

4.2 Spiritual Abuse

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Requirements

4.2.1 Church Officers must be aware that spiritual abuse is often an integral element of other experiences of abuse within the Christian and other faith contexts and must be considered when investigating disclosures of other forms of abuse.

4.2.2 In addition to the requirements and advice set out in Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse, in particular in relation to spiritual abuse, Church Officers must:

- i) Listen carefully, avoid interrupting and allow a full disclosure without feeling they must defend the Church or the individual.
- ii) Respond in a non-judgemental manner, demonstrating that the disclosure of spiritual abuse is being taken seriously.
- iii) Avoid minimising what they are being told or showing disbelief or denial.
- iv) Be aware that victims may have experienced harmful teaching.
- v) Avoid suggesting the use of Matthew 18 (resolving disputes by speaking directly to the person). It is harmful to suggest that someone speaks to their abuser about their abuse.
- vi) Be aware that a disclosure of spiritual abuse may also be part of a disclosure of other forms of abuse.
- vii) Where abuse has involved use of scripture or prayer, think carefully and be judicious about whether it is appropriate to use this as a first response to a disclosure

Spiritual Abuse is not a separate category of abuse but is a form of psychological and emotional abuse. It is important when discussing such cases with statutory agencies to be clear that spiritual abuse is a form of psychological and emotional abuse within a religious context.

Good practice advice for section 4.2

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is important when discussing such cases with statutory agencies who may not be familiar with the concept to be clear that the case is psychological or emotional abuse within a religious context. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. (A summary definition, and signs you may see, can be found in [Section 2 \[1\]](#).)

The Church of England accepts that there is an ongoing discussion about the use of the term ‘spiritual abuse’, and that some hold a view that an alternative term or wording should be used. It is, however, vital to give people the language to talk about this type of abuse, to recognise it, act on it and prevent it. The term ‘spiritual abuse’ is used by survivors and at present is the most widely recognised, and so it is the term used here. The term used will, however, remain under review. It is important to understand that work in this area acknowledges harm experienced but also seeks to create healthier, safer cultures in which all can flourish. Therefore, the work is preventative, responsive and protective for the Church. The use of the term spiritual abuse is recent and there has been some concern that the term could become “weaponised” to attack particular positions, rather than to identify and address harm and abuse. Holding a particular theological position may not be in and of itself abusive. What matters is how the position is held and shared - it is important that this must be done in a way that respects and values others.

Spiritual abuse may occur on its own, or alongside other forms of abuse, such as physical, sexual or domestic abuse. It may be used to ‘legitimise’ or facilitate other forms of abuse. It is often an integral element of other experiences of abuse within the Christian Church and other faith contexts and it is important that in investigating disclosures of other forms of abuse, spiritual abuse is considered. Spiritual abuse shares some of the hallmarks of bullying and harassment, including intimidation, manipulation and inducing fear. However, what makes this distinct are the elements associated with religious belief including coercion through religious position, membership of the religious community, scripture, biblical discourse and spiritual threats.

Within safeguarding, spiritual abuse of a child is a form of emotional abuse, and spiritual abuse of an adult is a form of psychological abuse. This distinction is important to ensure that any incidents of spiritual abuse can be addressed within the statutory definitions and categories of abuse that are currently in use, which are different for children and adults. The key aspect of spiritual abuse is the religious context in which the abuse occurs and the ways in which people are controlled through the misuse and abuse of religious scripture, divine position[\[2\]](#), spiritual threats and fear of spiritual consequences and the suggestion of God as complicit. All or some of these features can be used to control or coerce:

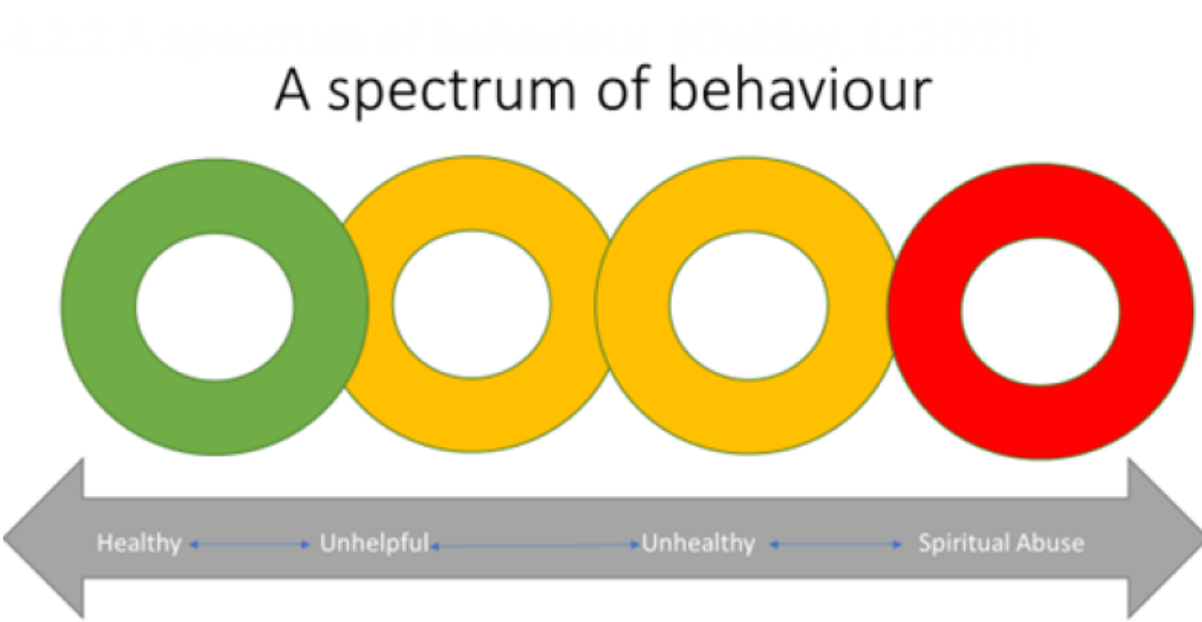
“There are profound consequences to someone who feels unable to comply with abusive behaviour...If you believe that to disagree or to fail to comply means that you are letting God down or even, in extreme cases, that you will not enter heaven, the pressure on you is immense”

“His primary tactic was to weaponise scripture and use it to induce a religion of fear and performance”[\[3\]](#)

[1] Oakley, L., Kinmond, K., & Humphreys, J. (2018). Spiritual Abuse in Christian faith settings: Definition, policy and practice Guidance. *Journal of Adult Protection*, 20(3-4), 144-154.

[2] Divine position is defined as being seen to be appointed or anointed by God; to hold a position or role and this equating to the individual being beyond question or reproach.

[3] Stibbe, Mark. Foreword to ‘Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse – Creating healthy Christian Cultures ’ – Dr Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, 2019



It is important to situate spiritual abuse in the spectrum of behaviour we experience within Christian contexts. The diagram above is helpful in understanding this spectrum. At one end there is good, healthy, nurturing behaviour in which people flourish and grow, and there are many examples of this in our communities. Then as we move along the spectrum, we reach unhelpful behaviour. This is where someone's reaction/behaviour is not harmful but not helpful and we all behave in this way at times. If we continue along the spectrum and if, in the context of spiritual abuse, we start to see a consistent pattern of behaviour that is negative, where we check ourselves before approaching that person; where they are not open to question etc., it starts to become unhealthy and much of the behaviour that concerns us sits here. It can often be challenged and addressed at this stage.

If it becomes a persistent pattern of coercive controlling behaviour that reflects the definition of psychological abuse with a religious rationale, it can cross the threshold into spiritual abuse. As with other forms of psychological abuse, it is anticipated the number of cases that cross this threshold will be small but where they do, they should be referred onwards as with other cases of psychological abuse. It is also important to note that people can move up and down this spectrum of behaviour. If behaviour is identified and responded to effectively it can be addressed and not escalate into unhealthy or spiritually abusive behaviour. In addressing and reflecting on behaviours this provides an opportunity for early intervention and support through a variety of pathways. These pathways may include pastoral support, supervision, training and learning to “disagree well”, using the Pastoral Principles as a starting point^[1]. As stated above, it is anticipated that the number of cases requiring referral through safeguarding or disciplinary means would be small, as some situations may be more appropriately dealt with through Dignity at Work or anti-bullying policies.

As spiritual abuse is a new and emerging area of understanding the box below shows the spectrum of behaviour with worked examples to show where something can be considered to cross the threshold into spiritual abuse. It also details the response and referral required at each stage.



Example 1 of behaviour [1]	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teaching about financial giving in a way that allows understanding of biblical passages and discipleship.• Accepting that some will be more able than others to give financially.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Suggesting that most people could give more if they managed their finances more effectively.• Being overly defensive when speaking to someone who has a different opinion to you on tithing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pressuring individuals or groups into financial giving.• Giving more attention to individuals who are able to give financially.• Developing a pattern of defensive and critical conversations with individuals who are unable to give financially.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consistent, intrusive, coercive requests for financial giving, suggesting that the level of giving is the most important measure of the individual's commitment to God.• The use of biblical scripture to persistently coerce financial giving or using threats of spiritual consequences to invoke fear if finance is not provided.
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Response required	Affirm good practice	<p>If this is a one-off situation, it could be that a little extra pastoral support is needed, or some help with capability.</p> <p>The response required will in part depend on whether the individual appreciates that their behaviour was unhelpful in that situation. If they don't, this would be a warning flag which might trigger a more robust response (see next column).</p>	<p>More robust, formal intervention, would be needed at this stage to help the individual move back down the spectrum and prevent them moving forward.</p> <p>This might include closer supervision, re-training on safeguarding or disagreeing well, coaching, mentoring or counselling.</p>	<p>A persistent pattern of such behaviour would constitute spiritual abuse. If this was towards a child of vulnerable adult, this would be a safeguarding matter.</p>
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Example behaviour	2	of	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All individuals in the congregation are able to question, discuss and respectfully challenge messages that are shared and how things are done.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being overly defensive when asked a question or being challenged respectfully.• Not actively listening to a concern.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing a pattern of defensive and aggressive responses to any question or challenge.• Creating a culture in which challenge and questioning are seen as threatening unity.• Regularly suggesting that anyone raising an issue is themselves the issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A consistent pattern of controlling behaviour suggesting that questioning or challenge is an inability to be obedient to God and a reflection of a problematic personal faith.• Seeking to use Scripture or spiritual threats to close down discussion or silence an individual rather than to engage with the issues they are raising.
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Response required	Affirm good practice	<p>If this is a one-off situation, it could be that a little extra pastoral support is needed, or some help with capability.</p> <p>The response required will in part depend on whether the individual appreciates that their behaviour was unhelpful in that situation. If they don't, this would be a warning flag which might trigger a more robust response (see next column)</p>	<p>More robust, formal intervention would be needed at this stage to help the individual move back down the spectrum and prevent them moving forward.</p> <p>This might include closer supervision, re-training on safeguarding or disagreeing well, coaching, mentoring or counselling.</p>	<p>A persistent pattern of such behaviour would constitute spiritual abuse. If this was towards a child of vulnerable adult, this would be a safeguarding matter.</p>
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Example behaviour	3	of	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Offering spiritual mentorship and support, which is mutually beneficial with agreed boundaries.● Aiming to be self-reflective and self-aware about one-to-one pastoral conversations.● Being aware of the likely power imbalance in a pastoral mentoring relationship.● Possibly having confidential supervision for one-to-one pastoral conversations, or 'checking in' with a third party confidentially about these.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Being a little too directive in one mentorship conversation.● Being overly defensive when one piece of advice is disagreed with or ignored.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Requiring the individual to share personal details which they do not wish to share. Going beyond agreed boundaries <u>[2]</u>● Spiritual mentorship or support becoming very directive and difficult to disagree with or not comply with.● Exploring and interpreting personal psychological history to a depth appropriate to a trained counsellor or psychotherapist.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Consistent pattern of highly controlling and directive mentorship.● Use of scripture to control behaviour consistently.● Using God's name to enforce actions the mentor recommends.● Making someone feel unable or afraid to disagree with any advice given.● Presenting oneself as akin to a professional counsellor, anointed by God for this role, with equivalent skills and competencies.
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Response required	Affirm good practice	<p>If this is a on- off situation, it could be that a little extra pastoral support is needed, or some help with capability.</p> <p>The response required will in part depend on whether the individual appreciates that their behaviour was unhelpful in that situation. If they don't, this would be a warning flag which might trigger a more robust response (see next column)</p>	<p>More robust, formal intervention would be needed at this stage to help the individual move back down the spectrum and prevent them moving forward.</p> <p>This might include, closer supervision, re-training on safeguarding or disagreeing well, coaching, mentoring or counselling.</p>	<p>A persistent pattern of such behaviour would constitute spiritual abuse. If this was towards a child of vulnerable adult, this would be a safeguarding matter.</p>
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Example 4 of behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking to see if a member of the clergy is OK • Ensuring the member of clergy has protected time to rest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduling a regular meeting on a day that should be the clergy members day off 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistently undermining a member of the clergy privately and publicly including commenting on their working hours as a means of undermining them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently using passages of scripture for example on servant leadership to control and undermine a member of the clergy and to exploit them in demanding excessive working hours with the rhetoric that this is required by God
	Affirm good practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take advice from Area Dean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request formal support from a senior colleague 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider escalating to Bishop, Archdeacon, or HR for intervention

The Senior Leadership Pathway has a strong focus on how to identify and create a culture which is protective, preventative, healing, and restorative. Examples of characteristics of a healthy Christian culture include a culture in which:

- There is a genuinely open dialogue, there is positive encouragement and active welcoming of different perspectives and views.
- Everyone is valued, respected and nurtured and no one is isolated or excluded.[\[3\]](#)

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- Power is distributed, not vested in one or two individuals or groups.
- Self-reflection in each member is promoted.
- Safeguarding is foundational and actively promoted, preventative and responsive processes are in place.
- Survivors are heard, supported and responded to.

It is important to understand that spiritual abuse can be experienced by anyone irrespective of position. It can be perpetrated from a member of clergy to the congregation, but also from the congregation to the member of clergy and by people in equal power positions. Where the member of clergy is the alleged perpetrator, this must be reported using the process set out in the [Managing Allegations](#) Guidance. Where the member of clergy is the alleged victim, this will still require a safeguarding response, and the DSA should be contacted to advise.

Openness to the presence and work of God in the life of the Church will often involve trust in, and a degree of vulnerability to, other people within the community of faith. This is true both in more formal contexts, such as public worship, and more informal ones, such as prayer ministry and spiritual guidance of individuals.

Spiritual abuse can lead to lasting damage to people, it often impacts the ability to enter into situations of trust and future relationships. Abusers act in a way that is contrary to scripture. The betrayal of trust can lead to fear and lack of safety. The depth of impact should not be underestimated. The Church has a duty to guard against the dangers of spiritual abuse and the harm it can bring to individuals and communities.

As with other safeguarding concerns, any Church Officer who has a concern about spiritual abuse must follow the referral processes set out in the [Managing Allegations](#) Guidance.

4.2.3 Who may perpetrate or experience spiritual abuse?

Anyone can experience spiritual abuse and any person may control and coerce another. It is important to understand that whilst many experience spiritual abuse from those who lead, leaders can and do experience spiritual abuse also. Spiritual abuse is not necessarily tied to a person's institutional power position. Abuse may occur from the top down (i.e. from the leadership) or from the bottom up. It may occur between peers. It also may occur with members of a congregation who hold or appear to hold influence. However, holding power in institutional structures can place individuals in positions where spiritual abuse is complex to challenge and, therefore, accountability for those in positions of power and influence is essential.

Spiritual abuse may be perpetrated by an individual in an otherwise healthy culture, or it may be endemic in a Church setting such that it is the predominant culture.

Spiritual abuse may occur within a range of ministerial and pastoral relationships, and it is important to recognise this.

Spiritual abuse is not tied to a denomination, expression of Church or faith. Holding a particular theological position may not be in and of itself abusive. What matters is how the position is held and shared. For example, a church may teach about tithing (giving 10% of your salary to the Church). If this teaching is shared and people are allowed to then make their own decisions about whether or not they wish to give, this is not by its nature coercive. If, however, there is repeated pressure to give, and giving is equated to a person's standing as a Christian or in the community, then this does become coercive.

4.2.4 What are the key characteristics of spiritual abuse?

- **Misusing scripture to coerce behaviour** - Behaviour may be coerced through the use of scripture in order to meet the abuser's personal agenda. Biblical messages of submission, sacrifice, obedience and forgiveness can be used to manipulate, control and coerce. The discourses will be recognised by many in the Christian faith and can be healthy and helpful. However, when distorted they can be difficult to challenge.
- **Coercing through censorship** – This may include pressuring people to secrecy and silence. People may feel unable to ask questions, disagree or raise issues and this can be associated with the need to keep unity or protect the individual, Church or God.
- **Requiring unquestioning obedience** – This may include requiring obedience to the abuser, with an implicit or explicit suggestion that this equates to obedience to God. People may feel unable to make their own choices and can feel pressured into providing financial, emotional and psychological support, service or even sexual activity in order to please their abuser and, it may be implied, to please God.
- **Using a sense of divine position to exert pressure to conform and suggesting this position is unchallengeable.** A spiritually abusive culture/relationship is characterised by a pattern of coercion and control, in which an individual's fear of disobeying God is used to require them to act or adopt a pattern of behaviour without there being free consent.
- **Enforced accountability** – For example, being required to be accountable to another without consent, and without choice and control over boundary setting in the relationship. It should be noted that there are times when accountability is required (for example, where there is a safeguarding agreement), but these are enacted in accordance with Church of England Policies, Procedures, and Practice Guidance and not as a punishment.
- **Exclusion or isolation of individuals as a punishment for non-compliance** – An individual may be isolated from others due to perceived

non-conformity or disobedience.

- **Coercing behaviour through exploitation and manipulation** – This may include extreme pressure to conform, for example requiring a degree of commitment to the Church or the abuser that exceeds what is required of others in the Church. The level of commitment may be equated to an individual's loyalty to the abuser or to God.
- **Publicly shaming and humiliating individuals in order to control their behaviour** - Individual/s may experience public shaming and humiliation because of a perceived lack of obedience or conformity.
- **Threats of spiritual consequences** – This may include exercising control through threats of spiritual consequences for non-compliance with personal directives.
- **Inappropriate mentoring relationships.** The misuse of the pastoral relationship in such a way that the mentor does not hold appropriate boundaries, and justifies this by theology, scripture or by claiming special spiritual insight or divine sanction.

4.2.5 What is the impact of spiritual abuse?

As with other forms of abuse, spiritual abuse can result in significant harm to a person. It can also seriously impact a person's faith. As this abuse is a new and emerging area of understanding and is, in fact, often misunderstood and minimised, this can exacerbate the situation.

The impact may include:

a. **Distrust**

Distrust is one of the main consequences of spiritual abuse. Coercion and control can leave individuals unsure of who and what they can trust. It can also lead to a distrust of any believed to be connected to the Christian faith. This could undermine an individual's confidence in any support offered by the Church, including safeguarding and investigation into the abuse.

b. **Crisis of faith**

Spiritual abuse can lead to damage to, or a loss of, faith. The role of faith and scripture in the experience of this abuse can lead individuals to questioning what, if anything, they believe. Individuals who choose to re-engage with a Christian faith may need considerable support to explore scripture for themselves (if they choose to do this) and to understand the misuse of scripture in their own experience.

c. Feelings of powerlessness

As with all forms of abuse, those affected will often feel powerless during the abusive experience and after. They may have felt compelled to be obedient to their abuser, and to defer to their decisions. They may struggle to regain control over their lives and may be frightened about doing this.

d. Feelings of anger and self-blame.

People often feel angry about what has happened. The anger can be magnified by the knowledge that it happened in a Christian context and that scripture and teaching has been used to justify it. People may also blame themselves. They may feel they have been complicit in their abuse or 'allowed' it to take place. They may worry they have unknowingly been complicit in the spiritual abuse of others.

e. Loss of self and identity

For many, faith is central to a sense of self and identity. A loss of faith, or loss of a Church role and damaged relationships, can result in a direct challenge to this. It may take some time for an individual to build a new positive image of themselves and it should be recognised that not all individuals may be able to do this where trust has been severely damaged. This is another reason why effective response to abuse is so important.

f. Isolation

Individuals who leave spiritually abusive relationships or environments may find themselves isolated. Other relationships may have diminished due to the effects of the abusive relationship. This may leave the individual with a lack of social support. The distrust experienced can result in deep complexities associated with accessing support and intervention.

4.2.6 Responding well to disclosures of spiritual abuse

Hearing about and listening to disclosures of spiritual abuse can be particularly challenging on a personal level, particularly as they touch on individual faith beliefs. Requirements and practice advice about responding to disclosures of all forms of abuse are outlined in full as part of [Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse Guidance](#).

4.2.7 Theology of safeguarding and spiritual abuse

As this is a new area it is important to demonstrate how addressing spiritual abuse is rooted in theology and biblical principles.

Christians, it is also important to think theologically about safeguarding. A conversation has now started in the Church about theology and safeguarding. The paper ‘Theology and Safeguarding: trauma, justice, forgiveness, wholeness, experience and calling’ has been co-developed with survivors. This paper is not a final product; rather it is the start of a process of continual dialogue and self-reflexivity which is essential if the Church is to get safeguarding right.

^[1] Oakley, L, 2021

^[2] This example does not relate to situations in which a safeguarding agreement is needed. Such an agreement is a requirement, this example relates to mentorship relationships freely entered in to in order to develop.

^[3] It is recognised that there are contexts in which a safeguarding agreement is appropriate and this could limit the activities in which individuals can participate.

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