

Section 15

Reporting non-recent abuse and dealing with the aftermath of disclosure in a congregation

At some stage it is likely that a priest, or other person involved with worship or pastoral care, will be in the position where someone discloses abuse that happened to them when they were a child.

As with best practice when hearing a disclosure from a child it is important to listen attentively and without judgement.

The person making the disclosure may tell you that they do not want this information to go any further. However this is not best practice and may endanger others by keeping the disclosure confidential. The information disclosed must therefore be passed on to a Provincial Safeguarding Officer for their action.

Where the perpetrator is still alive

Where a person discloses historic abuse and the perpetrator is still alive, the survivor of this abuse should be encouraged to agree to tell the police as this person could be continuing to abuse children.

A Provincial Safeguarding Officer will take responsibility for contacting the police and will give the details of both the survivor and the perpetrator to them. A Provincial Safeguarding Officer will advise the police as to whether the survivor has given consent for disclosure or not. If it is thought there are health or safety concerns for the victim by disclosing their name, this should be addressed with the police. However it should be remembered that the police can insist on their identity being disclosed through a court order if they believe this information overrides other identified risks.

Wherever possible the wishes and feelings of the person making the disclosure should be respected. Forcing someone to give information against their will can result in the allegation being withdrawn and is therefore counter-productive.

It is important to ensure that where disclosures allege criminal activity, and/or there is an ongoing risk of significant harm to the survivor, a child or adult, this information is shared with the police straight away. Where the survivor does not wish to speak with the police it is highly unlikely that the police will enforce contact when they know that the person does not want this to happen. It is the police's role to decide what should happen to the information that is whether to note it for information or to investigate.

Where the perpetrator is deceased or unknown

In these circumstances the survivor should be encouraged to give the information they know regarding the perpetrator and this will be passed on to the police. It is important for the police to have this information even though the person is deceased as it may tie in with a wider network of victims and other ongoing investigations.

Support for survivors

Pastoral care and spiritual support is different from counselling or therapeutic support. Whilst these can work alongside each other it is important that counselling is provided by those who are appropriately qualified. Where the abuse has alleged to have been made by a member of the church,

then this should be discussed with a Provincial Safeguarding Officer who will be able to assist in ensuring that the most suitable support is sourced for the survivor.

Those who are offering pastoral care and spiritual support to a survivor should discuss this with a Provincial Safeguarding Officer to ensure that boundaries with respect to subject matter, confidentiality and duration are taken into consideration in order to manage the expectations and meet the needs of the individual who is seeking support. This is particularly so if the disclosure that has been made is in, or likely to be in, the court's domain.

Dealing with the aftermath of disclosure (current or historic) within the church community¹

Following the disclosure that a cleric or a responsible lay person in a parish has been responsible for the sexual abuse of children, the effect that this can have on the congregation is considerable. Not only will they have to cope with a significant person within their church community having to leave, but also how the next person appointed to cover that post is implicitly affected and how the members of the congregation might heal and grow from the experience.

The process that a congregation goes through after such a breaking of trust can be likened to that of bereavement. There will be initial shock then searching and bargaining, disorientation and eventually acceptance.

The initial response of individual members of the congregation will vary depending on many factors, these will include:

- The role of the person in church.
- The degree of trust inherent in that person's role.
- The degree to which the congregation member accepted the facts of the case.
- Whether the congregation member was in contact with either the victim or the offending cleric.
- The relationship of the member to the cleric. For example had they used the cleric to discuss intimate matters, had the cleric married them or been involved in other sacramental events. Or was the cleric someone who received their confession?
- The person's theology of priesthood and leadership.
- To what degree the member was dependent on the cleric.
- Whether the member had any suspicion there was something wrong and therefore has feelings of guilt.
- The way the abuse/misconduct was communicated to the congregation.
- How close the member's children were to the cleric.
- The age and values of the individual.
- Their own history of abuse or misconduct.

Initial feeling could be anger, disillusionment, disbelief, shame and/or sadness.

¹ This Section has been adapted from one written by Janet Hind former Child Protection Advisor with the Church of England 2014.

Some of the effects seen within the congregation as a whole may include:

- A loss of energy.
- Distrust of leaders continuing over time.
- Divisions within the congregation.
- Withdrawal of some members of the congregation either from positions of responsibility or completely.
- Withdrawal of financial support.
- Anger, perhaps displaced onto unrelated issues.
- Conspiracy of silence about the event (seen as protecting the offender or the victim)
- Despair regarding the future of the congregation.
- Blaming and distorting responsibility for the event on to somewhere else, such as the diocese.
- Difficulty making normal and necessary decisions.

If the congregation has not gone through a healing process these elements can continue over time and become more permanent. They can appear unrelated to the particular traumatic event. This can cause great difficulty for the next incumbent appointed especially if they have not been fully briefed.

Consideration should be given to appoint a minister for a limited period in this situation. An experienced but well supported person who can model spiritual maturity, healthy boundaries and hold the congregation in a safe place whilst they come to terms and are reconciled to what has happened.

The support of the Provincial Safeguarding Officers should be sought and a plan put in place with other senior clerics in that diocese to deal sensitively and professionally with the situation.

The team will need to meet regularly during an investigation of abuse. It will need to ensure that the needs of the congregation are monitored. It is inevitable that during the investigation stage a high level of confidentiality is maintained. Those holding any information need to be supported by a senior person within the diocese.

As soon as possible and when information is about to become public, the congregation need to be told the facts, as far as possible and without identifying any victim. This may best be done at a parish meeting where senior members of the diocese and safeguarding team can be present together to facilitate the congregation processing the information.

The congregation should have an opportunity to express their feelings; these will be conflicting but should not be challenged. In addition they should be allowed to discuss the repercussions of the event.

The congregation could discuss future plans such as what other meetings they need. What are the spiritual and pastoral needs of the congregation at this time and do some people require individual help, for example someone who has been previously abused themselves and who thought they had come to a safe place.

Probably at a later meeting the congregation will find it helpful to put the event in context, for example learning about sex offending, the abuse of power, grooming and exploitation. A survivor of abuse (not the victim) and an offender (not the cleric) could potentially help people understand what has happened.

The team involved in explaining the situation to the congregation will need to be de-briefed.

Overtime the congregation will reorganize themselves and hopefully come to a place of acceptance. The signs of a congregation beginning to accept may include:

- The responsibility for the offence will be rightly acknowledged.
- It will be accepted that the cleric will not return.
- The role of the cleric will be seen more realistically.
- The offending cleric will be seen for the good that was achieved as well as accepting the wrong doing and the damage done.
- The victim will not be blamed but acknowledged to need support (even if the person is not known to the congregation)
- Communication within the congregation is open, roles and responsibilities are appropriately shared.
- The facts of the event need to be placed firmly within the parish's history and memory so that it is accepted and does not become a secret to cause problems later on.
- In troubled congregations developing a parish history or chronology could be the starting point for discovering the roots of dissension.
- The congregation may come to a point where a liturgical reconciliation event may help to reinforce the progress people have made towards healing.

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