

# Section 1: Responding well to all victims and survivors

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## Requirements

1.1 Church Bodies must promote a healthy, compassionate and safe culture which facilitates disclosures.

1.2 Church Bodies must regularly review their culture using the section “Characteristics of a healthy and safe culture” in the good practice advice below, to consider how their culture can be made healthier and safer, and make any changes identified. This must be done with the involvement of victims and survivors.

1.3 Church Bodies must provide clear and accessible information about:

- how victims and survivors can report abuse within the Church.
- the support available to disclosers immediately after their disclosure and how they will be assisted during and after the investigation.
- the processes that will be followed when abuse (or risk of abuse) is disclosed and what will happen to the personal information of people about whom abuse is disclosed.
- how allegations of abuse are reported to statutory services.
- how victims and survivors can contact statutory services if they believe that they have been abused or are at risk of being abused.
- contact details for national services for victims and survivors – for example [Stop It Now](#), [Samaritans](#), [NSPCC](#), [MACSAS](#), [Survivors Voices](#) – and local charities such as [Survivors' Network](#).

1.4 This information must be disseminated in a variety of methods relevant to that Church Body and those who encounter it through its activities, in order to meet different needs.

1.5 Information on safeguarding must be translated into the main languages commonly spoken by regular worshippers so that people who do not use English as their first language can understand it.

1.6 Church Bodies must also provide clear, jargon-free messages of support to victims and survivors of abuse.

## Good Practice Advice

Getting safeguarding right is about more than following procedures. It is also about how they are implemented and how people are treated and related to. Getting the “how” right will make the difference between victims and survivors experiencing disclosure as helpful or more damaging. This section therefore focusses on the relational aspects of Church Officers’ responses (behaviours, sensitivity to survivors’ and victims’ needs, humanity and care) which can support healing and recovery.

### Why disclosing abuse can be difficult

As explained by a survivor involved in the development of this Guidance, disclosing can be traumatic – *“Every survivor I know who has told me of their disclosure moment or moments has told me the process was traumatic. It does not matter if the disclosure is to a church person or secular person. The process is terrifying...”*

Disclosing current or non-recent abuse is extremely difficult for a range of reasons:

- As shown in survivors’ and victims’ accounts to the [Truth Commission](#), people have to remain undeterred by the history of indifferent professional and institutional responses to abuse. They must overcome the fear that their accounts will not be believed to report their experiences of abuse.
- Some victims and survivors may have witnessed disbelief and secrecy from their families or close social networks when they informed them that they had been abused. This previous inaction by others can create a psychological and emotional hurdle that people must overcome to tell others about current or non-recent abuse.
- Reporting abuse entails re-telling and re-living a truly traumatic experience. Victims and survivors will therefore judge whether people in the Church Body can be trusted to act on their disclosure before it is made.
- Some victims and survivors may have disclosed before and were not believed or their allegations were denied and covered up. This can lead to reluctance to make another attempt to disclose because they do not believe that action will be taken by Church Officers.
- Victims and survivors are likely to experience anxiety at the point of disclosure: “How will people react?”, “Will they believe me?”, “Will they blame me?”, “Will they think less of me or treat me differently?”, “Will everyone end up knowing?”, “Will my abuser find out?”, “Will the abuser seek retribution against me or a loved one?” “What happens to the information, who will be told?”
- Victims and survivors might be worried about possible consequences – for example, the possibility of being a witness in any ensuing court case can be terrifying, or that they may fear that the disclosure could lead to break up of their family or close friendships. Sometimes victims and survivors can also be threatened with harm (physical and psychological) by their abuser if they disclose and would have been told “no one will believe you.”
- Some victims and survivors may also feel that that once they tell their story, they will lose control about how the next steps will unfold.

## The culture of Church Bodies

Church Bodies can become safer and prevent abuse if they create and maintain healthy cultures. These environments will also help to ensure that abuse is responded to well, including good care and support for victims and survivors.

“Organisational culture” is an essential part of facilitating disclosure. It is about the quality of the relationships and behaviours within the church community. Healthy cultures also recognise the effect of power imbalances arising from hierarchies within the Church while unhealthy cultures are critical, closed and generate fear or apathy.

Given the acute sense of vulnerability that victims and survivors will be feeling, most of them will be reluctant to disclose in unhealthy Church cultures. However, they are likely to feel safe to disclose if they see that other groups of people who can experience less power than others (e.g. those with the "protected characteristics" under the Equality Act 2010) are treated with kindness, fairness and equality within a Church Body. This is in keeping with the Church's principle of “Every person is equally precious to God” enshrined in Protecting All God's Children.

Victims and survivors who supported the development of this Guidance said that trustworthiness was a shared attribute of the people that they disclosed to – “People [who are disclosed to] will have been selected because of their personal qualities, because the survivor trusts them enough.” It is therefore imperative that Church Bodies create and maintain a healthy and safe culture. This applies to all Church Bodies and all levels of the Church, and not only to frontline parish churches.

## Characteristics of healthy and safe church cultures

This section outlines some of the characteristics of a healthy and safe Church culture which Church Bodies should promote. Achieving this requires transparency and honesty, as explained below:

*Some churches present too strongly that everything is wonderful, we are here to praise and be joyful, we are all so blessed, life is just amazing, God answers our prayers. Healthy churches need to own properly issues of brokenness, of failure and sin and disappointment - and this needs to come from church leadership who are secure enough to be appropriately honest and vulnerable. So the culture is then “real” and not closed or defensive or false. There can be too much avoidance of the “bad” in churches that want to be happy, positive, joyful, 'successful' places, and that (usually subconscious) approach leads to a culture where disclosures are less likely” (Right Reverend Ruth Bushyager, Bishop of Horsham).*

## Communication patterns

- The mode of communication adopted by people is “genuine dialogue”, a respectful, person-centered exchange in which all people are open to being influenced, rather than “monologue disguised as dialogue.”
- There is encouragement and welcoming of different perspectives and views.
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People do not feel they are “taking a risk” by expressing different views to other members of the community.

- People do not have anxiety or fear about raising concerns.

## **Behaviour patterns**

- There is absence of coercive and/or controlling behaviour by ordained and non-ordained people and a "command and control" style of leadership.
- “Poor behaviour” (e.g. bullying) is challenged and resolved when it occurs.
- There is no evasion of responsibility to address difficult situations – for example, senior clergy or staff are not reallocated different roles when safeguarding concerns are raised about them, and the matter is addressed.
- Those involved in the Church Body support each other through difficult times.

## **Relationships**

- Power is shared and distributed instead of being vested in a few people.
- Leadership styles are inclusive and consultative rather than controlling.
- There are no powerful elites or cliques dominating the life and affairs of the Church Body.
- Safe boundaries between people are understood and observed.
- No one is isolated or left out of the Church Body's life and activities.

## **Self-reflexivity**

- Collectively and individually, the Church community devotes time to reflect on their behaviours and relationships.
- The tendency towards, and dangers of, clerical deference are acknowledged and actively guarded against.
- People are aware of the impact they can have on others.
- Feedback from others (for example, about communication style and behaviour) is welcomed.
- Leaders in the Church Body learn from failures and reviews and take appropriate actions to seek to prevent any recurrence.

## **Privacy and data protection**

The importance of protecting peoples' personal data and privacy is understood.

- People feel safe in sharing personal information because they know their privacy is taken seriously.
- People know how information about them will be used and they can trust people to use it appropriately to follow up their safeguarding concerns.

## Promoting healthy Christian cultures

Healthy Christian cultures need to be consciously and purposefully developed, nurtured and reviewed. The starting point is to reflect on the quality of the existing culture. Church Bodies can do this by:

- Highlighting the importance of healthy cultures and raising it in peoples' consciousness at meetings (e.g. within Chapter meetings, diocesan senior leadership meetings, or PCC meetings).
- Having conversations at these meetings or with other groups involved in the Church Body where people ask and seek to answer the question: "How healthy is our culture?"
- Creating opportunities to include all those involved in the Church Body in this dialogue – for example, introducing yearly feedback and reflection sessions involving parishioners, clergy, PCC members and churchwardens to evaluate the "health" of the Church Body's culture and community. In some areas, the diocese may have to take the lead in these reviews on account of available resources and expertise.
- Drawing on the section "Characteristics of healthy and safe cultures" above in these dialogues.
- Proactively role modelling healthy culture behaviours and communication patterns – as individuals and senior leadership teams.
- Involving victims and survivors of abuse in helping to improve and maintain a healthy culture.

## Accessing safeguarding information

Victims and survivors should be able to obtain safeguarding information without needing to identify themselves as such. Church Bodies can promote this by:

- Displaying leaflets, posters and literature about safeguarding on notice-boards or entrances to the church or cathedral. They can also regularly include safeguarding information in church services, notice sheets and monthly newsletters.
- Ensuring that safeguarding information is inclusive. Where a Church Body is a PCC or cathedral Chapter, they should ensure that safeguarding information is translated for worshippers who do not use English as a first language. It is also advisable for this information to be in accessible language so that people with learning disabilities, who face more risks relative to others, can also understand it. (Church Bodies can access resources for creating accessible information on the website of [CHANGE](#)).

Having a dedicated safeguarding section on the Church Body's website.

- Including the need for responsive listening to safeguarding disclosures in sermons and other messages from the pulpit. A parish community could ask itself: "When was the last time the needs of victims and survivors were addressed in a sermon?"
- Once a year having a "safeguarding Sunday" to focus on safeguarding issues. This could include having a shared sermon or dialogue between a survivor and a priest to demonstrate and educate about a positive culture.
- Consulting victims and survivors to get their advice on what information is needed in their setting and the most effective method of communicating this for the desired impact.

## **Relational and survivor-centred responses to disclosure**

Relational and survivor-centered approaches mean prioritising the needs of victims or survivors. The responses recognise the trauma experienced by victims or survivors, and their potential to heal and recover with appropriate support. Conversely, an inappropriate response can compound the harm and distress that victims and survivors feel. The Church's values of love, compassion and empathy should be central to relational approaches. Relational approaches should be underpinned by an understanding that abuse committed by Church Officers or in a Church setting has profound spiritual and theological consequences for victims and survivors. They should also emphasise the importance of the quality and nature of the relationship and interaction between victims and survivors and Church Officers. Believing that this relationship can motivate, inspire, and bring about change in its own right is central to relational approaches.

Survivors argue that *"[t]here 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 [and/or other forms of] abuse, and this is just the first phase of an ordeal that should no longer be tolerated."*<sup>4</sup> This means that Church Officers working with victims and survivors must recognise their humanity. They must also appreciate that some victims and survivors want to maintain the healthy relationships they have within their church because they can enhance their healing and recovery.

## **Clarifying early that information might be shared**

A relational approach involves honesty and transparency by Church Officers receiving disclosures. They should not make promises that cannot be kept – for example, that the disclosure will be kept secret. This will involve clarifying that the information disclosed might be shared with others (such as the NST, DSA or CSA and statutory authorities) for safeguarding purposes.

## **A safe space for disclosure**

Church Officers should listen to disclosures where confidentiality and privacy can be guaranteed and interruptions avoided. Some victims and survivors may want a quiet place while others may need suitably public places which are visible to others because this makes them feel safe. If the conversation is planned then it is preferable to allow victims and survivors to choose the location and time. Care should be exercised to avoid

locations which might trigger negative emotions for the victim or survivor. If the disclosure is spontaneous, the person disclosing abuse should be asked if they would like to speak in a more private space.

Church Officers should make an accurate record of what the victim or survivor discloses because this will facilitate appropriate responses and it may also be used in future legal proceedings. The best way to ensure accuracy is for Church Officers to show the notes they have made to the victim and survivor and ask them to confirm that it is an accurate record of the conversation. At the end of the conversation, Church Officers should assure the victim or survivor of next steps and take immediate action.

## Reflective listening

Research suggests that victims and survivors “*want to be actively listened to when they tell their story about spiritual [and other forms of] abuse*”. *‘Listening and hearing the person’*; *‘careful honouring, listening and respect’* [...] *‘This message was repeated again and again’* <sup>5</sup> Listeners can show “active listening” by reflecting back what the speaker says and what they hear, not in parrot-fashion, but by clarifying points and checking the meaning of phrases, words, or even events. This will enable the listener to understand what the disclosure means to the victim or survivor, while also showing empathy, humanity and care about recovery and healing. The [Parish Safeguarding Handbook](#) contains examples of good listening skills.

## Understanding the victim’s or survivor’s position

Survivors disclosing abuse may feel as if they are reliving, rather than just remembering, some truly awful events. Victims disclosing recent or ongoing abuse may still be fearful of their abuser. How they are responded to at the point of disclosure can have a profound effect on whether they trust the Church to protect and/or support them. Church Officers can assure victims or survivors of their safety by explaining that they will immediately inform the DSA or CSA who will determine and take the required safeguarding measures. For some victims and survivors a response that recognises their humanity, their right to care, safety and the support of the Church can be powerful first steps to their healing.

## Going at the victim’s and survivor’s pace

Victims and survivors should be allowed the space to disclose at their own pace and discretion. Church Officers listening to disclosures should avoid pressing for information and provide the required time for the conversation to unfold without either participant feeling rushed. They should also not ask leading questions. The extent of disclosure should rest with the victim or survivor, who should feel in control of their story – within the boundaries of good safeguarding practice – and what is going to happen with it.

Victims and survivors may not remember the details of their experience or articulate it in a way that appears understandable or in chronological sequence. This can be because of the impact of their traumatic experience of abuse and because they have not made sense of it themselves, or because their abuser has given them false messages – for example, that the victim or survivor was responsible for the harm caused.



## Checking on well-being

While disclosing abuse is difficult for victims and survivors, they may feel more cared for if Church Officers regularly check on their wellbeing (during and after the disclosure). Therefore, after they have disclosed, Church Officers should arrange to check on their wellbeing (with their agreement). Who exactly does this will depend on the Church Body involved and the support provision within, or available to, the Church Body. This should be arranged with the victim or survivor. For a survivor to get a call or visit from someone they did not disclose to, who apparently now knows about their abuse, may be very upsetting.

## Remaining non-judgmental and being self-reflexive

Listeners should be aware of their own emotions during disclosure. They should demonstrate appropriate empathy and avoid overt displays of shock and upset. The focus should be on the survivor's emotions, not the listener's, who should express deep concern for the victim or survivor whilst remaining calm themselves.

Church Officers should remain non-judgmental during a disclosure but they must take immediate action afterwards. They must take what they are being told seriously, respond empathetically and then act – for example, reporting to the DSA or CSA or others with safeguarding responsibility in the Church Body. It is not the role of Church Officers to judge whether disclosures are “true” or “credible”. The response must therefore not be one of disbelief.

To follow good practice, Church Officers should note the following:

- **Abuse can affect how a victim or survivor “presents” themselves:** The experience of abuse is likely to cause trauma and the disclosure process can be “re-abusive” (Stein, 2016)<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, victims or survivors may sometimes remember “snapshots” and not all the details of their experiences. This could make their account appear “unlikely” or “lacking credibility”, leading Church Officers to dismiss the truthfulness of their disclosure.
- **Abusers can be manipulative:** Some forms of abuse result from manipulation by the abuser in which victims and survivors feel “loyal” or “devoted” to them. This means that, even while disclosing, victims and survivors may wish to retain some information to “protect” their abuser, making their account appear distorted and therefore unreliable, untrustworthy and inaccurate. For this reason, Church Officers should prioritise listening and supporting the person to articulate their experiences; and record the information and report it to the DSA or CSA.
- **“Inappropriate” reaction to hearing abuse:** Church Officers hearing disclosures can become upset and overwhelmed by emotions, particularly if it triggers their own experiences of abuse. While this is an understandable reaction, it can also cause Church Officers to avoid talking to the victim or survivor about their disclosure in order to protect themselves from the details. The Church Officer facing this situation may react by preventing the victim or survivor from speaking further, “shutting them down”, challenging the victim or survivor on aspects of their account; questioning the veracity of their description of events, or even minimising the significance of what they are hearing. For these



reasons, Church Officers have a duty to listen to the disclosure, take note (verbally and in writing) and inform the DSA or CSA.

If a Church Officer is struggling to manage their emotions in the course of a disclosure, they should inform the victim or survivor disclosing to them and connect them with another Church Officer who is able to hear the disclosure – for example, the DSA or CSA. Depending on the information disclosed, they will need to inform the victim or survivor that they will have to share this information, as appropriate and necessary.

## **Managing online disclosures**

Occasionally, victims and survivors may make a disclosure on social media or through email, or by using other electronic platforms. Church Officers should contact the person to continue the discussion. It is up to the victim or survivor to decide how they wish to communicate online or in-person. The responsibility of the Church Officer is to keep that information safe, but they can of course make the person aware of the need to communicate safely.

## **Responding to concerns or allegations involving children or young people**

The Church of England seeks to create and maintain a safe environment for all. This includes being open and responding appropriately to concerns and allegations raised by children and young people. Church Officers should avoid intentionally instigating a meeting with a child or young person to receive a disclosure or take a statement from them – that is the role of local authorities' children's social care services or the police. However, if a child or young person directly discloses about abuse happening to them, the following general guidelines should be followed:

- Remain calm.
- Listen to the child or young person carefully and in a manner that conveys they are being heard and taken seriously.
- Give the child or young person the opportunity to tell their story in their own time.
- Ask questions only for clarification.
- Reassure the child or young person they have done the right thing by disclosing and that the Church will work with statutory services to safeguard them.
- Do not make promises that cannot be kept – for example, that the disclosure will be kept secret.
- Explain to the child or young person what will happen next – i.e. that the Church Officer will inform the DSA or CSA who will progress the disclosure.

● 4Stein, J. (2016). Surviving the crucible of ecclesiastical abuse. *Crucible: The Journal of Christian Social Ethics*, July

● 5Oakley, L., & and Humphreys, J. (2019). Escaping the maze of spiritual abuse. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.(p.90)

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