

Spiritual abuse – the next great scandal for the Church

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The concept of 'spiritual abuse' is in the preliminary stages of being understood and recognised as a significant form of abuse that can cause lasting damage to victims, particularly in relation to their sense of identity, wellbeing and mental health. For many years, this has been regarded by the government as an 'internal' affair for religious organisations, who have been left to self-regulate their own practices. However, there is now growing concern that this is ineffective in ensuring that appropriate safeguarding measures are in place to protect vulnerable adults and children.

This issue is particularly pertinent to those who struggle – due to their religious beliefs - with questions of sexual or gender identity. Sadly, these individuals are subjected to the worst forms of spiritual abuse by groups of individuals at the time that they require unconditional support and affirmation. This has the added complication that their once safe place of 'refuge' (their church) becomes a place of turmoil and pain, where those they have trusted are the source of their abuse.

1. Overview of Current Church Policy

Most denominations have been slow to recognise the issue of spiritual abuse, with some still failing to do so. This has meant that little has been done to ensure any adequate safeguards or indeed training on how to recognise and address this issue.

a) Church of England

The concept of spiritual abuse was first officially recognised as a specific form of abuse in the 2006 Archbishops' Council report *'Promoting a Safe Church'*.¹ This report, endorsed by the House of Bishops, had been prepared in response to the Department of Health's *'No Secrets'*² (2000) and *'Safeguarding Adults'*³ (2005), which recognised the need for good safeguarding practices for *all* adults – not just children.

The section on *'Spiritual Aspects of Abuse'* (Appendix 2.2) was vague, stating simply:

'Churches need to be sensitive so that they do not, in their pastoral care, attempt to 'force' religious values or ideas onto people, particularly those who may be vulnerable to such practices. Within faith communities harm can be caused by the inappropriate use of religious belief or practice; this can include the misuse of the authority of leadership or penitential discipline, oppressive teaching, or intrusive healing and deliverance ministries, which may result in vulnerable people

¹ Promoting a Safe Church Policy for Safeguarding Adults in the Church of England. *Church House Publishing*, 2006

² No Secrets – Guidance on Protecting Vulnerable Adults in Care, Department of Health, 20th March 2000

³ Safeguarding Adults – A National Framework of Standards for good practice and outcomes in adult protection work. The Association of Directors of Social Services, October 2005

experiencing physical, emotional or sexual harm. If such inappropriate behaviour becomes harmful it should be referred for investigation in the usual way. Careful supervision and mentoring of those entrusted with the pastoral care of adults should help to prevent harm occurring in this way. Other forms of spiritual abuse include the denial to vulnerable people of the right to faith or the opportunity to grow in the knowledge and love of God.'

The next safeguarding report to refer to spiritual abuse was the 2011 *'Responding Well to Those Who Have Been Sexually Abused'*⁴. Importantly, this recognised the historic issue behind the problem that *'spiritual abuse is not covered within the four-fold definition of abuse (as defined by the government as physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect) but is of concern both within and outside church communities.'*

Whilst the document naturally focused on the issue of sexual abuse, the section on 'Spiritual Abuse' was clearer about some aspects of the damage suffered by victims:

'Those people who are abused by clergy suffer profound spiritual abuse. The abuse shatters the victim's relationship and trust in the Church, severely impacts on the ability to maintain any connection with the sacred, and creates profound confusion and doubt about God's love for the victim. Kennedy identified a dual traumatization for these victims, namely the abuse itself and the response of the Church: 'When women reported their experiences using official structures and avenues open to them, the response was at best mixed and at worst damaging.'

In 2014, the Church of England appointed a National Safeguarding Adviser, Graham Tilby, whose work has significantly aided the church in focusing on the need to address a range of abusive practices. Notably, in Appendix 1.1 of the March 2017 *'Responding Well to Domestic Abuse'*⁵ report, the Church of England formally recognised additional categories of domestic abuse to those defined by the government, which included spiritual abuse:

Definition of Domestic Abuse

The cross-government definition of domestic abuse is: any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse perpetrated by those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional.

The Church recognises additional categories of neglect, spiritual and digital abuse.

It then went on to describe spiritual abuse as follows:

'For example, telling someone that God hates them; refusing to let them worship (e.g. not allowing a partner to go to church); using faith as a weapon to control and terrorize them for the perpetrator's personal pleasure or gain; using religious teaching to justify abuse (e.g. 'submit to your husband'), or to compel forgiveness.'

⁴ Responding Well to Those Who Have Been Sexually Abused. Church House Publishing, July 2011

⁵ Responding Well to Domestic Abuse – Policy and Practice Guidance. Church House Publishing, March 2017

Of arguably greater significance, however, is the fact that this report was the first to recognise how religious texts can be used to justify abuse (see Appendix 3 of report).

b) Methodist Church

The signing of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant⁶ in 2003 has led both denominations to work together on areas of common policy, such as the 2010 Joint Statement on Safeguarding Principles⁷. In the policy booklet that accompanied this statement, the Methodist Church acknowledged the issue of 'spiritual and ritual abuse' but then – as with the Church of England's statement - gave little advice on how to address it:

'In the church context there has been developing realisation that spiritual abuse is another form of harm. The Church of England 'Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy' cautions those who minister to beware of abusing their position. In 'Domestic Violence and the Methodist Church – the Way Forward', there is evidence of spiritual abuse issues.

Churches need to be sensitive so that they do not, in their pastoral care, attempt to 'force' religious values or ideas onto people, particularly those who may be vulnerable to such practices. Within faith communities harm can be caused by the inappropriate use of religious belief or practice: this can include the misuse of the authority of leadership or penitential discipline, oppressive teaching, or intrusive healing and deliverance ministries, which may result in vulnerable people experiencing physical, emotional or sexual harm. Other forms of spiritual abuse include the denial to vulnerable people of the right to faith or the opportunity to grow in the knowledge and love of God.

If such inappropriate behaviour becomes harmful it should be referred for investigation in the usual way. Careful supervision and mentoring of those entrusted with the pastoral care of adults should help to prevent harm occurring in this way.'

c) Catholic Church

To date it has not been possible to identify any publicly available report or document that recognises or addresses the issue of spiritual abuse within the Catholic Church.

d) Baptist Church

The Baptist Union Safeguarding Policy does recognise spiritual abuse as a form of abuse, even if it is 'not one of the official definitions of abuse'. The following is available on the Baptist Union website, under the section 'Understanding Abuse'⁸:

'Spiritual abuse' is increasingly being used to describe those situations where an abuse of power takes place in the context of a faith community. The following is a widely used definition of spiritual abuse:

⁶ <http://www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/text.htm>

⁷ Safeguarding Children and Young People – Policy for the Methodist Church. *Methodist Publishing*, April 2010

⁸ http://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220834/Understanding_Abuse.aspx

'Spiritual abuse occurs when someone uses their power within a framework of spiritual belief or practice to satisfy their own needs at the expense of others.'

The section continues by outlining the various forms spiritual abuse that can and have taken place with children, such as that which led to the death of Victoria Climbié. It then questions whether the specific belief in demon possession of children is spiritual abuse or in fact an excuse *'to justify and condone the physical and emotional harming of children.'*

Helpfully it lists examples of how this practice can lead to the abuse or neglect of children:

- *a belief in demon possession resulting in the labelling and naming of a child as 'evil' or a 'witch'*
- *placing pressure on children to make decisions that are not appropriate to their age or developmental stage*
- *creating an environment in which children are discouraged from asking questions or holding alternative views*

2. Defining Spiritual Abuse

In 2013, Dr Lisa Oakley, Programme Leader of Abuse Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, defined spiritual abuse in her book *'Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse'* as follows:

*'Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.'*⁹

This definition has since been adopted by the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) and other church organisations. As such it focuses on the abuse perpetrated by an *individual* (normally someone 'in power') over another individual (normally a congregant).

The most typical incidents involve those in leadership who have frequently achieved a 'cult-like' or 'guru' status due to their charismatic personality and strong leadership style. This is most evident in large evangelical churches, particularly those with a Charismatic or Pentecostal background, where leaders exercise 'gifts of the Holy Spirit' and are therefore recognised by their congregations as being 'chosen and anointed by God'. As a result, their word can become infallible and their authority unquestioned. For the purposes of this document this type of abuse will be called the **'Individual Leader Model of Spiritual Abuse'**.

⁹ Oakley, L. & Kinmond, K. (2013) *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*, Palgrave MacMillan (p.21)

However, the question then arises as to whether the abuse can also be perpetrated by a *group* of individuals. This could be a whole church, or a group of individuals within a church (e.g. home group) or that of a whole network of churches. Turning once again to the Oakley definition of spiritual abuse it is possible to apply many of her characteristics to such groups:

- *pressure to conform*
- *misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour*
- *requirement of obedience to the abuser*
- *the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position*
- *isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.*

For the purposes of this document, this type of group abuse will be called the '**Group Model of Spiritual Abuse**', where it is a form of church community – rather than an individual – that perpetrates the abuse, and so causes significant long-term harm to their victims.

3. The Group Model of Spiritual Abuse

This is a far subtler - albeit unconscious - form of control compared to the 'Individual Leader Model', and is mostly due to the formation of a group dynamic that is unique to certain types of churches and network groups.

Much of this is driven by the 'spiritual atmosphere' that is created during the teaching and worship times, and especially the prayer ministry sessions. An emotionally safe and open 'spiritual space' is established by a mix of factors, which include the choice of worship songs, a modern open-plan worship space and a laidback approach to dress codes. Surrounded by a large number of like-minded people (often in their thousands), worshippers are frequently encouraged to overcome their inhibitions and raise their hands and/or dance. The impact of this is that a *group norm* is created, where people are led to feel that whatever happens during prayer ministry must be both normal and spiritual. Such sessions are overseen by leaders who have a powerful air of authority. This makes it very difficult for people to question or show concern about what is happening, and can feel akin to 'pressure selling' where individuals feel obliged to comply. Dissenters who do not conform to the group norm (such as LGBTI¹⁰ Christians, divorcees and single parents) are frequently viewed as lacking in faith or spiritual maturity, and are often subsequently viewed with caution and scepticism.

A key common group dynamic is the church's attitude to the Holy Spirit, particularly the belief in the importance of being baptised in the Holy Spirit. This forms the core part of the now global Alpha Course, where in Week 9 of the 10-week programme people are invited to attend a Holy Spirit weekend in order to be 'baptised in the Spirit'. Many other evangelical ministries and networks also offer similar opportunities to be baptised in the Holy Spirit, such as:

¹⁰ Initialism for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Intersex

- *New Wine, Spring Harvest, Soul Survivor, Heartcry, Saltbox*
- *Healing Ministries – such as Ellel, True Freedom Trust, Core Issues Trust*
- *International Prayer Ministries – Prayer for the Nations, Lydia Prayer Movement*

Indeed, the Evangelical Alliance website lists nearly 50 prayer ministry organisations, most of whom will exercise “gifts of the Spirit”, such as speaking in tongues, words of knowledge or discernment of spirits.

4. Common Spiritually Abusive Practices

To be clear, the vast majority of these ‘group models’ do not set out to be abusive. However, the combination of their unquestioned teaching on the Holy Spirit coupled with their common worship dynamic can lead to a variety of abusive practices such as:

- *Taking a leader’s word as read on key issues, given he/she is God’s ‘anointed’ leader*
- *Believing that failure to be baptised in the spirit is due to some undisclosed sin/curse*
- *Believing that failure to be healed after prayer is due to some undisclosed sin/curse*
- *Misusing ‘words of knowledge’ and/or ‘prophecy’ to control and subjugate people*
- *Putting pressure on people to give financially in order to ‘release’ God’s blessing*

The most damaging practice is often the misuse of scripture during times of prayer ministry, where passages are quoted (such as those below from the NIV) that can make the individual receiving prayer feel that their failure to be healed is due to their sin:

- *‘When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives’ (James 4:3)*
- *‘But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts... should not expect to receive anything ... Such a person is doubleminded and unstable in all they do’ (James 1:6-8)*
- *‘For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.’ (Deuteronomy 5:9)*

5. The Spiritual Abuse of LGBTI Christians

A large proportion of these types of churches and network groups believe that ‘the Bible is clear that homosexuality is a sin’. As such they will teach, despite significant evidence to the contrary, that they are the *only* ones who take scripture seriously and that:

- *Engaging in acts of same-sex love is an abomination (Leviticus 20:13)*
- *Practising homosexuals will go to hell (Romans 1:26-32)*
- *God made us only ‘male and female’ (Genesis 1:27)*
- *‘Sex is only for marriage’, which can only ever be between a man and a woman*

LGBTI Christians in these churches are therefore taught that they must live abstinent lives if they want to be ‘proper Christians’. They are told that ‘this is the cross that they are called to bear’, but are then reassured that ‘this is the only for this life’. The other option often taught is to trust God for healing and get married to someone of the opposite sex.

This abusive teaching leads LGBTI Christians to go through three common phases:

i) The Silent Confusion Phase

This is normally suffered alone as the victim knows that sharing their struggle will place them on the church's 'unsound naughty step'. Typical internal dilemmas are:

- *If God loves me, how can He create me with a desire that is 'abominable'?*
- *Will acting on this desire truly bring me happiness, or is it just temptation?*
- *How do I satisfy my desire for love and intimacy if I can never be in a committed long-term relationship?*

ii) The Church Healing Phase

Many will experience breakdown during Phase One, after which they will often seek help from mostly untrained prayer ministry personal, who will pray through:

- *Their life history to identify areas of emotional healing that might be needed*
- *All their past sins, meaning they are asked to divulge their most intimate secrets*
- *Any "generational curses" that may come from parents and/or grandparents*

iii) Conversion Therapy/Deliverance Phase

Normally, when their local prayer ministry does not work, the individual is then recommended to attend a specialist ministry that can help deliver them from their 'unnatural desires'. They are urged by their peers to submit to the healing process, which often involves periods of fasting, and can cost quite a lot of money.

6. The Consequences of Coming Out for LGBTI Christians in these 'Groups'

The Evangelical Alliance (EA) has provided a resource document for church leaders as to how they might best respond to the issue of homosexuality. Entitled 'Affirmations'¹¹, it summarises in ten points the EA position about how to deal with the LGBTI Christians in EA member churches. This has recently been adopted by various organisations, including members from the Church of England's Evangelical Group on General Synod.

Of greatest concern and a significant cause of spiritual abuse are the final two points:

9. *We believe both habitual homoerotic sexual activity without repentance and public promotion of such activity are inconsistent with faithful church membership. While processes of membership and discipline differ from one church context to another, **we believe that either of these behaviours warrants consideration for church discipline (author's emphasis).***
10. *We encourage evangelical congregations to welcome and accept sexually active lesbians and gay men. **However, they should do so in the expectation that they, like all of us who are living outside God's purposes, will come in due course to see the need to be transformed and live in accordance with biblical revelation and Orthodox Church teaching (author's emphasis).** We urge gentleness,*

¹¹ <http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/resources-for-church-leaders-biblical-and-pastoral-responses-to-homosexuality.cfm>

patience and ongoing pastoral care during this process and after a person renounces same-sex sexual relations.

As a result, LGBTI Christians who decide to 'come out' and enter same-sex relationships face 'church discipline'. Recent testimonials from LGBTI Christians show this includes:

- *Being removed from any form of lay leadership (such as being in the worship group, serving communion, doing the prayers or readings, helping with children's church)*
- *Having letters sent to neighbouring church leaders warning them about an individual*
- *Being asked to leave a church if no repentance or change in behaviour is forthcoming*

Even if they are not formally asked to leave, many choose to do so as they find the pain of rejection and humiliation hard to deal with, especially at such a vulnerable time. They are therefore left without any form of supportive community, and frequently find they are deserted by church friends who up till then have been their main source of support.

7. Impact of Spiritual Abuse on LGBTI Christians

The significant long-term harm that these church practices cause cannot be underestimated. Whilst an in-depth academic study is required, a top line summary shows victims experience:

- *Intense sense of guilt and shame for having 'unnatural desires', frequently exacerbated by the continual failure of prayer ministry to deliver any form of long term 'healing'*
- *Self-hatred for being LGBTI, which frequently becomes deeply internalised homophobia*
- *Repression of all forms of feelings and desires, which can lead to emotional breakdown and other mental health issues*
- *Significant levels of internalised anger, leading to high levels of depression*
- *Significant levels of fear, both at being 'found out' or of being labelled 'unsound'*
- *A striving to 'be good and do good' in order to try to bring about their healing*
- *A belief that one must ultimately choose between following God and being loved/happy*

Sadly, this often proves too much for many LGBTI Christians, some of whom have tragically chosen to take their lives as a result. Others can turn to self-harm. Indeed research conducted by has shown that a large proportion will suffer from long term mental health issues.

8. Conclusion

In 2017, the Oasis Foundation published a report '*In the Name of Love – the Church, Exclusion and LGB Mental Health Issues*'¹² that highlighted what a wide range of health care professionals and academics now agree:

¹² In the Name of Love – the Church, Exclusion and LGB Mental Health Issues, Oasis Foundation, February 2017

'LGB problems with mental health are as a result of discrimination and a sense of societal inferiority...arising from explicit statements or implicit assumptions that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality or bisexuality'

In particular, it sought to lay a large part of the blame at the door of the Church:

'The Church and local churches are one of the biggest sources of direct discrimination against LGB people and the biggest contributor of negative views to debates about same-sex relationships in society and the media.'

Until the specific issue of Spiritual Abuse against LGBTI Christians is recognised and addressed, particularly the 'Group Model' outlined above, then the high rate of suicide, self-harm and depression amongst LGBTI Christians will continue to go unabated.

It is imperative that professional organisations external to the religious institutions call for better safeguarding measures against spiritual abuse. Indeed, they should look to recognise it as a key form of abuse at a national level so as to ensure that some of the most vulnerable in our society are afforded the same protection as those facing other forms of abuse.

Jayne Ozanne is a prominent gay evangelical who works to ensure full inclusion of all LGBTI Christians at every level of the Church. Having been a founding member of the Archbishops' Council for the Church of England (1999 – 2004) she is now once again a member of General Synod where she is involved in campaigning for a range of issues. She is actively engaged through her writings and broadcasts in helping the Church develop and promote a positive Christian ethic towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.