

## GENERAL SYNOD

## REVIEW OF ABUSE AT SOUL SURVIVOR

**Summary**

This paper argues that the completed NST/Diocese of St Alban's investigation into the abuse of Mike Pilavachi at Soul Survivor, as well as the Soul Survivor commissioned independent KC review by Fiona Scolding, are not sufficient in their Terms of Reference or Scope to satisfy both the needs of those who are victims and survivors of this abuse nor matters that should be of interest to the wider Church of England as a whole, and to this Synod, in our determination to create a safer church. The Terms of Reference and Scope of these investigations fail to deal with the wider cultural and systemic contexts that allowed this abuse to occur, to continue and to go unchecked for nearly 40 years. This paper sets out some of the areas that still need to be addressed and, in debate, asks members of the General Synod to map further areas that the Archbishops' Council need to take into consideration in the commissioning of our own review as a national church.

'That this Synod, being deeply disquieted at the continued controversies over the actual independence of Safeguarding structures within the Church of England, does not accept that an internal Church inquiry into the allegations of abuse and cover-up within the Soul Survivor network is either sufficient or right in principle. It accordingly calls upon the Archbishops' Council to commission, on agreed terms of reference with survivors, a report into those allegations from an independent King's Counsel without delay.'

---

**Background**

1. Mike Pilavachi (MP) was initially a youth pastor at St Andrew's, Chorleywood, In 1993, he planted Soul Survivor Watford (SSW). This continues as a church based in former warehouses in Watford. SSW was initially 'informally' part of the Church of England via the permission of the Vicar of St Peter's Church, Watford. In 2014 SSW was granted a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO) in the Diocese of St Albans.
2. MP is the founder, previous leader and was until last year, an associate pastor of SSW. Soul Survivor is renowned for running annual summer festivals for 12–18-year-olds, from 1993-2019 under a separate charity, Soul Survivor Festivals. These were attended by up to 35,000 people each summer. Soul Survivor (SS), since 2011 ran religious gap year courses, previously known as Bodybuilders and Soultime but most recently as Soul61 as well as programmes for interns.
3. In 2013, MP was ordained in the Church of England, made an Honorary Canon of St Alban's Cathedral in 2016, awarded a MBE for services to young people in 2019 and received Lambeth award for his outstanding contribution to evangelism and discipleship amongst young people in 2020. Soul Survivor has a family of linked churches in this country and abroad.
4. The allegations made against MP have been the subject of an internal investigation by the NST along with the Diocese of St Alban's. On 6th September 2023 this concluded: "Having explored the safeguarding concerns fully, according to House of Bishops guidance, the investigation team has concluded that they are substantiated. These relate to conduct in his leadership and ministry, both before

## GENERAL SYNOD

and after he was ordained in 2012, spanning 40 years from his time as a youth leader through to current day.”

5. The report found a number of concerns to be substantiated, namely that MP:
  - a. abused his ministerial power.
  - b. practised spiritual abuse: ‘a form of emotional and psychological abuse characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context.’
  - c. used his spiritual authority to control people in coercive ways.
  - d. been inappropriate in his relationships with young people and interns.
  - e. specifically wrestled and massaged young male interns.
  
6. The NST/St Alban’s investigation was specific to the abuse of MP in relation to safeguarding. It was neither a judicial nor a disciplinary process. Its purpose was to determine if MP, as an individual, was ‘safe’ to minister within the Church today.
  
7. From the outset this investigation was seen to be inadequate by many of the survivors of that abuse and these reservations have been fully documented in Gabriella Swerling’s investigative journalism in The Telegraph all of which can be found here: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/search/?q=Soul+Survivor&p=1&sortBy=date> as well as in the many social media posts of those survivors.

### Terms of Reference and Scope of the Scolding Review

8. Given these reservations the commissioning by the various SS organisations of an independent KC led inquiry to be headed by Fiona Scolding is very much to be welcomed. The full Term of Reference (ToR) can be found here: <https://www.soulsurvivorwatford.co.uk/review>
  
9. However, these ToRs make it quite clear that the remit of this investigation does not go much further beyond the actual abuse of MP as an individual. They fail to comprehensively engage with the relationship of the various SS organisations to the Diocese of St Alban’s and in turn the relationship of those organisations and the diocese to the Church as a whole.
  
10. Paragraph 1 is MP specific and states that SS:
 

*have commissioned Fiona Scolding KC to lead a team consisting of herself and Ben Fullbrook (a barrister) (hereafter “the Reviewers”) to conduct an Independent Review of the evidence produced following the allegations made and investigated jointly by the Church of England’s National Safeguarding Team (“NST”) and the St Albans Diocese by numerous individuals against Mike Pilavachi.*
  
11. Paragraph 10 is once again MP specific and states:
 

*Whilst the time period concerned by this review is long (dating back to the early 1990s), it is not a review of Soul Survivor (generally) or its general safeguarding practices (in particular at the festivals organised by Soul Survivor) but is focussed upon the allegations made against Mike Pilavachi and the response (or failure to respond or to notice such behaviours) to such allegations.*

## GENERAL SYNOD

12. Paragraph 12 (f) does seem to extend the remit of the investigation beyond what is MP specific in that it states:

*Consider the extent to which the conduct specified in the allegations against Mike Pilavachi was, whether tacitly or explicitly, enabled, condoned or exacerbated by the past and present culture and practices of Soul Survivor and/or deficiencies in the governance, policies, practices, arrangements and oversight by the Trustees of Soul Survivor, others in leadership positions within Soul Survivor, and those who had oversight of Soul Survivor in respect of their governance, such as the Diocese or other church bodies.*

There is indeed here an admission of wider cultural and governance considerations both in how this relates to the various SS organisations and their Trustees and to the diocese and the Church of England as a whole.

13. However, this widening out of the remit of the investigation in Paragraph 12 (f) is then diluted in Paragraph 13, which deals with the scope of the review, at subsection (a) which states that it:

*Focuses exclusively upon the activities of Soul Survivor, insofar as they relate to Mike Pilavachi and those with whom he had direct contact or relationship.*

14. This paper asks members of the General Synod to decide whether these ToR and this Scope are sufficient to the interests both of the victims/survivors and of the wider national church. If we deem that they are not, then we need to call upon the Archbishops' Council to commission a review with a different set of ToR and Scope on our behalf. In the next section I outline ways in which I find these ToR and Scope to be insufficient and begin to map those I feel necessary to be included in any Archbishops' Council commissioned review.

### **Towards a sufficient Terms of Reference and Scope**

15. **Survivor input.** Any ToR and Scope which can be deemed to gain the necessary trust of victims/survivors of abuse must have the active participation of those abused in the co-production of the ToR and the Scope. This was neither part of the process of the internal NST/Diocesan review (and I make no negative evaluation of that as that in this regard is a matter of due process) nor does it seem to have been part of the SS commissioned Scolding Review. **This relates to our wider consideration of the Jay Report.**
16. **'Semi-detached organisations'.** The initial nature of the church plant, from 1993-2014 as being 'informally' part of the Church of England via the permission of the then Vicar of St Peter's Church, North Watford, and the ways in which SSW was then granted a BMO as well as MP ordained into the ministry of the CofE require investigation. What processes were followed here? What safeguarding considerations were operative? Was due diligence done both regarding the organisation and the individual person? Since allegations date back to the early 1990s what reservations were already in either in the private or public domains and in what ways were these presented or considered? **This relates to the safeguarding impact of the increase in use of BMOs and the Myriad agenda.**

The Myriad is a self-funding initiative aiming to support the planting of 10,000 new, predominantly lay-led churches. It comes from the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication which supports leaders, church teams and diocese across London,

## GENERAL SYNOD

England and beyond as they multiply disciples, churches and networks. It is part of the CofE but works with many denominations and networks. Further details can be found here: [Myriad – Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication](#)

17. **Complex organisations.** The multiple nature of the SS organisations may in itself have contributed to the longevity of the abuse. This relates to the clarity around who works for what organisations and the conflicts of interests of many of the Trustees of the various organisations in how they related to the others. Was the separation of governance both clear and transparent in order that charitable trustees could have effective oversight not just of MP but of the entire culture/s they were responsible for? **This relates to the increasing plurality of structures in the CofE and how individual worshipping communities relate to wider networks in which they sit.**
18. **Parochial and diocesan contexts.** How clear was it that SSW sat within the diocese, and that ministry there was both in the name of the diocesan bishop and ultimately accountable to them? Was this apparent and transparent? Have the views of other local diocesan clergy been sought and evidence gathered from them as to the impact of the abuse of MP on the wider church? Specific questions also remain in relation to the suggestion of the diocesan bishop that licensed clergy would make themselves be open to a CDM if they called for an independent investigation. This was because the diocesan bishop had stated that under guidance issued by the House of Bishops, it is only for the Church's core group handling a safeguarding case to make the recommendation that it be handled by an independent inquiry. Was this assertion made on legal advice? **This relates to our wider discussions on clergy collegiality and discipline.**
19. **Media and social media.** It is clear that for victims/survivors the reporting of Gabriella Swerling and the witness of individuals on social media was both positive and crucial in others coming forward and unmasking the extent of the abuse perpetuated. Much of our rhetoric in the church in relation to the impact of social media is extremely negative. But the experience here for many who were victims is quite the reverse. We need to develop a more sophisticated and nuanced theology and ethics of social media and its use and make sure that all guidelines and protocols reflect this moral complexity. **This relates to how we implement the Digital Charter and its relationship to any discipline that may arise from it.**
20. **Charismatic theology and practice.** In their video account of their own experience of abuse at SSW <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVZkgdt32u8> Matt and Beth Redman raise issues in relation to this which merit further examination: the ways in which ministry is constructed as unquestionable 'leadership'; the nature of protections in prayer ministry; the use of and faking of 'words of knowledge'; the ways in which other 'leaders' on the reception of complaints about MP's behaviour would dismiss this as 'just Mike being Mike'; the nature of 'tribal' loyalties within charismatic networks within the CofE as a whole. **This relates to the increasing impact of the charismatic revival on the life of our church.**
21. **Human Sexuality.** There are obvious aspects of the abuse that relate to the inappropriate channelling of repressed homoerotic sexual desire. Judith Maltby has written extensively on our overlooking of the sexuality dimension of our multiple safeguarding failures here: <https://viamedia.news/2024/04/24/safeguarding-living-in->

## GENERAL SYNOD

[love-and-faith-learning-for-the-church-of-england-from-the-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-lessons-learned-reviews1/](#) To what extent was this also a factor with MP and at SSW? **This relates to our wider LLF discussions.**

22. **Need for theologies of suffering and abuse.** I will leave this there for others more qualified than me to comment on in debate. But we seem to have lost the identity of Jesus Christ as a victim of our abuse who asks us to see the Christ-self in the abused lives and bodies of others we abuse in our own communities and calls us to repentance. May Christ redeem our bodies and the body of the Church.

Robert Thompson, London 166

June 2024

**Published by the General Synod of the Church of England  
© The Archbishops' Council 2024**