

Spiritual abuse

People come to the church looking for the healing, love and acceptance that we know God promises them. It is our job to maintain a healthy culture which honours that trust and hope.

Over the last few years we've seen more recognition and understanding of spiritual abuse. For those unfamiliar with the term, it's "a form of emotional and psychological abuse, characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context."¹

That can't happen in a church context, surely?... Well, yes, just like every place where there are humans, things do go wrong on occasion. By thinking of everyone's behaviour occurring along a spectrum, we can begin to consider where there are unhealthy habits or cultures.

At one end of the spectrum are the behaviours demonstrated within churches that have created healthy cultures where people can flourish and grow in their faith. In these environments people feel empowered and included, able to give feedback to leaders and discussion is encouraged. The church leadership will be aware of power dynamics, be open to learning and operate with humility. Spiritual abuse is unlikely to occur.

However, if a church culture is unhealthy, there may be attempts to control other people, shaming or putting pressure on them to conform by misuse of scripture or "God-given" authority. At its worst, people are badly damaged and manipulation and tactics to intimidate can lead to fear of challenging church leadership or raising concerns.

What about strong Christian teaching from the pulpit, or in our family home? There are many good things we learn from scripture. But at the unhealthy end of the spectrum, the rich imagery

and languages of scripture can be misapplied to coerce behaviour, require unquestioning obedience, or exert pressure to conform.

For example, in a domestic situation, an abuser might use the Old Testament to say, "This is always the man's role, and this is always the woman's role" in a way that is oppressive, or use a "Biblical justification" for sex, even when the spouse declines.

In a church people could be told that if they do not behave in a certain way or believe certain things then God may punish them. A leader could suggest they have divine authority which cannot be questioned. If people do not conform they could find themselves less involved in the church.

These examples are abusive, no less difficult to endure than other types of abuse.

Thankfully, our churches, clergy and leadership teams across this diocese are committed to creating healthy cultures where all can experience God's love and grace. That means space and respect for dissenting opinions, a PCC that supports and challenges ministry and addresses complaints.

But we must remain vigilant. Anyone can experience spiritual abuse, including clergy. If you are concerned about spiritual abuse within a church community or domestic setting, contact the diocesan Safeguarding team. 📧

Words: Dr Louise Whitehead and Steven Buckley

¹ *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*, Oakley and Humphreys, 2019

Reflection

Proverbs 31:8 calls us to “Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.” How is that at the heart of your mission and ministry?

Responding well

Responding well to a disclosure includes active listening, understanding and empathy, taking the disclosure seriously, not minimising the story or blaming the individual.

Online learning

Safeguarding is everybody’s responsibility. Why not take an hour to complete basic awareness training online? Register at safeguardingtraining.cofeportal.org

When to report

If you have received a disclosure, have a concern, or worry about someone then you must report it to diocesan safeguarding. But **if someone is in immediate danger dial 999.**

Support for victims

Anyone who comes forward to disclose church-based abuse will be listened to with compassion and humanity. Find out more at oxford.anglican.org/survivors

Diocesan safeguarding

If there is no risk of immediate harm, call 01865 208 295 during office hours. Outside office hours call 0303 003 1111
oxford.anglican.org/safeguarding