

Roy Bishop

Supporting survivors of abuse

Abuse of any sort, be it physical, emotional, sexual or spiritual, damages the abused, resulting in loss and trauma. Such trauma eats away at the very identity of the victim. What must we do to help when we encounter such a situation?

The fact that abuse is happening is not always obvious to the outsider - or even to the one being abused. Indeed, abuse results in considerable confusion for the victim; their thinking does not match what they are feeling, and this impacts not only every aspect of their lives but also the way they interact with other people.

This is particularly so in the areas where they have experienced pain and suffering. But abuse can also make it extremely difficult for the victim to trust God.

In recent years much publicity has been given in the UK to people who experienced sexual abuse during childhood but have only now found the

courage to speak out against their abusers in their adult lives, and to seek justice. This may happen in your church. What follows is offered for your consideration, and hopefully will be helpful to some as you meet individual victims of abuse. Many of the references made to children can equally be applied to adults who have been or are being abused.

Jesus said, *'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy: I have come that they may have life and have it to the full'* (John 10:10). The thief uses abuse to steal and kill and destroy: Jesus restores.

Understanding Abuse

The home is intended by God to be a place of security, enrichment, growth, loving acceptance, appropriate discipline and responsibility; a place of mutual respect of an individual's boundaries, where all the family, including children, can learn more about God, his principles and love and grace, and forgiveness. Sadly, it is generally recognised that most abuse - including neglect, the most common form of abuse - occurs within the home,

hidden behind closed doors, making it more difficult for abuse to be recognised by the outsider. (However, a recent news item featured a representative of Barnardo's also expressing concern about the increasing number of children as young as ten who are being groomed by external sexual predators.)

Any young girl or boy, or an adult, may turn to the church for help or comfort for abuse. And so it is important to anticipate an appropriate response. This will provide a safeguard against the person receiving the information being overwhelmed, help them to concentrate on the victim's story, and respond appropriately. I use this word 'story' not to undervalue or diminish the depth of suffering, but to highlight the fact that each of us has a 'life story'; and victims of abuse have frequently kept their secret for years, some for many decades.

So then: if someone in your fellowship begins to talk about being abused, how should you respond?

None of us have all the answers, and many books have been written on these topics. The most helpful book I have ever read on the topic is *Counselling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* by Diane Mandt Langberg (Tyndale). In it she reminds us that we are made in the image of God; and she reflects on the fact that this God is relational (the Trinity), powerful (creative and has control), and has a voice (he speaks and things happen).

Although mankind was intended to bear these marks of our Creator, they were lost as a result of the Fall. Adam and Eve lost the close relationship with God and with each other that God had intended. They lost the power and control with which to carry out their divine purpose.

They also lost their voice, and, guilty and ashamed, hid silently from God in the bushes. Dr Langberg applies these principles very helpfully to victims of abuse. Rather than living for and in open relationship, the victim of abuse becomes isolated, cutting him or herself off from friends, other family members and their community generally; perhaps retreating into the comfort of drugs, alcohol, or other addiction. Rather than having power, they feel helpless without any degree

of control in their lives. And instead of having a voice, they become silent.

Imagine such a person approaching you to share for the first time with another human being about what they have experienced. What would help them most?

Bear in mind he or she may have been threatened, or told 'This is our little secret', or 'I'm only doing this because I love you', or 'This happens to everyone - it's no big deal', or 'If you had not behaved the way you did this would not be happening'. As the individual anticipates opening their heart and being vulnerable again, there will be fear about how you will receive what they have to say, accompanied undoubtedly by a considerable sense of shame and false guilt. Will you reject or accept them? Will you add to their sense of worthlessness, or treat them with dignity befitting a person made in the image of God?

The abuse perpetrator invariably tries to convince their victim that he or she is somehow responsible for the abuse, and must take some if not all of the blame for what has happened. The perpetrator generally sees nothing wrong in what he or she is doing - it's the rest of the world that is out of step with their desire to have inappropriate relationships with vulnerable children, or (in the case of neglect) to treat them as nuisances or objects. A child who does not have a very positive perception of self will assume that abuse is their lot, perhaps even the norm; perhaps no more than he or she can expect out of life, or even deserves. Sadly, an increasing number of children no longer live with either of their birth parents, and some of these will undoubtedly be at greater risk.

Children and adults who have been abused are very vulnerable. What has been lost or damaged through relationship can only be restored or recovered through relationship.

Relationships require trust, consistency, reliability and appropriate boundaries in order to grow. It is therefore vital that such individuals are treated with respect, so that they can begin to regain their voice and a sense of control in order to work through their feelings.

It takes great courage to talk for the first time

about something so personal, which increases a victim's sense of vulnerability. So the initial response of the church is very significant. You may be the first person to whom a victim has dared to entrust their pain.

I heard a Christian say recently that they wanted to be Jesus' hands, feet and mouth to the world. I missed the opportunity to remind, 'What about being his ears too?' Listening, as I know this person does well, is hard work. Anyone with a story appreciates being heard and believed; but how much more so when the trauma of abuse has attacked your very identity.

When there is even a hint of abuse there can be a tendency in some to doubt or discount it, perhaps not to want to consider or believe the possibility. Worse than that, there may be a tendency to ignore it, hoping it will go away, or not to take it seriously because to believe it would be painful and bring many things into question. Could abuse possibly happen in a respectable home, or at the hands of a respectable member of our own community or church? But it happens in all walks of life, and every aspect of society; so we have to take it seriously.

Sadly we are all aware that some abuse has been covered up within the church for many years, only to be brought into the light when the victims have grown into adulthood.

The most important and helpful gifts you can give to anyone disclosing abuse, especially a child, is to listen carefully and take what they say seriously. Someone has said 'love' is spelt T-I-M-E, which is such a precious gift to wounded and hurting people. A very experienced social worker told me some years ago that, if a child under age 11 speaks about sexual abuse, then almost certainly he or she is telling the truth.

So how should we react?

- Remain calm; this will help children especially to talk about the problem.
- Always let the individual know that you take what they say seriously and will support them.
- Validate the person's feelings - this is particularly relevant when responding to a child.

Editors note: Charitable organisations will have safeguarding policies and procedures in place.

It is important to make yourself familiar with any policies and procedures in your organisation, including understanding who is your safeguarding officer/s, and completing any training.

- Assure the individual, especially a child, that you care.
- Let the individual know he/she has a right to be safe, and what you will do to ensure that.
- Listen in a non-judgemental way. (Consider improving your listening skills. There are many suitable courses to help with this - see list of resources at end.)
- Show acceptance.
- Respect confidence, but never commit to what is being told you remaining a secret between you and the abused. You will be laying up further problems especially if the abuser turns out to be a member of your church or a prominent member of the community. Further, you may unwittingly be repeating the pattern of secrecy established by the abuser; and you may be acting illegally.
- It is vital for the abused to know you can be trusted. It is better not to hear than to let them down later by breaking confidence. So, gently but with assurance of your concern, let the individual know early on that you will have to refer to someone else.
- Allow the abused to tell their story at their own pace, using their own words. Remember they may have only a limited vocabulary, and will need time.
- Use whatever language is used by the person talking with you to describe what happened to them, especially if that person is a child. Children and some adults may be explicit - be prepared for it, and use their words. If you don't they may not understand.
- Use open questions as much as possible (ones that do not suggest a 'Yes'/'No' answer), but avoid asking 'Why?'

- Pray silently as you listen. It is unlikely you will be able to undo years of pain with a simple audible prayer; it can be unhelpful for the abused to think they are being dismissed by someone offering to pray for them. They may conclude you are not really entering into their pain with them, and may see it as an easy way out for you
- A very useful illustration of how important it is to walk with the abused through the memory of their pain is 'The Gospel Bridge' in *Healing the Wounds of Trauma* by Margaret Hill (Pauline's Publications Africa).
- It may become necessary for the alleged abuser to be named at some time, but this should not be done without consultation with Churches Child Protection Advisory Services or a similar body, and/or the authorities. You will need to think very carefully about what action to take if the perpetrator is involved with young people in your church. **The protection of the children must be your priority.**
- Remember: It is not helpful for the abused to think they were somehow responsible for what has happened to them. They are never to blame. Responsibility always lies with the abuser.
- Remember too: In order to survive, the victim may have forgotten or denied what has happened, or in the most extreme situations convinced themselves that what they suffered actually happened to someone else. These defence mechanisms are God-given, and must be treated with respect. It is wrong and potentially very harmful for anyone other than the victim to remove or dismantle them.

What should you do after talking with anyone who suggests they have been abused?

As soon as possible:

- Make careful notes of what was said, including date and time of your conversation.
- Be sure to use their words, and be as accurate as possible.
- Sign your notes and keep them in a safe place.

- Do not make value judgements about what you think might or might not be important.
- **Contact an appropriate organisation** (see 'General Observations' below).
- If you suspect a child has been deliberately injured, or are concerned about their immediate safety, contact social services; arrange medical help if it is needed, informing the doctor of your concerns.

What you should NOT do (Thirtyone:eight will advise you on all these aspects):

- Do not press for details of what happened.
- Do not play the detective.
- Do not ask leading questions.
- Do not ask questions that require only a 'yes' or 'no' answer.
- Do not encourage the abused to 'forgive and forget'.
- Do not be judgemental.
- Do not allow your own emotional response to overwhelm you or the abused - keep control of your feelings. If the abused sees that you are shocked, he or she may not want to tell you more for fear of hurting you.
- Do not approach the alleged abuser.
- Do not inform the child's parents or caregivers.
- Do not tell anyone who does not need to know.
- Do not pray for deliverance.
- Do not avoid embarrassing subjects. Let the individual know that everything can be talked about.
- Do not project or assume anything. Let the individual (particularly a child) tell the story without interjecting your own assumptions.
- Do not make promises you cannot keep, e.g. do not promise not to tell anyone else.

The effects of abuse are very damaging. The impact can last a lifetime. Victims need love, time, acceptance and grace to find healing. They do not need to feel condemned or judged.

Take Care of Yourself

Active listening is generally hard work, and hearing about abuse can be particularly draining and can raise huge questions for you. It is important for you not to feel that you have to carry the burden alone. Contact with Thirtyone:eight will help. If you are able, find a trusted friend to whom you can talk in confidence for your own support. It is crucial to maintain anonymity of the person who has spoken with you, and also that of the alleged abuser; so be especially careful not to pass on information in normal conversation or through the church prayer meeting.

Maintain your own relationship with God, and take your heart to him in prayer.

General Observations

Know in advance how to contact an appropriate organization or authority. Overriding any considerations of confidentiality is what is in the public interest; while it is important for the individual to know you can be trusted, you also have a duty to others who may be at risk.

Rather than consider whether or not any disclosure of abuse should be reported, decide beforehand that, in the event of any disclosure, you will speak with someone outside your local, immediate community, and do what they say. This will avoid you having to make or even consider making a 'judgement' on what to do at a time when you may not be thinking objectively.

Abuse involving children or occurring during childhood will raise strong feelings within you: maybe of anger, of sadness, or a sense of being overwhelmed by the pain and enormity of it all. So it is vital to have a point of reference where you can obtain an objective perspective. You may be able find such a body within your denomination or church affiliation; but if not, you can do no better than speak to Thirtyone:eight - www.Thirtyoneeight.org. Their staff are always very helpful, will treat you and the person about whom you are calling with respect, and will do it all in confidence. With their experience over many years they will be able to advise you on the legal position and make recommendations about the next step you should take. This means you can

check on what the law requires you to do with the information you now have, and take appropriate action with the best interests of your 'client' in mind. Thirtyone:eight will not ask for your client's name, so you can respect confidentiality, and they will always follow up their advice to you in writing. Of course you can always speak with your local social services, or another organisation such as NSPCC. If you report it directly to the police they are legally bound to take action. Thirtyone:eight and other or similar organisations will know the correct course of action for you to take.

Ensure the protection of children and vulnerable adults in your church. Make sure you have a written Safeguarding Policy in place. This is not only a requirement of the Charities Commission but will also raise awareness in your church and keep the topic on the church's agenda. Advice can be obtained from within your denomination or national association or from Thirtyone:eight.

Remember that paedophiles often groom children and families, sometimes over several years, but an effective Safeguarding Policy will help eliminate potential risk to the children in your care. Be aware too that most children are abused either within their own families or by people who they know.

The support a local church can give a child who has been abused may be limited, as sometimes the child will be removed from the family and perhaps placed into care outside your sphere of influence. If the abuse happened in a church family, then work within boundaries agreed with your local Children's Social Services, rather than acting independently. If a family in your church comes bringing a child other than their own one Sunday, it may be the child is in their foster care. It could however be that he or she is a visiting relative, so don't ask leading questions but treat the child with respect and allow them to take part in age-appropriate activities - it might help them to feel accepted.

(A question for the wise: some people have heard only half a text, and some people use only half a text to justify their behaviour. How do you think individuals who have suffered abuse at the hands of their parents (or primary care givers)

will respond when told to 'obey their parents in the Lord'? How can we encourage them to apply what 'in the Lord' means?)

If an adult discloses that he or she was abused in their childhood, then the same considerations about public interest must be born in mind. The decision about reporting the abuse to the authorities and police should ideally be left with the victim. (The Association of Child Abuse Lawyers have a helpful article on this topic, 'Reporting child abuse: how the law works and what it can do for you', by Jonathan Wheeler, on www.childabuselawyers.com.) To override the decision of an adult abused in childhood takes control away from them; but another serious consideration is the potential harm to other children and young people. Do not dismiss the possibility that someone who abused a child 20 years earlier still has access to children; e.g. an abuser aged 25 when the person talking to you now age 40 was abused as a 10 year old could still be active aged 55. He or she may have relocated to avoid detection, perhaps even joining another church. Again Thirtyone:eight will advise on what you should do.

Recognising Signs of Abuse

Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment of a child. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm or by failing to act to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or an institutional or community setting, by those known to them or, more rarely, by a stranger, for example via the internet. They may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children.

Physical abuse may involve:

- hitting
- shaking
- throwing
- poisoning
- burning or scalding
- drowning
- suffocating
- and/or otherwise causing physical harm to a child.

Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces, illness in a child

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, and whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including:

- assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex), or
- non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing.

They may also include non-contact activities such as

- involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images or watching sexual activities
- encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways
- grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet).

Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males; women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve

- conveying to children they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person
- not giving the child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them or "making fun" of what they say or how they communicate
- age- or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children, such as interactions that are beyond the child's developmental capability
- over-protection and limitation of exploration and learning
- preventing the child participating in normal social interaction

- seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another
- serious bullying (including cyber bullying), causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger
- exploitation or corruption of children.

Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of maltreatment of a child, though it may occur alone.

Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, which is likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to

- provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home, or abandonment)
- protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger
- ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care-givers)
- ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

(All of the above definitions were taken from the guidance document *Working together to safeguard children* (March 2010). This is Crown Copyright; the Department of Education is the corporate author. See www.education.gov.uk for articles on this and a wide range of topics related to children's issues. Also worth searching is the phrase 'Every child matters'.)

Spiritual abuse is the 'mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment' (*The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by David Johnson and Jeff van Vonderen (Bethany House)). There have been reports recently of children in some overseas countries and here in the UK being branded as witches; the child may have been beaten or tortured to confess he or she is a witch, and, after being exorcised 'in the name

of Jesus', is driven from family and community. This experience is very damaging, and of course brings dishonour to the Lord. Johnson and Van Vonderen's book, whilst not addressing this topic specifically, provides real food for thought on the general subject of recognising and escaping spiritual manipulation and false spiritual authority within the church.

Helping Adult Survivors

Memories of the fear, hurt, and loss associated with abuse experienced as a child may not surface until adulthood; but, whenever they come, they will be painful and will need to be dealt with. Often the most effective way is for the victim to receive counselling. This should not be undertaken lightly and really needs to be handled by a trained and experienced counsellor.

Details of suitable counsellors in your area can be obtained from the website of Association of Christian Counsellors www.acc-uk.org, where you will also find contact details. A trained counsellor can help the victim recognise difficult areas in their life or behaviour that may be linked to the past abuse, and help them also to hold on to hope that freedom will come; and to a willingness to eventually begin the process of forgiving.

Remember that forgiveness for most people is a process, so be careful not to rush it. A lady in Africa had been gang-raped during a rebel war but came to a place where she was able to say she had forgiven her abusers. Many churches encouraged her to share her testimony to God's grace and mercy. She was encouraged and happy to do this, until at the end of one meeting a man approached her and, as he offered her his hand, identified himself as one of her attackers. She could not take his hand but said, 'I have more forgiving to do'.

Abusers in Church

A good quality, operational Safeguarding Policy can be effective in preventing abuse in your church and maintaining awareness of the issue amongst your congregation. But, if you become aware of a perpetrator in your church, it is imperative that you act to limit any further damage.

This will involve suitable boundaries of what he or she may be allowed to do, particularly in regard to children, but also in general terms as most churches encourage friendly relationships between children and adults. Any boundaries will need to be monitored and the individual made accountable. As forgiveness is a process for someone who has been abused, so it is also vital that we do not allow someone who has abused children to have access to them again simply because they have spoken words of repentance and asked God for forgiveness. We all know something of the ingrained nature of our own sin, and that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Again counselling, probably over a long period of time, is the way forward in such a circumstance. Advice can be obtained from Stop it Now (www.stopitnow.org.uk), which seeks to work with offenders who want to change, and those who are concerned about their own thoughts and behaviours. Another organisation working in this field is Circles UK (www.circles-uk.org.uk).

False Memories and False Accusations

'False memories' arise when a memory surfaces without a foundation in fact, or is about something which did not actually occur. We all go through troubled times in our lives and, perhaps when feeling particularly vulnerable, seek to find explanation of why we feel the way we do. We also know it can be hard as adults to find the right words to express our feelings, or to describe what has actually happened to cause our current discomfort. How much more so for a child with a limited vocabulary, experience and resources looking to someone for help. As a listener to the distress of an adult or a child you may also find yourself looking for an explanation. The unknown can leave us feeling inadequate or vulnerable, so we look for reasons to rationalize confusion and doubt.

If it is suggested to a troubled individual that abuse of some sort at the hands of one or another person may be at the root of their issues, he or she may be inclined to believe that is true; yet it may or may not be the case. If it is not true, then

the 'client' has gained nothing, and irreparable harm may have been done to an alleged abuser or community. This is why it is so important not to ask leading questions, but to let the 'client' tell their own story in their own words, at their own pace. Do not suggest or hint at the possible causes of the distress - LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN!

I would also caution the use of 'words of knowledge' as we seek to support survivors of abuse. We are all fallen people in a fallen world, and, whilst God does give such insights to some, he may not always be the source of what is perceived to be a 'word from God'. Think how you would feel if someone you respected (or someone you hardly knew) came up to you and said, 'The Lord has told me you were abused or neglected when you were aged three, and I am going to pray for you now'? Experience has taught me to respond to such 'insights' as though they were for my help, but not to be passed on. They have meant that gentle, open questions have enabled a victim to speak out what is on their heart, and what they say has not come as so much of a shock to me.

If in your desire to support a survivor of abuse you take control, you take it away from the person talking to you. In effect, what you do then is to tell them what you think has happened, or may have happened to them - and you will have stopped listening to them. In other words they will not be using their own voice to tell their own story.

I have said we should take the person's story seriously, and you may wonder about the implications of doing that if any such accusation is untrue or made maliciously. In talking with a survivor of abuse one of our main functions is to listen and hear what they are saying for the reasons stated earlier. Our role is not to investigate or to decide if there is a case to answer in law; that is for the police and the CPS. I suspect many a genuine case of abuse has been covered over because someone without the appropriate authority, training or experience has taken it upon themselves to act as counsel for the defence and prosecution, judge, and jury, and concluded there is no case to answer.

If an allegation is made about someone who attends your church, then your response needs

to be both sensitive and objective; bearing in mind that both the innocent and the guilty will maintain they have not done anything wrong. The allegation may prove to be unfounded, but you will not know until after some time has elapsed. The individual will need your love and support. But the prime concern must always be the welfare of the children. Do not tell anyone who does not need to know about the allegation; remember gossip is very damaging. If the accused has a heart for children, he or she will willingly step down from any active involvement with their activities, and comply with any boundaries you feel are necessary, however painful that may be for them and you. It may be that initially 'another reason' could be given to those who do not need to know the real reason for the action taken. Aim to maintain a sense of objectivity, while at the same time recognising the needs of the accused for love and support. They too need to tell their story, and a referral to someone outside of your church could be very appropriate - see resources at end - but do not wash your hands of them, for their sake and the sake of the children.

Don't Promise False Solutions

Trust is an essential part of relationships. In the face of a damaged and traumatised child or adult, we may want to 'make everything better'. But it would be foolish to think we can.

Trauma always results in loss; and it is most likely that, even after a considerable degree of healing has taken place, reminders of the event will trigger painful memories. This can be seen likewise in the lives of those who have moved on after the loss of bereavement: years may have elapsed since the actual loss, but painful memories can be triggered by an unconnected event.

The consequences of our own choices, and the choices other people made for us or about us, and the ways we have been treated, have to be worked through this side of heaven, in our everyday lives. Our hope is in the One who has gone to prepare a place for us where there will be no more tears or suffering.

Resources

Association of Christian Counsellors (www.acc-uk.org), for details of their Pastoral Skills Course, and a counsellor to whom you can refer.

Thirtyone:eight (www.thirtyone:eight.org and a 24-hour helpline), for general information plus advice on Child Protection issues. They also have a good range of books, articles and DVDs.

CirclesUK (www.circles-uk.org.uk).

Crisis Care Training International (www.crisiscaretraining.org) The Core Module, a short course of four to five days, gives a good introduction into some of the issues facing those who have been abused. Whilst aimed at those working with children, the information is also very useful for anyone working with adults who have been abused as children. Details of where the courses will be held can be found on the website

Stop it Now (www.stopitnow.org.uk)

The Association of Child Abuse Lawyers (www.childabuselawyers.com)

The Department of Education (www.education.gov.uk)

What could I say? by Peter Hicks (IVP) is a 'handbook for helpers' in which the author seeks to offer help to anyone wanting to be a listening friend to people in need, and covers a wide variety of issues.

At the time of original writing, **Roy Bishop** was accredited by the Association of Christian Counsellors as an Emeritus Counselling Practitioner/Supervisor, and facilitated ACC Pastoral Skills Course in UK and Sierra Leone. He was also a trainer with Crisis Care Training International (www.crisiscaretraining.org), and an elder with Kennet Valley Free Church in Reading (www.kvfc.org.uk). Following a heart attack in 2016, he retired from formal activities.

