk/cyberbullying)

Telephone: 0808 800 2222

#### CAADA - Coordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse

A national organisation providing practical help and support for professionals and organisations working with those who have experienced domestic abuse.

Address: 3rd Floor, Maxet House, 28 Baldwin Street, Bristol, BS1 1NG

Website: [www.caada.org.uk](http://www.caada.org.uk)

Telephone: 0117 317 8750

#### The Cybersmile Foundation

A non-profit organisation trying to combat cyber abuse, which has been set up by parents of children who were directly affected by cyber abuse.

Website: [www.cybersmile.org](http://www.cybersmile.org)

#### MENCAP

A national organisation that works in partnership with people with a learning disability, offering support, advice and advocacy services.

Address: 123 Golden Lane, London, EC1Y 0RT

Website: [www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

Telephone: 0808 808 1111

### **Mind**

Mental health charity offering advice and support for people in mental distress and their families.

Address: 15-19 Broadway, London, E15 4BQ  
Website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)  
Telephone: 0300 123 3393

### **Respond**

Support and help for those who have experienced abuse who have learning difficulties, and their families.

Website: [www.respond.org.uk](http://www.respond.org.uk)  
Telephone: 0808 808 0700

### **Scope**

A national charity that provides support, information and advice to people with disabilities.

Website: [www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)  
Telephone: 0808 800 3333

### **SelfharmUK**

An online organisation offering information, advice, support and training on the subject of self-harm. It is primarily focused on self-harming young people and those who work with them.

Website: [www.selfharm.co.uk](http://www.selfharm.co.uk)

### **Think U Know**

Resources about new technologies and sites children and young people are visiting.

Website: [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk)

### **Trading Standards**

Help for those who have experienced a situation where they have been charged excessive amounts of money for services, or have been pressurised into buying something.

Website: [www.tradingstandards.gov.uk](http://www.tradingstandards.gov.uk)  
Phone: 08454 040 506

### **Victim Support**

Victim Support is an independent charity for victims of crime in England and Wales.

Website: [www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)  
Supportline: 0808 16 89 111

### **Women's Aid**

A national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children.

Address: PO Box Bristol 391, BS99 7WS  
Website: [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)  
National Domestic Violence Helpline: 0808 2000 247



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Safeguarding Team, Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist House, PO Box 44, 129 Broadway, Didcot OX11 8RT  
Tel: 01235 517700 Email: [safeguarding@baptist.org.uk](mailto:safeguarding@baptist.org.uk) Website: [www.baptist.org.uk](http://www.baptist.org.uk)  
BUGB operates as a CIO with registered charity number 1181392