

Little Ro and Survivors Voices Safeguarding Presentation to General Synod November 2020

Greetings,

I am going to share with a matter of equality.

This fact applies all over the world.

Across race, class, income, gender and any other artificial division of humans.

It's not grand.

Universally, children are sexually abused irrespective of race, class, income of any other artificial division of humans.

The stats by One-In-Four read that one in four girls and one in six boys suffer abuse. But with years of experience, we know the figure is higher than that.

I am Roz Etwaria from littlero.org and an ambassador for Survivors Voices. We offer Help Hope and Healing. And so along with Jane from Survivors Voices, we want to share the opinions of victim-survivors, from our Church of England focus groups and beyond.

Jane will magnify the story but let me share the common ground.

Children, the most vulnerable in society, are abused. And that affects me and you. We don't have to have suffered individual violation too.

That scar affects generation after generation after generation.

It affects physical and mental health, too, from blood pressure to emotional meltdowns. The amygdala, the emotional centre, is affected by child sexual abuse and with that, the ability to trust marred.

It is time to turn the other cheek.

That's not something to fear, but an opportunity for the Church of England to globally lead the way. And the Church of England can do this by

1. Recognising that sorry can be the strongest word.
2. Independent investigation into cases of abuse. After all, "He who pays the piper calls the tune". And that does not grow trust. So, to build bridges with victim-survivors, there must be independent investigations.
3. Collaborating with victim-survivors and taking a victim-centred approach.

I will now pass you onto Jane who's story is my story, our story and her own story.

Jane

If I told you my father died suddenly, what would you say to me?

Hold that thought.

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I want to share with you today as a person with a story, not as a 1 in 4 statistic. It is a difficult story but also a hopeful one. It's a story of connection, compassion and collaboration.

At the age of 13, the church was my refuge.

My father had been sexually abusing me for as long as I could remember.

I joined a church choir and youth group and found joy in the liturgy and a place where I felt part of a family, and safe, and where I had worth.

The church was my sanctuary, throughout my teenage years, marred by vulnerability and multiple sexual abuse. I told no-one because I felt scared and ashamed.

But our deaconess saw my troubled soul and held a safe space for me.

She listened. I shared my feelings. Her generous heart gave me connection, the unconditional love of God. I spent many hours in the lady chapel, weeping, praying, and lying in the soothing arms of Jesus.

Through depression, anorexia, self-harming and suicide attempts.

I was hurting so badly, I wanted to be with God more than I wanted to be alive.

The church was my salvation.

That is the power of a church that holds a safe space, that listens, that meet survivors with care, compassion and love.

At 18, I lost the church, my safe place.

In my vulnerability two priests raped and sexually abused me. The worst part was the spiritual abuse; they told me this is what God wanted. This was an expression of God's love.

I lost trust in the church.

So, it was many years before I found the courage to report the abuse.

Sadly, the reporting to not one but two bishops added to the emotional distress.

After a year of trying, I gave up.

Not being believed does that.

I want you to just think back to when I told you my father died; your reaction to hearing of my loss. Did you wonder if I was telling the truth? Did you think, I ought to be referred to a bereavement counsellor immediately?

Or did you want to show me compassion? I'm sure that is what all of us here would do, when people come to us who are grieving. And abuse is not just a betrayal, it is a huge loss; a loss of safety, a loss of connection, a loss of self, a loss of worth. And healing is a grieving process.

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So why is it so impossible for the Church to have a safeguarding process that says to survivors: "We believe you. We're so sorry. How can we put things right?"

Because that is not what happens. Last year I reported again, and after 13 months of the core group process I got: "We can't say if we believe you. It was too long ago to be important now. It doesn't matter enough to hold anyone accountable."

How did safeguarding become about risks & secrets, not compassion & justice?
When did we start to contract out healing, pastoral and spiritual care?
How did we create a safeguarding machine that excludes survivors?

So, how do we turn the other cheek?

Volf talks about "love shaping the very content of justice."
And that means justice that is restorative for everyone affected by abuse; and that includes all of us, yes, even bishops! That means justice that is accountable because it's independent; and justice that is collaborative, with survivors at the centre.

This is one of those kairos moments, when we have a unique chance to turn this completely around. It requires all of us to be bold and committed.

Connect. Read Letters to a Broken Church then meet with survivors in your diocese. Apologise and ask them how you can restore trust. We can help you to find survivors and to work safely.

Be Compassionate. Believe survivors and support them with recovery.

Collaborate. Commit to co-producing everything with survivors.

We all want to be a church that is free from abuse. The good news is that we can change, and the key to that change is us.

The poet *Audre Lorde* wrote: "It is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence." Don't be silent. Listen to us; hear us; and work with us.

Thank you.

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