

Section 6: Spiritual and pastoral support for victims and survivors

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Requirements

6.1 Church Bodies in which abuse occurred must offer spiritual and pastoral support to the victims and survivors. This should be discussed with the victim or survivor and they must consent to the support, using an appropriate consent form.

6.2 The DSA will support PCCs, Diocesan Boards of Education and cathedrals (with which the diocese has a safeguarding Service Level Agreement in place) in arranging spiritual and pastoral support.

Good Practice Advice

The spiritual dimension of Church-based abuse

Spiritual and pastoral support can be important components of recovery for victims and survivors and can lead to their reconciliation with their local church, if this is what they want. However, it should be needs-led. Sometimes, this is exemplified by the needs of victims and survivors for a theology that can assist them to make sense of their traumatic experiences. On other occasions, some victims and survivors need arrangements to worship in a different church, to prevent re-traumatisation.

Victims and survivors with faith, or those who wish to explore faith, may, understandably, have great difficulty in reconciling the Christian teaching of a loving God with the reality of their abuse. Others may struggle with Christian references to God as “Father” or to discipleship as “submission” or “obedience” because they imply an acknowledgement of their powerlessness *vis-à-vis* clergy. Some Christian survivors also struggle with the notion of “forgiveness”, as they may think of it as absolving their abuser of their criminal conduct. These complexities can be compounded by the misuse of theology to silence survivors at the point of disclosure or in their demand for redress – for example, “You must forgive and forget”. This is a very sensitive area of ministry and Church Officers should avoid exacerbating the trauma that victims and survivors have experienced by suggesting that they should “move on” from the harmful abuse.

Some survivors of abuse in the Church have maintained their faith but, understandably, they struggle to engage with formal Church settings. Many have expressed the desire to stay connected with their faith even as they keep their distance from the Church. Consideration should be given, for victims and survivors in this situation, to whether pastoral support can be provided in addition to specialist therapeutic support as previously discussed.

Arranging spiritual and pastoral support

The pastoral response of the Church, and the responsibilities of the bishop who has the ‘cure of souls’ for their diocese, are not wholly discharged by providing a Support Person. The services of the Support Person should be in addition to, rather than a substitute for, the pastoral care provided by the diocese and the bishop. However, some Support Persons, with the appropriate training, might be able to provide pastoral and spiritual support and some victims and survivors might prefer to receive that support from someone who is not ordained.

Experience shows that many survivors of abuse in the Church need to see that the Church and its leadership have understood their experience, including any complicity of the Church in that experience, and has fully taken responsibility for any failures and the actions required to avoid abuse in the future.

The DSA (or CSA) working with the Archdeacon, Area Dean and Spiritual Director should identify a pool of clergy with the skills and theological knowledge to undertake the work. The nominated clergy will also require training and support to undertake this work. Not all victims and survivors will want to receive this support from a member of the clergy. There may be highly able lay people who can undertake this work.

In their conversations with victims and survivors who have disclosed abuse, the DSA (or CSA) should inform them of support available, describing the skills and knowledge of clergy alongside exploring the spiritual or pastoral needs to be addressed.

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