

Surviving the Crucible of Ecclesiastical Abuse

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Introduction

Good safeguarding policy is no guarantee that survivors will encounter appropriate or helpful responses to their disclosures of clerical sexual abuse. The evidence from survivors' organisations such as Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors (MACSAS, Lawrence 2011) is that responses from the Church are typically more damaging than the original experience of sexual abuse. This rings true with my own, direct knowledge from survivors whom I have met as well as from my own personal experience.

Bishops and other senior post holders may avoid investigating allegations and make it clear that they would like the 'complainant' to just shut up and go away. But this short-sighted thinking can lead to serious re-abuse by safeguarding advisors as much as by other Church officials. And it can lead to the proliferation of both clerical sexual abuse and institutional re-abuse, which together comprise ecclesiastical abuse.

Survivors are challenged to engage with intricate, intimidating formal complaints procedures without being provided with either expert or pastoral support, knowing that even for serious sex crimes such as rape conviction rates are miniscule. Most refuse. It can take years, even decades, for survivors to disclose the abuse they experienced, bearing not only the ineffable pain of betrayal and violation but feeling the guilt of not having been able to prevent the (re-)abusers from continuing to harm others.

There is no such thing as an 'historic' case of sexual abuse from the standpoint of survivors who currently suffer from the cascade of harm precipitated by clerical sexual abuse (Gladwin and Bursell, 2012). As Paul Butler, lead bishop for safeguarding in the Church of England acknowledged (2015), 'the effects of abuse are lifelong'. The only cases that can truly be consigned to the past are those that have

been properly resolved from the perspective of the survivor.

Something is clearly wrong, very wrong, and it is as corrosive to the Church, the body of Christ, as it is damaging to all those individuals and parishes who are affected by ecclesiastical abuse. While survivors continue to suffer, so does the Church (Orr, Grosch-Miller and Poulter, 2006).

Why is the experience of ecclesiastical abuse so protracted and so intensely painful? What actually happens when survivors do come forward to make disclosures to ecclesiastical authorities? Why is it that so many charities have been set up to serve survivors, when the Church itself has a duty of care towards those who work and worship within the Church, and a Christian duty to seek truth, justice, healing and reconciliation?

Clerical sexual abuse

The involuntary expression of sexuality by a cleric is commonplace. In the vast majority of cases, it is swiftly brought under control and no harm is done; most clergy have enough self-awareness to manage their sexuality. If their sexual impulses are too powerful, as professionals they will ordinarily bring pastoral sessions to a close before any harm is done.

The key word here is ‘harm’. Clerical sexual behaviour becomes misconduct when it harms a person under the cleric’s pastoral care, and abuse when that harm is serious. Irons and Roberts (1995) outline a typology of clerical sex offenders, covering the full spectrum from ‘young and inexperienced’ all the way to psychopaths. The most serious abuse occurs when sexual aggression encounters vulnerability. In this paper, the main focus is on clerical sexual abuse rather than misconduct, but the central argument is that any harmful form of clerical sexual behaviour is unprofessional.

Sexual abuse is typically personality-based and a recurrent behaviour pattern (Gamble et al., 2002). The abuser targets people who are the most vulnerable and the least likely to be believed. The abuser is aware of his¹ behaviour and the impacts this has on his target, although he can be expected to deny any wrongdoing and to place the blame elsewhere – often on his target. According to occupational psychologist Sarah Worsley-Harris (2004), most abuse is conducted in private and the only perpetrators to leave behind unambiguous evidence are simply stupid. The intelligent, experienced

abuser, she says, is ‘deadly’. The only person who can reliably relate what actually happened and accurately describe the nature and the severity of the damage done is the survivor.

Clerical sexual abuse is always a form of serious professional misconduct, a boundary violation in which the survivor is blameless. Sexual abuse arouses strong emotions which can be expressed as intense, dangerous hostility towards either the perpetrator or the survivor, or both. Abuse attracts unhelpful prurience – and the press. It can devastate families, parishes and careers and can result in suicide.

The Church of England’s safeguarding policy and guidance stresses the importance of a prompt response to allegations of clerical sexual abuse, of listening and of providing the survivor with pastoral support. Citing Kelly et al. (2005), the House of Bishops’ 2011 report *Responding Well to those who have been Sexually Abused* also points out (p.13) that there is authenticity to what nearly all survivors report. Unfortunately, this understanding is not reflected in the experiences of the vast majority of survivors.

There is a Christian duty and a moral imperative to respond to disclosures with sensitivity and compassion. The victim has already suffered the trauma of clerical sexual abuse, and this is just the first phase of an ordeal that should no longer be tolerated.

The Four Phases of Abuse

Abuse is about aggression and the misuse of power. The primary phase, the sexual abuse itself, commands the most attention, fascination and horror in the public imagination. Most explanations of the harm done consist of abstract concepts such as feelings of guilt, lost self-esteem, shame, powerlessness, isolation and extreme inner pain that can lead to self-harm or suicide. But to understand what happened and the impacts in each case, which is typically humiliating and traumatic for the survivor to relate, sensitive pastoral listening is required.

The secondary phase, poor responses by those Church officials to whom the disclosure is made, may be far more harmful (Lawrence, 2011) than the original sexual abuse. Of the nearly 2,000 contacts MACSAS received by the Helpline or email from 2012 - 2015, every survivor had contacted the organisation because of the damaging response they had had from the Church.² It may be that the Church responds quickly to an initial contact – but it may be six months or

more before the survivor is seen by the appropriate ecclesiastical authority, if at all.

Despite the substantial investment in salaried safeguarding advisors by the Church of England, listening is, at best, outsourced. Authorized Listeners have no authority to investigate allegations, nor do they have access to diocesan files which could reveal a pattern of clerical sexual abuse – and they certainly have no authority to discipline those who have abused power. Moreover, the Church is not obliged to listen to Authorized Listeners, and even once they report to a Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser (DSA), there is no guarantee that the Bishop will accept the DSA's advice.

What about providing 'informed pastoral care and support', also promised by 'Responding Well....' (2011)? This needn't cost anything as clergy (including retired clergy with the necessary pastoral skills and experience) are already supported by the Church. But even long-serving church leaders can claim that they 'don't know anyone' who could help survivors in this way.

Using proceduralism in place of pastoral listening, up-front demands for written 'evidence', miscommunication, delays, errors, selective memory, denial, dishonesty, jumping to conclusions about who was responsible and acting upon assumptions without having first spoken to the person making the allegation, claims about ignorance of Church policy or safeguarding issues, refusal to become informed or to properly investigate allegations, breaking confidentiality or threatening to do so without justification, inappropriate referrals, cancelling meetings at short notice, refusing to acknowledge conflict of interest, and further aggression when the target refuses to 'shut up and go away', can be devastating. This is what Butler has termed 're-abuse' (2014).

From the survivor's perspective, the escalation of safeguarding cases to formal procedures causes still more harm. How can justice be expected when so many sexual abuse cases are dropped due to 'insufficient evidence', when clergy who are subject to disciplinary proceedings under the *Clergy Discipline Measure* are eligible for ecclesiastical legal aid (Church of England 2016), but those making allegations are not -- and when a survivor who is herself a lawyer can be subjected to legalistic harassment (Macfarlane, 2015)?

In the tertiary phase, relationships of all kinds fall apart as the survivor turns to friends, family and clergy who are not involved in the case for support. These people, no matter how well intentioned, all too often either tire of listening, feel threatened by Church authorities

or cannot cope with the emotional demands and turn away from the survivor, often quite abruptly. The rejection is seldom done with honesty; such people suddenly become unavailable or hurtful in order to rid themselves of the survivor. The problem, initially having been recognised as the abuser, is transformed as time goes on; the abused victim comes to be seen as the problem, as trouble, as someone to be avoided (Lerczak, 2007).

Disclosure itself becomes recognised as dangerous. The survivor learns not to explain the reasons for their distress to even the closest and most caring friend, relative or minister, as this almost inevitably results in the destruction of the relationship. Since talking and sharing are essential to the recovery process, healing becomes extremely difficult and the survivor is condemned to suffering in isolation. It is not unusual for survivors of childhood abuse to remain silent until their parents are dead, such is the danger of putting the parental relationship at risk.

The Samaritans are helpful in times of crisis but cannot prevent self-harm or suicide – nor can they provide lasting solutions. Survivors of abuse, whether experienced as children or as adults, are forced into costly counselling or therapy, which may help in coping with problems arising from clerical sexual abuse (Stell, 2014) and its sequelae – but cannot actually do anything about the (re-)abuse itself. Counselling and therapy can only be palliative.

The tertiary phase of abuse can be even more damaging than secondary phase institutional re-abuse. The series of rejections and the resulting isolation may be why survivors typically remain in such distress for a very long time, and may explain why so many self-harm or commit suicide. It is not the sexual abuse itself, deeply unpleasant as this may have been to experience. It isn't even the institutional re-abuse: the Church can be expected to protect its own office holders whilst considering survivors expendable. It is the destruction of friendship itself and the failure of Christians, both professional and lay, to listen, to love and to care for the victim, and along with this often comes the destruction of faith.

In the final, quaternary phase, 'ripples' of harm from a poor response to a safeguarding issue can traumatise congregations (McClintock, 2004). Survivors, who are typically forced out of their own churches to avoid further mistreatment and rejection by the clergy, the PCC and the congregation, rarely find other churches who will accept them as they are.

Personal privacy is important to survivors, but many parochial ‘welcomers’ fail to draw a distinction between friendliness and intrusiveness. Survivors who are not willing to divulge personal details, avoid contact with people after services and/or are mistreated by the clergy are resented and this makes it extremely difficult to receive communion or even to exchange the peace. Survivors witness clergy who gladly minister to the ill and the bereaved, but use every avoidance tactic imaginable to prevent meaningful contact with the survivor. This mistreatment is intensely painful to survivors who take the discourse of the liturgy and the Gospel itself seriously. This may be the real reason why most survivors who consider themselves committed Christians (58 out of 60 in one straw poll) do not attend church (Atkinson, S. and Atkinson, D., 2006). Others are dechurched entirely.

Nonparochial clergy to whom the survivor turns for help, such as archdeacons, bishops and chaplains, can be even more dismissive, dishonest, aggressive and damaging to survivors.

Clerical sexual abuse is an offence against ordination according to the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662, p.324). Yet survivors have seen their abusers continue to practice and go on to abuse others (Lawrence, 2011).

So, survivors not only have to deal with the damage done by clerical sexual misconduct/abuse; they face obstruction, injustice and re-abuse from the Church, the pain of being disbelieved, blamed and shunned by those to whom they turn for support, and finally ‘functional excommunication’.

This, then, is the crucible of ecclesiastical abuse.

The Long-term Consequences of Abuse

The four phases of abuse are not the end of the story. Abuse is a form of trauma that has been linked in meta-studies to numerous medical conditions and illnesses, both physical and mental, (Chen et al., 2010; Leserman, 2005; Paras et al., 2009). Most relevant studies focus on those who have been abused in childhood, but there is an extensive literature on the long-term health impacts of both acute and chronic stress experienced by adults. Trauma survivors are statistically more likely to develop heart conditions, clinical depression, diabetes, irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia and other functional disorders than the general population.

The psychological damage of ecclesiastical abuse cannot be

underestimated. Survivors remain vulnerable for a very long time and are easily re-traumatised. What would be ordinary disappointments and frustrations for most people, such as failing to receive responses to emails, failure to turn up for meetings on time and the catalogue of re-abusive behaviour detailed above, are deeply painful to the survivor. The damage is cumulative.

According to Worsley-Harris (2004), relationships are what give us as human beings identity, community and security, and ‘abuse is an attack on your [the target’s] relationships’. Without supportive relationships, personal, professional and social, there is little prospect of healing and little reason to live. No wonder that many survivors self-harm and that some commit suicide.

The survivor has to endure a protracted emotional gauntlet of sexual abuse, institutional re-abuse, further mistreatment, rejection and trauma until – and unless – the dynamic may finally be arrested and healing can become effective.

Surviving ecclesiastical abuse cannot be the responsibility of the survivor alone. Having acknowledged the safeguarding failures of the Church and offered blanket apologies (Butler, 2014), the time has come for the Church to take focused action to set things right in each and every case of clerical sexual abuse.

Safeguarding, Ecclesiastical Discipleship and Penance

When clerical sexual abuse is a criminal matter, it is best reported to the police. But as a spiritual and as a professional matter, it is the responsibility of the Church. Above all, the Church needs to act promptly to disclosures with the appropriate mixture of compassion, controlled anger and the exercise of both moral and formal authority.

It is the Church that trains and ordains priests. The Church is responsible for upholding professional clerical standards (Church of England, 2015) and for ensuring that professionalism is rigorously adhered to by its lay workforce. If priests or other church workers harm vulnerable people through sexual abuse, institutional re-abuse or further mistreatment, this needs to be treated as professional misconduct, and the perpetrators held to account. The Church needs to assess risk and fitness to practice, and to see that (re-)abusers either be rehabilitated or be removed from office / post.

Formal procedures that put the survivor into conflict with the perpetrators and/or the Church as an institution will do more harm

than good. Justice is not equivalent to the conclusion of an institutional process and to each individual survivor, justice means something different. However, a nearly universal priority for survivors is that the people who harmed them be prevented from harming others. This means that the Church needs to be pro-active in safeguarding vulnerable people from harm once an allegation has been made, not through lengthy application of formal procedure, but through swiftly taking precautions to minimise the opportunities for further abuse.

The immediate response to disclosure should be pastoral, implementing national Church safeguarding policy and observing national guidelines. Bishops need to listen not only to their safeguarding advisors and Authorized Listeners, but to spend unhurried pastoral time listening to the survivor and responding to their unique circumstances, needs and search for justice. Senior church leaders can offer prayers, sacramental reconciliation³, blessing and anointing for healing, and can explain how the case will be investigated and perpetrators will be dealt with. This is a much wiser approach than treating the survivor as a potential litigant to be re-abused in order to neutralise the ‘threat’.

Offering to pay for counselling or treatment would not in itself be deemed to be an admission of legal liability. The Compensation Act 2006 makes it clear that ‘offering an apology, an offer of treatment and other redress shall not in itself amount to an admission of negligence or a breach of statutory duty’. Ecclesiastical discipleship, repentance and generosity are the best ways to avoid costly and damaging complaints procedures and litigation.

Consultations with numerous safeguarding professionals and an extensive body of scholarly literature have shown that false accusations of clerical sexual abuse are exceedingly rare. Reports of ecclesiastical abuse following disclosure have been consistent and borne out in investigations at diocesan level by Gladwin and Bursell (2012) and in the national case investigated by Ian Elliott (Wyatt, 2016).

All those alleged to have harmed the vulnerable need to be challenged by Church authorities directly and held to account, whatever their place in the hierarchy. The Church can no longer afford to accept denials, excuses and spurious claims at face value. But the first step needs to be a no-nonsense pastoral encounter accompanied by moral authority, understanding and love. The responsibility then becomes that of the accused to recount what they have done – or if falsely accused, to explain the circumstances. Unless (re-)abusers accept

responsibility for what they have done and explain how they will undertake to set things right, communion itself is held in contempt (*Book of Common Prayer*, p.131).

Sacramental reconciliation can be offered to those accused of safeguarding offences; if the confession is manipulative and dishonest, absolution can be withheld. However, sacramental reconciliation is not an acceptable substitute for professional and ecclesiastical discipline.

The Church already has numerous options for responding to alleged unprofessional clerical behaviour. The Church can conduct or commission independent investigations of allegations and commission specialist risk assessments of the alleged perpetrator. It can remove the priest from pastoral duties, put him under pastoral supervision (Leach and Paterson, 2009), place records on file, withdraw Permission to Officiate if the cleric is retired – and in the most serious cases, excommunicate the perpetrator. Similar approaches can be applied by the Church to lay office holders, even if some, such as safeguarding professionals, are already under independent professional supervision.

The pattern of ecclesiastical abuse and its relationship to existing safeguarding policies needs to be acknowledged. Current national safeguarding policies, while generally good, have significant flaws and gaps, for example on handling claims of conflict of interest. However, the solution is not to generate ever more complex formal procedures in an attempt to cover every possible eventuality. In the words of one safeguarding professional, many diocesan safeguarding policies and procedures are already ‘overly complicated and completely useless’. They can therefore contribute to secondary phase and institutional re-abuse.

But there may be an even more important explanation for why re-abuse has been so consistently encountered by survivors. House of Bishops’ safeguarding reports lay out policies and guidelines – but these have no legal force. There has been ‘no general duty on office holders in the church to have due regard to those safeguarding policies.’ (General Synod, 2015). Moreover, the *Clergy Discipline Measure* 2003 cannot be considered fit for purpose (Bursell, 2016) – and even as amended to cover safeguarding cases its impacts would need to be evaluated.

It is the inescapable duty of the Church to possess clear, concise and binding policies and procedures for the Church of England as a whole. Every officer of the Church, ordained or lay, should be required to understand, abide by and carry out the Church’s safeguarding

provisions. Failure to do so should be a matter that leads to disciplinary action. Having ‘due regard’ to these policies must mean that their provisions are rigorously and visibly enforced, leading to meaningful changes in behaviour.

Furthermore, the Church must ensure that lawyers, insurers, consultants and others with whom it has a contractual relationship understand ecclesiastical safeguarding objectives and terminate those relationships if contractors fail to observe them.

Surviving the crucible of ecclesiastical abuse requires the Church to confront uncomfortable truths. Paper-based reviews and audits cannot succeed in identifying and addressing many if not most unresolved cases and problem areas. To get at the truth, the Church must listen to survivors, and this will involve demonstrating good practice in order to overcome the widespread distrust that is justifiably commonplace amongst survivors.

Acknowledging the truths brought forward by the survivor and offering genuine appreciation for their courage and for their service to the Church through disclosing clerical sexual abuse could transform the ‘business as usual’ of institutional re-abuse to an authentically Christian exercise in ecclesiastical discipleship.

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to detail how all clergy from airport chaplains to archbishops can contribute to making the church a safer place. Concerted leadership can make an enormous contribution to reprioritising the Church’s ministry and to transforming the way in which safeguarding matters are dealt with (Stein, 2015).

Reconciliation, Forgiveness and Hope

Since the harm to survivors is due to ecclesiastical abuse as a whole, reconciliation needs to be an ecclesiastical matter. This means that Christian discipleship, generosity, hospitality, care and love are needed, not only for the sake of the survivor, but for achieving reconciliation and for restoring the social legitimacy of the Church itself.

According to Glasson (2009), reconciliation is not about rebuilding or restoring a relationship between perpetrator and abused. It must be done collectively to put responsibility where it properly lies and to restore the community, the web of relationships that has been damaged by abuse, so that the survivor can reconnect with what they have lost.

Forgiveness is an important part of reconciliation, but it cannot

be the sole responsibility of the survivor. Even Jesus, as he hung on the cross, did not forgive; he asked his Father to forgive those who put him to death. Survivors cannot be expected to do more. It is far easier to forgive if the perpetrator accepts responsibility for his misconduct and asks for forgiveness, just as in the Lord's Prayer the penitent asks for God's forgiveness. And forgiveness is much easier if the Church engages with the perpetrator on behalf of the survivor, taking responsibility for pastoral supervision and disciplinary intervention as appropriate.

Healing the damage done in the tertiary and quaternary phases of abuse is mainly a matter of hospitality, to counteract the rejection and isolation suffered by the survivor. Those who have harmed a survivor in this way can take the initiative to put things right. Whether this means inviting the survivor to have a cup of tea at the House of Lords or down the Corner Caff, this is a meaningful way to respond with Christian generosity (Giles, 2003, p.115) and to enable healing, forgiveness and ultimately, closure.

We are called by God to love one another as he loves us; everything else rests upon this calling. Once survivors can credit the Church for effective responses to allegations of clerical sexual misconduct/abuse, including genuine apologies from all those who have done harm at any point in the overall ordeal of ecclesiastical abuse – and for taking action to prevent further abuse – the Church itself, the body of Christ, will be healed.

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and survivor of ecclesiastical abuse.*

Footnotes

1. Sexual abuse is gendered and is most commonly perpetrated by males, whether against females or other males; the masculine pronoun is used in this paper for convenience.
2. The data have not yet been disaggregated for repeat contacts.
3. Survivors often feel guilty about not being strong enough to prevent abusers from harming others.

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