

Creating Healthy Cultures and Understanding Spiritual Abuse Webinar Transcript

[Introduction]

Hello, and welcome to our webinar on Creating Healthy Cultures and Understanding Spiritual Abuse. This webinar is broken into two sessions, each of which will be two and a half hours long and we'll have a five-minute break around halfway through each session. You should have received a link to the PDF of the slides and the handbook for this course, you will need those throughout the discussion so please have them ready. There are accessible formats available, so please let the host or the co-host know if you would like those. Ideally, we would like your webcams enabled, but we ask that you stay muted. We do this because we want to minimise the distractions that background noise could create for people, but we also want to be able to see that everyone is there and engaged. We understand there might be occasions where you would prefer to have the webcam off. For example, if you're

having problems with your internet speed, or you've got children who need your attention.

Just to say that information shared can be of a sensitive nature, and some of the content is not appropriate for children, so if children are in the room, we ask that you use earphones so that they can't hear the content. Also, if you're happy to share any of your own experiences, please bear in mind confidentiality. We ask that you anonymise any examples, experiences or stories that you share. The chat facility can be used throughout for questions and for participation in activities. The co-host might answer the question, signpost you to further sources or hold on to that question for the next pause and share it with the host. If a question is not answered, or a question is about a very specific issue, please do call our safeguarding helpline.

It is important to keep yourselves emotionally safe during the training and if you need to take a breather from the webinar, that's okay and you can rejoin whenever you feel able to. It might be good to think about somebody you could reach out to

if uncomfortable feelings or memories come to the surface. You might need to find support for yourself, or it might be that you're concerned about someone else or another situation after the session. If that's the case, please do call our helpline as soon as you can because the trainer is not equipped to give specific advice on the webinar platform.

Thirtyone:Eight is the UK's largest independent Christian safeguarding organisation. Our mission is threefold - to equip, to empower and to encourage churches, charities and faith-based groups in their safeguarding responsibilities. We do that in a lot of ways including training, consultancy, background checks, our research and our helpline. Our helpline number is 0303 003 1111 and is there to support with any questions you may have with regards to safeguarding. It might be about your policy, or a live situation, or there might be a concern that you have which you would value talking over with somebody. We operate from 7am until midnight, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Finally, our name Thirtyone:Eight is taken from a book in the Bible, Proverbs. It's chapter 38 verse 1 and it says, 'speak out on behalf of the voiceless and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.' We passionately believe that there's a biblical mandate for safeguarding and when we fulfill our responsibilities in safeguarding, we're taking work on that is very close to the heart of God. If you belong to another faith group, I know many of you have similar sacred scripts that have a very similar mandate, so we are very much working together in this vision of safeguarding vulnerable people.

[Course outcomes]

The first outcome for this webinar is to understand healthy cultures and spiritual abuse, and that they are opposite extremes. The second outcome is to understand the impact of people, policies and practice. The third outcome is to understand healthy culture as being both preventative and restorative. The fourth is to look more closely at what spiritual abuse is. Our fifth outcome is to know how to respond well to

incidences of spiritual abuse and finally, to understand how openness, awareness and processes support healthy cultures. Those six outcomes match up to our six modules. The first three we will cover today, and the second three will be in the next session. Each module will address one outcome but will be of varying length.

Before we begin module one, let's have a look at spiritual abuse and why it matters. This frames the whole training course and illustrates why we need more understanding on the topic. We'll go into the definition in more depth later, but at its simplest, what we're talking about is a specific form of emotional and psychological abuse. These are terms that would be understood by statutory bodies such as the police, social services or social care. It's important to make note of those terms in case we have to refer any concerns on later. So it's emotional and psychological abuse that occurs in religious contexts, and exhibits aspects that are supported by, or intertwined with faith or belief. It's important to say that all three of these things (the abusive behaviour, the religious context

and the faith element) should be present for it to be considered spiritual abuse. For example, we wouldn't consider harassment that occurred within a church building to be spiritual abuse, we would say that's purely workplace bullying happening in a church context. The recent IICSA report - the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse - said that abuse that occurred in a religious context led to a loss of faith, or a loss of trust in a religious organisation. We know that spiritual abuse has a significant effect on people's faith as well as impacting them in many of the same ways other forms of abuse does, which we'll look at in greater details later.

[Module 1]

Let's jump into module one, healthy Christian cultures. We're going to look at what culture is, what makes a healthy culture and we'll discuss the myth of homogeneity or, phrased more simply, the wrong belief that any of us are only one thing, that we're all good or all bad. It's a myth. Often when we look at our own lives and understand the motivations behind certain behaviours, we can justify our behaviour. The action may be

bad, but the motivation behind it might be more understandable or forgivable. Often, when we see others act in exemplary ways, or in terrible ways, we seem to be less likely to think about why *their* behavior might be more complex or nuanced. We're going to explore that a while as well.

Before we get to that, first we need to check our understanding of culture. What is culture? Put simply, it is what defines us; it is what makes us part of - or not part of - a group. Culture is made up of things like what we believe, how we express ourselves and how we behave towards each other. Every group of people on Earth has their own culture, every country, people group or family. If you find the concept of culture hard to define, you're not alone. It's hard to comprehend because it's never one single thing. A resource that was developed for the Peace Corps describes cultures as; "systems of symbols and meaning, that even their creators contest, that lack fixed boundaries, that are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another. It's the behaviors and attitudes that

we and those around us are co-creating, reinforcing or contesting all of the time.” With that in mind, let's consider what makes a healthy culture. What are the marks of a healthy culture? Cultures aren't neutral constructs, they can be helpful, or they can be harmful. At Thirtyone:Eight, we really encourage peer learning and the co-production of knowledge. This kind of dialogue is a trait of healthy cultures, which means it already has significant value, but it's also the reason for this training, and one of the three factors shaping how all our training evolves (the other two factors are research, and law and policy). This training topic was developed because of conversations. As a 40-year-old organisation supporting faith communities with experience of abuse, we would often see examples of harmful cultures in faith communities. The survivor/victims' voices speaking to us led us to seek out, and do our own research on the topic. That research strongly advocated for training on spiritual abuse, both so those with lived experience might find safe places with empathy and understanding of what they went through, and so other places

might have the knowledge to reflect on problematic behaviours and correct them before they became spiritual abusive.

Interestingly, over time, we've also seen elements of this written into law. We know culture matters, and that includes a culture of openness to different voices. With those things in mind, we encourage you to engage today: Add your thoughts, examples and questions. We want this to be a healthy and productive conversation, not a monologue.

In order to understand the issue of healthy culture in a balanced way, we need to consider how good things can be and at the same time, be honest about when things go wrong, and what that looks like. That's going to give us the context for how we look at culture in a more balanced way. The fruit polo illustration I mentioned earlier was developed by Lisa Oakley, the Professor of Safeguarding and Knowledge Exchange at University of Chester. The illustration has the title: A spectrum of behaviour. A row of four coloured rings have corresponding words underneath. Green on the left labelled 'healthy' followed by yellow labelled 'unhelpful' then another yellow labelled

'unhealthy' finally red on the right labelled 'spiritual abuse'.

Double ended arrows between each word to show behaviour can travel in either direction. The illustration depicts that we can understand culture as a spectrum of behaviour. The behaviours we see normalised in our organisation's culture can be reimagined on a scale and it's important to say the practices in our faith communities are more likely to sit at various spots along the scale, as opposed to simply being either okay, or spiritually abusive. Interestingly, we can also use this spectrum of behaviour to imagine any form of abuse. Our aim should always be to achieve more green healthy practices, rather than accepting practices that are unhelpful, or allowing those behaviors to become embedded, and then, them becoming spiritually abusive. It's so important to situate spiritual abuse in a wider spectrum of behaviour. At the one end, we see good healthy, nurturing behaviour in which people can flourish and grow. Then as we move along the spectrum, we reach unhelpful behaviour. That's where somebody's reactions or behaviours are not harmful, but they're not helpful and we all

behave this way at times. As we move further along, we start to see behaviors that are unhealthy, especially where they are consistent patterns of behaviours. This is where we find ourselves hesitating before approaching the person exhibiting those behaviours because they feel unsafe. It may be that they're not open to questions, and our interactions begin to feel unhealthy. A lot of the behaviour that concerns us will sit here and it can still be addressed. If, however, it becomes a persistent pattern of coercive controlling behavior, that reflects the definition of psychological abuse (which you'll find in the handbook) it can cross the threshold into spiritual abuse, or what we would define as harmful. As with other forms of psychological abuse, it is anticipated the number of cases that cross the threshold will be small, but those that do should be referred onwards. As with other cases of psychological abuse, it's also important to know that people can move either way along the spectrum of behaviour. If behaviour is identified and responded to effectively, it can be addressed and not escalated into unhealthy or spiritually abusive behavior. When we pause

to reflect on our behaviours and seek to address them, we can get some early intervention and support from a variety of sources. These sources might include pastoral support or supervision, training, and even just the art of learning to disagree well. As stated previously, it is anticipated that the number of cases requiring referral through safeguarding or disciplinary means would be quite small because a lot of situations are actually more appropriately dealt with through anti-bullying policies. It's also worth mentioning low level concerns here. This is when the behaviours don't quite meet the threshold for reporting onwards, but they're still inconsistent with a code of conduct or behaviour that we would expect from somebody in that position. Your handbook has several resources for you, helping you know what action you can and should take in situations that fall into the 'low level concern' category.

[The creation of healthy cultures]

As an organisation, we believe we're called to create safe places together. Harvard University has done extensive studies

showing how fear impacts a child's growth and learning. Fear itself changes the brain's architecture and it causes us to prioritise self-preservation even when the stakes might be as high as life and death, which is discussed in a book called 'The Fearless Organization' by Amy Edmondson. People can't grow in healthy ways in unsafe environments. So, what does a healthy environment or culture look like? As Christians we seek to be Christ-like in our responses to people and in our culture. In the Bible, in the book of Mark 10, verses 17 to 27, a rich young ruler comes to Christ. Jesus could see he was doing a lot of things right, but he also correctly pointed out the areas he needed to grow in. Many of us in leadership positions may be able to relate to that moment; we have a desire to help others work through their blind spots and grow in their faith. Most significantly, this example shows that Jesus allowed the rich young ruler to make a choice. He allowed him to walk away. We can understand a healthy culture, or a healthy faith culture, as one that provides emotional/psychological and physical safety. It offers guidance while simultaneously accepting a

person's right to choose. It creates an environment where people can be nurtured and grow.

Let's have a look at some concrete components of healthy cultures. We have six that we use within Thirtyone:Eight:

1) establishing good governance, 2) listening well, 3) building effective structures, 4) managing power, 5) modeling safe

behaviours, and 6) communicating well. There is more

information on this topic for our members in the Knowledge

Hub, with useful takeaways you can use with your leadership or your trustees or your organisational members. For non-

members there's a very similar resource that's been recently developed and can be equally impactful. It's found in the

brilliant book called 'A Church called Tov' by Laura Barringer

and Scot McKnight. The 'Circle of Tov' is described from page

97 onwards and explores similar components of healthy faith

communities; 1) nurture empathy, resist narcissism, 2) nurture grace, resist fear, 3) people first, resist institution creep, 4) tell

the truth, resist false narratives, 5) nurture justice, resist loyalty

culture, 6) nurture service, resist celebrity culture, 7) nurture

Christlikeness, resist leader culture. We're going to explore the six components we use within our organisation in this next part of the webinar. But before we do that, I want you to share a personal example from one of our team. She used to be a caseworker for expat families adopting children while living in China. Most of the children they worked with had experience of living in an institution or an orphanage rather than a family environment. So, a significant part of the preparation work she would do with hopeful parents was to prepare them for the disparity in development. What they would very commonly say is the child might be eight years old chronologically, academically they could be functioning at the age of an average nine-year-old, emotionally, they may function as a two- or three-year-old and prone to tantrums, or also could have the mental or executive functioning skills of a five-year-old. I think this is a good analogy for the reality of organisations. Just because we're doing well in one area, it doesn't mean that we are globally, or throughout the organisation, doing well. Like the rich young ruler, we have areas where we are succeeding, and

we want to celebrate those, but that doesn't give us a free pass for the areas that we've not yet looked at. In the same way the child who joins a family with unequal development would need more support in certain areas. We want to make sure that we address those areas and work with the child through those delays, if relevant. We also want to acknowledge and celebrate the things they excel at. Weakness in one area doesn't mean we're globally 'weak'. Similarly, growth and success in one area doesn't mean we're globally healthy. Let me ask, are we teachable and open enough to see the areas where our behaviour might be harmful or unhealthy or unhelpful? And are we prepared to take action to correct that?

Let's look at those six areas in turn. What does good governance look like? Procedures and the expectations of people are clear, consistent and easy to understand. Control within the organisation is not coercive, and the difference between demands and requests is clear. When dealing with complex situations, organisations willingly seek impartial advice

from outside. The behaviour shown by our leaders and others within our organisations is not rigid, dogmatic or controlling. People are given genuine freedom to make choices for themselves about matters that affect their lives. We'll talk later about how good governance isn't the same as lots of governance. Let me ask you to consider how you would self-evaluate yourself or your organisation, on this and each subsequent component. Where do you feel you would sit on the spectrum of behaviours? Do you have good governance according to those traits?

The second component of a healthy culture is that we listen. Consider when stories about us are being told by people outside our organisation, what is said? How do we respond? The traits of listening well include that: Stories being told by people inside the organisation are mostly positive, but there's an awareness of what negative stories might be being told about our organisation, because we listen well, and we're self-reflective enough to say wherever it is true and relevant. The

organisation has a culture that encourages and welcomes feedback, that encourages open discussions about the stories that might not always portray us in the best light. The organisation has a culture that encourages people to be humble in the way we respond to issues and the way we learn from them. Again, we would ask you to consider where you or your organisation might sit on the spectrum of behaviours when it comes to listening. Are you in the healthy spot, the unhelpful, the unhealthy, or are you tipping into behaviours that fit the definition of being spiritually abusive?

Number three is building effective structures. The structures in the organisation help to develop and maintain safer, healthier cultures and practices. In cultures like this, people are clear about what our organisation is trying to achieve with its structure, and leadership is exercised safely within those structures. The leadership structures have processes in place that encourage and invite challenge, and there is scrutiny and accountability of leaders. The way the organisation structure

works displays and develops safer, healthier cultures. Everyone with responsibilities is offered an appropriate level of support through supervision, through personal development, or coaching, mentoring, etc. Once again, I would ask you to have a think about where you'd put yourself on the spectrum of behaviours for this component. When it comes to building effective structures, do you have those mechanisms and processes in place already or not?

Fourthly, managing power. What does managing power look like? In the organisation, decisions are made in a way that includes and welcomes the input of others and leadership models humility and respect. They challenge any behaviors and attitudes which don't value and treat people equally. In the organisation, people can be seen as displaying safe and healthy cultures, attitudes, values and behaviours. The organisation can identify the places where power dynamics could create unhelpful or harmful imbalances, and people do feel able to talk about this openly. Individuals feel they could

challenge the development of authoritarian or dictatorial power dynamics in the organisation's leadership. Again, consider how you self-evaluate your organisation's ability to manage power. Where do you feel it would sit on the spectrum of behaviours?

Component five is modeling safe behaviours. The organisation is committed to being transparent and clearly communicates what behaviours are acceptable and permissible. The organisation welcomes feedback on practices and ways of working from people who are new. The organisation also welcomes feedback on practices and ways of working from people who are long-standing members and the routines and rituals are kept under review to make sure that they reflect a safe, healthy culture. The routines and rituals consider how they might affect people who might be vulnerable. Again, where would you evaluate your organisation on this component, do you model safe behaviours that fall in the green end of the spectrum, in the middle of the spectrum, or on the red side of the spectrum?

Sixthly, communicating well. What does communicating well look like? The organisation communicates messages that support everyone in developing and maintaining a safer culture. The organisation clearly communicates what a safe place looks like, so everyone understands what's expected of them and others. A commitment to be a safe place is an important part of the organisation's identity and people are clear about where accountability lies, and they choose to encourage personal value and equality. The organisation actively welcomes people who are broken, wounded and vulnerable, and provides them with a safe space to be heard. Finally, I ask you again to have a think about where you would say you are on the spectrum of behaviours when it comes to communicating well. Looking back at those six components, where would you say your strongest is? Is it communicating well? Is it managing power? Is it one or the others? The same for which is your weakest, and are any of those components sitting in the unhealthy or harmful or spiritually abusive side of the spectrum?

There is a quote from a survivor/victim who shared; “From my experience, I do not think that the idea of church being a safe place would have been discussed when [the individual in question] was vicar. It was not a safe place for those who were there, as those who were in preaching groups might disclose where people were not ‘up to grade’, they would be humiliated.”

The individual who exhibited abusive behaviours said the church should be a training camp not hospital. This quote was taken from an Independent Lessons Learnt Review report Emmanuel church, Wimbledon, which went on to say that the term ‘spiritual abuse’ had been used by some participants to describe their experiences. Just being part of this training shows a willingness to be part of the solution. The willingness to be a safe place and to articulate that to others is such a positive sign. Incidentally, the quote also touches on elements of establishing good governance, of listening well, of managing power, and modeling safe behaviours, and how those

components can mean that we avoid instances of spiritual abuse.

Let's move on to the myth of homogeneity, which is the idea that people with positive characteristics can't act in abusive ways. The review illustrated that one of the biggest difficulties in identifying and disclosing the behaviours was this myth of homogeneity. The review evidences that a person who possesses positive characteristics and is widely highly regarded, could nonetheless display entirely inappropriate, abusive, and harmful behaviours, which render them unfit for their office. Furthermore, those who wish to disclose abuse or harmful behaviours can be caused to question the reality of their experience, when the predominant narrative is focused on the positive traits of the individual. When this is combined with a narrative about protecting the gospel above all else, it becomes a powerful barrier to disclosing abuse or harmful behaviour. In preparing this training, I've had the honour of reading stacks of books, and reviews and listening to panels of

survivors and professionals, etc., and this is one of the strongest themes that emerges and is particularly insidious within faith communities. In situations where the culture is known to be based on faith, love, morality, etc. there is an implicit level of trust and we need to ensure that we don't dismiss negative behaviours, or dismiss the feedback about negative behaviours, because we can also see good in the situations that are being discussed. The reality remains that people with positive characteristics can, and sometimes do, still act in abusive ways.

[Module 2]

In this module, we're going to explore the importance of people, policies and practices. We understand that maintaining a healthy culture and safeguarding more broadly is everyone's business and it's born out of an ongoing, intentional work. We'll explore how we need people, good policies and great practices to build healthy cultures and avoid harmful or abusive practices. You've almost certainly heard the phrase 'safeguarding is everyone's responsibility'. It also works and is relevant in

situations and discussions of spiritual abuse for two reasons.

The first one is we are all co-producers of culture. Nobody is a static or neutral player when it comes to culture. We are always either reinforcing or challenging the current cultural norms in our community and therefore, we're always either contributing to making places safe or allowing unsafe cultures to continue.

It's also relevant because of accountability: In the Bible, power is always connected with accountability or responsibility. Volk Kessler said: "A leader is always accountable to those who have entrusted him or her with power, and to those who find themselves in his or her sphere of influence." Accountability requires people to speak out, and for others to feel like they can act. What do we think are good examples of healthy accountability?

Healthy cultures also require us to be inclusive. Do we only listen to the voices of those who share the same opinions as us, or are we open to different perspectives and inputs? It is challenging to listen to the opposite view and to humbly weigh

its merit. A few years ago, as I was submitting a research piece for international publication, one of the peer reviewers replied that they felt I needed to read two particular books. One was called the 'Child Catchers: Rescue, trafficking and the new gospel of adoption'. It is a book that questions whether intercountry adoption is a form of human trafficking. I had to read this book as somebody who worked supporting the social welfare system in China, as well as having two children adopted through intercountry adoption processes myself. It was one of the best and worst experiences of my life, it was uncomfortable, challenging, and painful to consider. Not only that the opinions in the book could be correct, but also that these are opinions that could be held by people around me. Ultimately, it was the best experience. I learnt to sit with nuance without getting defensive, it left me comfortable staring those painful questions in the face, and having clarity around my own ethical boundaries. Incidentally, it also ultimately left me confident that the safeguards in place for intercountry adoption from China at that time, were robust enough for it not to

constitute human trafficking. Learning to sit with opposites is a valuable skill to develop. It's uncomfortable, it's challenging, but it helps us grow. There's a fascinating website called 'The Human Library' (there's a link in the handbook) that invites you to listen to voices of people who might be outside your normal sphere. Do we disregard some voices because we struggle to relate to some of their characteristics? All of us will have some form of unconscious bias, i.e., where we carry stereotypes about people based on their age, their gender, their ethnicity, etc. When we identify this, and make the decision to sit and listen anyway, we're more likely to hear the things we need to hear, even when it comes from a source outside of our core group. Again, it is challenging, but it's also healthy. It's also not a new issue. Let's consider the parable of the Good Samaritan, it's a story that had an impact on the listeners around Jesus, because they identified those unconscious or perhaps conscious biases in themselves, the stereotypes they held about certain people. It highlighted the groups they viewed as good and holy, and who were unclean. We might be more

polite about it today, but I think these are biases that we still hold. The more we can challenge ourselves, to be open to different views and empower all of those around us, the more likely we are to create healthy situations and cultures.

As we move on to the consideration of the impact of good practices, let me ask do you have spiritual abuse covered in your safeguarding policy? Because policy can be a concrete first step in creating healthier cultures. From a piece of research conducted by Thirtyone:Eight among various Christian denominations, we can see that a range of responses to this question is common, but we also know it's a fast growing area. We don't have any numbers from charities or other faith groups, but we know that spiritual abuse is an issue that is becoming much more mainstream and believe it is something that many faith groups and organisations are actively looking to work against. People are integrating their commitment to protect people from the harms of spiritual abuse into their policy framework, so do check with your umbrella organisation as they

may already have templates or policies that you can benefit from. For our members, we now include a section on spiritual abuse in the template safeguarding policies, which you can of course download and use.

There are several ways in which policy can be used as a framework for building healthy cultures. To move from a desire to empower people to the end goal of healthy practices, we often need that framework in place. So how do people signal when behaviors are bullying or demeaning? How do people respectfully and appropriately raise concerns about sexual impropriety or financial pressure without straying into the territory of slander or gossip? Our policy should clearly give everybody in our faith communities the answers to those questions. Do our organisations have spiritual abuse in our safeguarding policy, have a whistleblowing policy, a bullying policy, and do we have a reporting concerns process?

We also need to have intentional practices in our day-to-day functioning, and the first practice of that is governance. One

common element in the widely reported abuses around the 'nine o'clock service' and several of the independent reviews we're being commissioned to produce is that often in situations where spiritual abuse occurs, the organisation in question doesn't lack governance, rather they have multiple layers of governance from sitting under several different umbrella bodies. This can lead to a sense of uniqueness, where the organisation is no longer expected to fully comply with any single governing body's roles, and where the assumption is also that they must be being held accountable by someone else. Ideally, governance structures need to be simple and clear. And where there are multiple layers of governance, where perhaps you do sit under two different oversight bodies or umbrella bodies, then think about how do these work in practice? Is it clearly written out in a memorandum of understanding for example. Lots of governance is not the same as good governance, because often lots of governance means things can be more easily missed.

A second intentional practice, which is fundamental to building healthy cultures, is visibility. Even if we have the right policies and practices in place, their effectiveness in protecting people from harmful behaviour that takes place in a religious environment is limited by how visible these practices and policies are. Can people see on your website what your policies are and how to report things that concern them? Are there quick guides available? Are themes discussed publicly from the pulpit. For example, do people know what should and shouldn't be considered as problematic within your organisation. You can have the safeguarding lead wear a lanyard or use another method to visually identify them but do consider visibility. Schools and hospitals often seem far better at making sure that safe practices are visible, than our faith communities do.

Another intentional practice is that of humility. How open am I to criticism? Is my default when someone gives feedback that's not positive, to assume that the comments are wrong, or that the person is being unfair, or that they are intentionally trying to

cause me harm? Am I actively aware of the areas that I and other leaders in the organisation need to grow in? Am I open to hearing input on that?

The final intentional practice, which, simply by your participation you're meeting to some level, is training. Have I maintained my professional curiosity? Am I constantly learning and seeking new input? Or am I only seeking out voices that affirm what I already believe to be true, and areas that I already feel competent in. There's always a temptation to lean that way because it's comfortable, because it makes us feel less vulnerable. When we're functioning in areas where we know we can already succeed and we have strength, but don't have that openness to learn about the areas where we are weak, we can become stagnant, perhaps even arrogant and stray into behaviours that are not healthy.

Our cultures can be seen as the soil into which we plant our best intentions. Soil must be healthy and full of the right

nutrients in order for the seeds we plant to flourish and grow. If we don't take time to look after the soil, to make sure it's well watered, then we risk the introduction of toxic elements, or weeds taking root and choking what we planted. Safer, healthier cultures survive when our beliefs, attitudes and behaviour support the development and the implementations of our policies, procedures and training. Without the culture being sufficient to promote safer practices, all our efforts will be limited and may even have unhealthy or unsafe attributes.

We need to create healthier cultures where no one's behaviour is above being questioned. Spiritual abuse, all too often, is harder to respond to than other forms of abuse because we're concerned about calling religious texts or religious leaders into question. Being respectful is good, but we must bear in mind that spiritual abuse is a gross distortion of true faith. A quote taken from the final IICSA report [independent inquiry into child sexual abuse], says that "The power, authority and reverence bestowed upon religious institutions and the individuals working within them meant that the conduct of perpetrators went

unquestioned.” One of the truest distortions of our faith is when people are allowed to get away with unbiblical behaviour because of their status as a religious leader.

So far in creating healthy Christian cultures, we've had a look at what constitutes a healthy faith culture, and then we focused on the people, policies and practices that support those healthy cultures. Finally, we're going to have a look at how healthy cultures can be both preventative and restorative. They can prevent spiritual abuse, and they can also restore people when they've experienced spiritual abuse.

[Prevention and restoration]

Let's look at professional advice for offering pastoral care to victims/survivors. While spiritually abusive behaviours create deep harm, a healthy behaviour or environment gives those in our care what they need to grow in healthy ways. There's a powerful quote that's broadly attributed to the abolitionist ex-slave and statesman Frederick Douglass; “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” But healthy cultures

do both, firstly, they build strong children. Think back to the healthy cultures you self-identified at the start of the webinar. What components of culture can prevent abuse ever occurring? In his book, 'Powerful Leaders', Marcus Honeysett asks the question whether the structures around us are sufficient to safeguard people from the worst version of ourselves. I find that a very powerful question to reflect on. Healthy cultures take inventories early enough and frequently enough to prevent abuse ever occurring.

Secondly, healthy cultures are also restorative in their responses to disclosures, and can positively influence an individual's recovery from abuse. "A caring and compassionate response, underpinned by pastoral and spiritual support, if requested by survivors, can support recovery and healing and can dismantle the false messages their abuser may have given them." That came from the Church of England safeguarding eManual. The power of healthy responses cannot be overstated. Dr. Kathryn Kinmond is a chartered psychologist

and researcher into abuse that occurs within religious context. She was asked, 'when people disclose abuse, typically, what kind of responses do your clients get? Is it broadly negative or positive?' Echoing the content of the quote above, she responded that she only hears negative responses. She believes that when a survivor/victim experiences a positive response to a disclosure and has access to a healthy restoration, the victims and survivors are less likely to ever need her professional services. A significant portion of delegates on this course have reported that they have people starting to attend their faith communities after experiencing negative or harmful situations in other faith communities. Just as cultures can be harmful or spiritually abusive, I believe they can also be restorative. Psalm 23:2-3 says 'He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for His name's sake.' Being in a caring and compassionate environment can be restorative for people who have suffered abuse. In situations where the victim or survivor has

experienced coercive control, with religious elements, our typical posture or approaches might not be appropriate. They might even be triggering. Has scripture been used as a tool against them? Has prayer been used in a manipulative way? Has it been used to get them to act or not act, rather than asking God to act? Because individual experiences vary so much, there is no right answer to the question 'how should I respond to disclosure of spiritual abuse?', but there are a few guiding principles.

The first one is, be guided by the individual. Let them know that you're available and that you're listening, but allow them to set the pace and the level of vulnerability. Allow them to raise topics as and when they feel comfortable. A second principle is to give choice, don't coerce. It might be that you understand this differently compared with an individual who's experienced harm in faith settings. For example, the question 'would you like me to pray with you?' is most often intended as a neutral well-intentioned statement, but if somebody has experienced

control, and been accused of not being submissive, they may experience this question as harmful. Phrasing the same question as 'if and when you feel prayer would be beneficial, do let me know' might be heard as empowering. Give choice. Finally, allow for the spectrum of emotion. Do we unconsciously make some emotions more acceptable or more holy or more godly than other emotions? Do we leave space for anger, uncertainty, exhaustion, grief and loss? We need to allow people to journey through different emotions at different times. That brings us to the end of module three.

[Welcome to session 2]

Hello and welcome back to creating healthy cultures and understanding spiritual abuse. This is session two. In the first session, we looked at the first three modules. We discussed in module one what healthy cultures look like and that healthy culture and spiritual abuse are two ends of the same spectrum. In module two, we focused on the role of people, policies and practices. Module three looked at why these healthy cultures are so essential, and how they can prevent spiritual abuse

happening, and be restorative environments for those who have experienced harm in spiritual settings. In module four, we will be looking at what spiritual abuse is, how it is defined, and the impact it has on people. We'll also explore why this is something all faith communities and those in positions of influence should be aware of, and actively seeking to prevent. In module five, we'll consider how we respond well to disclosures of spiritual abuse and concerns. We'll consider how the issue of spiritual abuse is recognised and overlaps with legislation, and how we engage with statutory agencies in situations of spiritual abuse. And in module six, we'll come full circle and once more look at how healthy culture and spiritual abuse are two ends of the same spectrum, and how openness, awareness and the right processes can give us hope that we will either remain on the healthy side of the spectrum, or we can move towards it.

[Module 4]

So, let's start with module four, spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse is the opposite end of the spectrum of behaviours to the healthy

behaviours that we looked at in session one. Understanding what these abusive behaviours look like and the harm they do helps us to understand them. When we understand the pain and trauma associated with abuse in religious contexts, we can also understand why it's important to strive for healthy cultures. So, what is spiritual abuse? Who are the perpetrators and where does it happen? And what are the key characteristics of spiritual abuse? So firstly, as a refresher from session one, how do we define spiritual abuse? In its simplest form, what we're talking about is emotional and psychological abuse that occurs in religious contexts and exhibits aspects that are supported by or intertwined with faith or belief. It's important to say that all three of the above should be present. If belief or our religious texts aren't elements of the unhealthy behaviours, then we wouldn't consider bullying that happens within a church building to be spiritual abuse, we would consider that workplace bullying, as serious as that is. It's important to know that practices within our faith communities are more likely to sit at various spots along the scale, rather than simply being

acceptable or spiritually abusive. Our aim should always be to move towards that green end of the spectrum, towards the healthy practices, rather than accepting practices that are unhelpful, or allowing these behaviours to become embedded, and then becoming spiritually abusive. When we look at the scale, we can say that one end is the good, healthy, nurturing behaviours, where people are able to flourish and grow. As we move along the spectrum, we reach unhelpful behaviours. This is where someone's reactions or behaviours are not helpful, but they're not harmful and we all behave in this way at times. And then, as we move further along, we start to see a consistent pattern of behaviour that's negative, where people are reluctant to approach us, or where we are not open to being questioned, then we're coming to identify unhealthy behaviours. Towards the right-hand side of the spectrum, we start becoming concerned and would want to address these behaviours. Finally, if behaviours become a persistent pattern of coercive control that reflect the definition of psychological abuse, we would consider that you have crossed over the threshold into

spiritual abuse and being harmful. As with other forms of psychological abuse, it is anticipated that the number of cases that cross this threshold will be small, but where they do they should be referred onwards. People can in either direction along the spectrum of behaviour. If behaviour is identified and responded to effectively, it can be addressed and not escalate into unhealthy or spiritually abusive behaviour. When we reflect on unacceptable behaviours, we gain an opportunity for early intervention and support from a variety of sources. It's anticipated that the number of cases requiring referral through safeguarding or disciplinary means is quite small, because a lot of situations can be appropriately dealt with through either anti-bullying processes, or through your trustees.

[Perpetrators and settings]

Premier:Unbelievable recently had both a webinar and a blog post on spiritual abuse. In the blog post, Dr. Eric L Strandness says this, "We need to remember that Christianity is facing a church crisis and not a Christ crisis. Jesus isn't the problem, but

rather those who use his church as a staging area for abuse.”

When discussing spiritual abuse, we need to be clear that we're not talking about spirituality being inherently abusive, but rather that abuse can and does occur in all spheres of humanity.

When coercion and control become part of our faith journeys, spirituality has been abused and distorted from the gift God intended it to be.

Some people feel like a discussion of spiritual abuse is an attack on faith communities, or more specifically on leadership, and it's important to dispel this. Research shows us that this is an issue in all faith communities, that anyone, including leaders can and do experience spiritual abuse, and the experiences of leaders can be more hidden. It's important to know that leaders can and do abuse their positions, but those in parallel and lower power positions can also abuse one another and those above them. Leadership style isn't necessarily an aspect of spiritual abuse, but traits of spiritual abuse can be associated with narcissistic behaviours. Where leaders remain accountable, vulnerable and humble, unhealthy and harmful

behaviours are less common. It's also important to make the point that spiritual abuse can be perpetrated either by an individual or by a group. It can be behaviours of one individual, or it could be endemic within a culture. The local church is a body and a recent book on this topic, 'A Church called Tov', which we mentioned briefly in session one, talks about while leaders articulate the culture of a faith community, it is the congregants who reshape, re-teach and re-articulate the culture. Everyone in a faith-based community plays a role in its culture, and therefore may behave in unhelpful, unhealthy or harmful ways. Research, like our 2017 study that had responses from ten different denominations as well as respondents selecting 'other', also shows that spiritual abuse happens in different denominations, and expressions of church. It's important to note though, that many churches and Christian organisations are healthy places where people do thrive. When we consider the setting (where it happens) we can see that spiritual abuse occurs in the UK as well as in overseas contexts. It may be that in other contexts spiritual abuse fits

more closely with the stereotyped perceptions we hold. For example, our stereotypical idea of spiritual abuse may look like the often-discussed phenomenon in America of prosperity preachers, or the big personalities on stage using coercive behaviour to raise huge amounts of money, television evangelists, or even leaders exhibiting cult-like behaviours can easily be identified as having the traits of spiritual abuse.

Similarly, in many African nations, instances of accusations of witchcraft are a good example of controlling or coercive behaviours in religious settings. It's important to acknowledge that these are real and valid examples of spiritual abuse, while still bearing in mind that spiritual abuse within Christian organisations in the UK can have the same traits, but look quite different. A final thought on the settings in which spiritual abuse can occur- we're predominantly talking about organisations, the cultures of groups and accountability for leadership, but we also need to acknowledge that spiritual abuse can and does occur at home, particularly within intimate partner relationships.

There's a quote from the National Domestic Violence helpline

that says 'it can be so difficult to feel torn between one's religious beliefs and their desire to live free from abuse.' The Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which applies to England and Wales, amended the definition of 'personally connected', so that spiritual abuse or controlling or coercive behaviour is now considered to apply to partners, ex-partners, or family members regardless of whether the victim and perpetrator live together. Scotland and Northern Ireland have similar domestic abuse acts, which say that behaviours do not need to be physical to constitute abuse.

Finally, can spiritual abuse occur outside of church environments? What is spiritual abuse in home settings? This topic is addressed by the National Domestic Violence Hotline and it says this, "Whilst it's widely understood as referring to a church elder or faith leader inflicting abuse on congregation members and in turn creating a toxic culture within the church or group by shaming or controlling members using the power of their position. Spiritual abuse can also occur within an intimate

partner relationship. Spiritual abuse is not limited to a certain religion or denomination. Any person of any belief system is capable of perpetrating spiritual abuse, just as anyone can be the victim of it. Signs of spiritual abuse between intimate partners include when an abusive partner ridicules or insults the other person's religious or spiritual beliefs, prevents the other partner from practicing their religious or spiritual beliefs, uses their partner's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate or shame them, forces the children to be raised in a faith that the other partner is not agreeing to, or use his religious texts or beliefs to minimise or rationalise abusive behaviours, such as physical, financial, emotional or sexual abuse, or marital rape.”

When we're talking about creating healthy faith cultures, we also want to be aware that members of our groups may be experiencing spiritual abuse, not necessarily within our faith culture, but perhaps within their family settings, not only is this harmful but it is also illegal.

The following quotes are taken from Bournemouth University research from 2017. One person described spiritual abuse as when the leader or senior leaders of a church operate in their own authority whilst abusing and manipulating the congregation and begin to 'take the place of God in their lives.' Another contributor said 'I think people assume the abuser is usually the person with more power, e.g., the church leader. But I think church leaders are often not very protected from being abused themselves from members of their own church.' Anybody can be a victim or survivor of spiritual abuse.

Let's take a look at some of the key characteristics of spiritual abuse. The whole experience is about coercion and control, or being forced or pressured to conform. For example, seeking to enforce something, rather than encouraging behaviour, can take away an individual's autonomy or freedom to make their own choices. It may look like the decision making is shared, but decisions have been made and then people are expected to simply go along with them. A significant trait in spiritually

abusive cultures and situations is that asking questions can be seen as disruptive rather than the normal part of a healthy activity in church. One litmus test of whether behaviours are harmful or not is, when you say there's a problem, do you become viewed as a problem? It's worth pointing out that when we ask questions and raise issues in a healthy and respectful way, we are acting well in our faith-based communities and are giving others the opportunity for growth.

A second key characteristic of spiritual abuse is manipulation and exploitation. It can take the form of requiring people to be present to serve beyond what they're comfortable doing because of the fear of short term or eternal consequences. Not attending meetings or not 'going the extra mile' may result in isolation or the misuse of Scripture suggesting overworking or compulsory attendance is what God requires from all committed believers.

The third characteristic is enforced accountability, for example, being required to be accountable to another person without consent, without choice and without control over the boundary setting in the relationship. We do need to know that there are times when accountability is required. For example, there might be a safeguarding agreement in place with a known offender, but these are usually enacted in accordance with the organisation's policies and procedures and are often done with input from the parole officer. These are not punishments, rather, they're designed to safeguard the individual and those in the wider organisation.

The fourth characteristic is a requirement of secrecy and silence. Many people who experience spiritual abuse may be explicitly or implicitly silenced. A requirement for silence may also be seen in coercing through censorship. People might feel they can't ask questions or disagree or raise issues. This can be associated with the need to keep unity or protect the individual, protect the church or even to protect God.

Another common spiritual abuse trait is the pressure to conform. This can take several different forms - we might see excessive pressure to commit to the person or the organisation, and this commitment being equated to their commitment to God. In some circumstances, we see the requirements for unquestioning obedience to those in authority. Again, this is equated to being obedient to God. For some people, their gender can be a factor that's used to exercise control, for example, the idea that certain activities should not be conducted by women. Another means of control is isolation if people do not do what they're being pressurised to do. Again, in some circumstances, it's right and proper to develop a safeguarding agreement. That might mean some activities can't be participated in by all individuals, but this is not what we're talking about here. In situations of spiritual abuse, people can find that they're accepted when they're doing what they're being pressured into doing, but rejected when they don't agree or comply.

Publicly shaming and humiliating individuals to control their behaviour is another trait we're concerned about. The individual might experience public shaming, or humiliation because of perceived lack of obedience or conformity. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse report on child protection within religious organisations and settings was released in 2021. It cited 'victim blaming, shame and honour, abuse of power by religious leaders, gender disparity, mistrust of external agencies and pressure on victims to forgive their abusers' and justification of failures by leaders to take the appropriate action were common characteristics of spiritual abuse. The conclusions from these findings came from evidence obtained from 38 different religious organisations across Wales and England and these are religious organisations that have a dominant influence on the lives of millions of children and they cover organisations from the Christian congregation of Jehovah's Witness, the Council of African and African Caribbean churches, UK, Muslim Council of Britain, the network

of Buddhists organisation, the SRI Hindu temple and community centre, Quakers, Salvation Army, and the United Reformed Church. We can see these traits are not limited to any one denomination or area, but they are also traits that are impactful and damaging to those who experience them.

Again, these words are taken from survivors and victims of spiritual abuse from the research that was undertaken in 2017, by Bournemouth University. One individual said, 'in my experience, my accountability involved a hard hand, I was told to be disciplined, I was told to come under the authority, under my house group leaders and work through issues with them.

Again, in the correct setting, this would be a good thing. I embrace the opportunity to talk through and pray through areas of my life. Yet, even in those early days, I remember feeling pressured and pushed into action. Keep your head down and your mouth shut and no one is going to get hurt. Look on it as a case for keeping unity. Would they go the extra mile? If so, they would likely face greater demands fantastically disguised under the heading of being given greater responsibility. If not, they

were among those who could not be trusted, they have betrayed their leaders. Their decision to do so will take them into a time of isolation and loneliness.'

These survivors and victims voiced their experiences of spiritual abuse and summed up the lived experiences of those traits; coercion and control, manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, the requirements for secrecy and silence and pressure to conform. Let's think about the spectrum of behaviours again, what would be a healthy expression of accountability, or relational boundaries or appropriate confidentiality? When would it become unhealthy? Where would it stray into spiritual abuse?

[Module 5]

In module five, we will consider how we respond well to disclosures of spiritual abuse and concerns within our own organisations. We will consider how the issue of spiritual abuse is recognised or overlaps with legislation, and how we engage with statutory agencies in situations of spiritual abuse. When

we talk about responding well in this module, we're making a distinction from what we looked at in module three, which primarily looked at supporting individuals who'd experienced spiritual abuse in other settings. In module five, we will talk about how we respond well to accusations or concerns about these traits or behaviours within our own organisations. Once again, a definition of spiritual abuse is that of a systemic pattern of ongoing coercive, controlling behavior within a faith community. Let's talk about responding appropriately. One victim/survivor of spiritual abuse said that the experience of 'is the equivalent of someone depth charging our insides.' This quote shows the deep effect of the experience and the importance of addressing the issue. For those of us not familiar with military terminology, depth charges are underwater bombs designed to destroy submarines and is also a psychological term where someone is deliberately provoked to see whether their response is true or not. The survivor/victim's words, therefore, hints at being destroyed or being provoked.

Responding appropriately, this slide summarises the main impacts of spiritual abuse through the use of a diagram, a description of which follows: The diagram shows two concentric rings. The inner ring is made up of four interconnecting arrows flowing clockwise. The outer ring is a faint line connecting a series of 10 words, each written on a circle. The circles are evenly spaced around the ring. Starting at the top of the ring the words are: 1. blame, 2. changing perceptions of reality, 3. distrust, 4. personal discredit, 5. anger, 6. fear, 7. isolation on leaving, 8. loss of self and identity, 9. faith, 10. Long term impact. The circles are all of a similar size except for the one that says 'distrust', which is larger than the rest.] Through the personal stories that you've heard throughout this course, you may have got a sense of what these impacts look like within individuals' lived experiences. It's also important to know that everybody responds differently and is unique. So, you may see some of these traits play a bigger part in certain individuals' lives than others. Perhaps the biggest impact of all is distrust. People may have questions about their identity, their faith and

their opinion of the church, and that is true as well of other forms of abuse. It can have a long-term impact, especially because people may not recognise spiritual abuse as abuse and there's also not so many places to go to for support, unlike other forms of abuse that have been more widely discussed. It's important that people understand that those who have had the experience of abuse may take a long time to feel safe in their relationships and at church, if they choose to go back to church. The handbook has additional detail and so it's helpful to read this on pages 21-23.

The impact on faith is important and possibly the most damaging aspect of spiritual abuse. Many people walk away from the church and faith, which is why acknowledging, recognising and responding well to the issue of spiritual abuse is key. It is also exactly what's been described in the account within the Gospel where Jesus talks about the millstone being hung around a person's neck, and them being cast into the sea as a better punishment than what would be fitting for those who

cause little ones to stumble. The original translation of this passage refers to the damage that is done to a person's relationship with God as a consequence of harmful and incorrect teaching or behaviour.

The other impacts of spiritual abuse on victims and survivors may include blame, changing perceptions of reality, personal discredit, anger, fear, isolation on leaving, loss of self and identity, faith. And remember that the impact can be long term.

[Responding appropriately to a disclosure of spiritual abuse]

Once again, keep in mind that spiritual abuse is defined as the persistent patterns of coercive control within a faith context. If someone discloses an experience of spiritual abuse to you, follow the normal guidelines for listening to a disclosure. Try to ensure the person feels safe, that the environment is suitable and that you are unlikely to be interrupted. Ensure the person knows you are taking what they say seriously. Part of reassuring the individual making the disclosure is actively

listening to them – make sure you're using facial expressions; body language and speech prompts to show that you're listening and engaged. A further aspect is validating the person. It's a hard thing to disclose any experience of abuse, so the person needs to feel valued and safe. Finally, for those who have experienced this form of abuse, it's important to feel understood, and for you as the listener to demonstrate empathy. Don't judge, minimise, blame or defend either the church or the individual. These things, sadly, are common but unhelpful responses to the disclosure of spiritual abuse. It's important to remember that your role is to allow the person to tell their whole story, not to decide whether their disclosure is true. Take care when using the Bible or prayer as these might have been part of the experience of spiritual abuse and so people might find this triggering. However, others might find it helpful. So, ensure that the person is comfortable and recognise that after someone has been controlled, it's not easy to say no to an offer of prayer, or to read the Bible together. It's

really important to be sensitive to where the individual is and let them take the lead.

Finally, a note on Matthew 18, which encourages people to attempt to out disputes in-person, directly and privately. This is a good tool when there's a standard dispute between people, however when a person has experienced coercive control, great care must be taken. The individual must feel safe, and we don't recommend suggesting a direct meeting as a first response to a disclosure of coercive control. If you look back to the traits of spiritual abuse, you can easily see why this wouldn't be a helpful or safe environment.

As with all safeguarding concerns, we need to think about agreeing to keep confidentiality within limits. Many of those who experience spiritual abuse describe their level of fear about telling their story and the possible repercussions, so it's really important that it is made clear that their story will not be shared without their knowledge and only on a 'need to know basis'.

That said, it's also essential that they understand from the start that you may need to refer on and you will be really clear with them about exactly who will know their information. You will need to ensure that no one you are planning to 'refer' to is involved in the accusation. You will also need to express a necessity for confidentiality from any third parties in the referral process. This can be a challenge if it's the church or leaders or friends that have been implicated. It's important to ensure ongoing support for all the people involved both those disclosing and those implicated. We suggest that separate help and support is available. It should not be the same person or people supporting everyone.

Where do people typically go to for help and support when they've experienced spiritual abuse? First of all, church leaders were identified in the surveys as the first place individuals would go to for support. This may be useful, but there's two words of caution. Firstly, church leaders may be the ones being accused and secondly, they might not have any knowledge of

spiritual abuse. However, this shows the importance of training church leaders in the area. One of the quotes from research into spiritual abuse said within the church, I would first speak to our senior pastors, Thirtyone:Eight or similar organisations. We, and similar organisations which you'll find listed in the signposting portion of the handbook, have resources on this topic and our helpline staff are aware of spiritual abuse. They're available to respond to requests for help and support and they're able to listen and advise on the best steps to take when this has occurred.

A third source of support the people return to is friends and family. As a friend or family member, your closeness and the sense of being on the same level might be why someone felt comfortable enough to disclose to you. But again, many friends and family can be unaware of spiritual abuse, the impact of it, and also the relationship they have with the church or the person identified as the perpetrator could be a factor to consider.

The fourth place people disclose to is the church's safeguarding lead. This was quite low on the list of responses identified in the research, but it was recognised by some as a source of support and help. There was some concern about whether the safeguarding lead would understand spiritual abuse, but this research was undertaken several years ago, when the concept was less well understood. There is also further concern about reporting within the church where the experience happened. Some people felt they would want to access help and support external to their church organisation. Statutory agencies were also noted as a source of support and help, but one of the concerns was whether the behaviours crossed the threshold needed for intervention. Thirtyone:Eight is able to advise about how and when to contact statutory agencies such as the police, or social services, where the concerns are significant. If you have any doubts do phone the Thirtyone:Eight helpline, which is 0303 003 111. Counseling was also identified as a form of support. There was some debate about whether counselors needed to have the same

faith to really understand the issue, but it was clear from the research that counselors do have skills that can be very useful in helping people to recover from this experience. And finally, external support. Some people notice the importance of being able to obtain external help and support and that consideration should be given to how an external service around spiritual abuse can be developed. There are already organisations that fill this gap, one that we recommend is Replenish and you can find details of how to contact them in the signposting area at the end of your handbook.

Let's think back to the 'planting in fertile ground' illustration we discussed in session one. We know that policies can help lessen the impact of spiritual abuse and can help create healthy culture. A clear policy with precise steps on what should be done when things do go wrong means that we are clear on our referral pathways when instances of spiritual abuse do occur. There will be different guidance if you are part of a denomination or under an umbrella organisation, but we're here

to help and support you, if necessary. If you're part of an independent church or are a faith community outside of normal church structures, independent advice on referring on concerns can be particularly helpful. We would also suggest seeking advice if you're uncertain in live situations about what action can or should be taken. Ignoring concerns or situations is rarely the best approach.

In considering specific pathways for referral, it's important that concerns and disclosures are recorded accurately and in a timely manner on safeguarding referral forms. This is especially pertinent in spiritual abuse cases as it is characterised as a pattern of behaviour that is difficult to evidence. If we cannot show a consistent pattern of behaviour, we can't consider this spiritual abuse. The records and reports of spiritual abuse are often needed to show that this is not a one-off event. Accurate and ongoing records are essential, and they can feed into a series of possibilities for referral that will differ on both your organisation's status and the specifics of the concern or

disclosure. Before you respond to crisis, you should have taken the steps needed to ensure that your safeguarding policy makes the referral process clear. If not, a disclosure of abuse or a concern can be a catalyst for making sure we think through this process. Currently, spiritual abuse is not a recognised category of abuse, it does not constitute a criminal offence in and of itself, but it may overlap with other criminal offences. Coercive or controlling behaviour where the perpetrator and victim are personally connected is, for example, a criminal offence. So, if these harmful behaviours occur in faith groups, where members are also relatives, it may be a criminal offence. For churches within denominations, there will be denominational support and help for safeguarding concerns. For independent faith groups, the responsibility may lie with the trustees. All these elements will have implications for the exact referral pathways you'll follow. Spiritual abuse does occur both in large and small contexts, from individual abuses to institutionalised examples of religions being used to control and coerce thousands of people. A fairly recent quote from an

article in The Guardian (2021), looking at the Baby and Mother homes, said “After all this time, it’s not only the women's words that are so powerful, but it's the absence of their silence.

Silence is what the church relied on. Silence fed the shame.

The ability to refer, to hear voices, to honour the experiences, is an incredibly powerful response to spiritual abuse.” This quote came from an example of spiritual abuse that recently came to light with the publication of the 2021 report on the Ireland Mother and Baby homes, which were religious institutions for unmarried mothers. It affected 56,000 mothers and 57,000 babies between 1922 and 1998. Ireland’s Taoiseach commented after reading the report, “As a society we embraced judgmental, moral certainty. A perverse religious morality and control which was so damaging. What was so very striking was the absence of basic kindness.”

In both large-scale instances of spiritual abuse, and in smaller, perhaps family-based instances, specific referral pathways need to be carefully considered. Who do we pass the concern

on to? If a concern is raised internally, we need to have a culture that listens well, which we discussed in the previous session. The kind of questions we need to ask are, how do people report concerns internally? Who do they report to? Who needs to know (an essential safeguarding concern)? We don't share the information more widely than we need to. How do I keep the survivor or victim informed of the process? And importantly, what should we not do?

Who should we refer on to? It may be that the concern reported to you internally is significant enough to be forwarded on to a statutory agency. This would be in situations where either children are involved or a crime has occurred. If a disclosure is such that it suggests an individual is at immediate risk of harm, then you need to contact the police. While the safeguarding lead is the person who would handle most of concerns within an organisation, it's always important to remember that your safeguarding lead does not replace the emergency services. In the same way a First Aider does not replace the need for an

ambulance when somebody is having a heart attack, the safeguarding lead may have skills and knowledge, but they are not to be expected to replace the police when somebody is at risk of immediate harm.

A second referral pathway you may be more likely to take in situations of spiritual abuse is to your charity regulators. If you're in England and Wales, that's the Charity Commission. In Scotland, it's the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator [OSCR], and in Northern Ireland is the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and those are in your handbook. The signposting section also has other organisations that may be able to give relevant support and advice to you.

And finally, you may need to refer to your umbrella organisation or your wider denomination. Where there are concerns about either an individual or wider culture, it is important that the larger governing structures of your organisation are kept informed. That brings us to the end of module five.

[Module 6]

In this final module, we're going to go full circle and revisit the spectrum of behaviour and pick out some attributes which, regardless of what our starting point might be, can help us get to and stay on the healthy end of the spectrum. Our aim should always be to achieve healthy or 'green' practices. We don't want to mindlessly accept practices that are unhelpful or allow behaviours to become embedded, because when those behaviours become a persistent pattern is when we consider them to have become spiritually abusive. We'll very briefly look at three tools that can be instrumental in helping us move towards - or stay on - the green end of the spectrum:

Openness, awareness and processes.

[Openness]

The first of these is openness. It is fascinating to me how many people can choose to ignore or deny the darker side of human nature. One quote that came from the IICSA report, which was shared online and gave a platform for the voices of victims and survivors to be heard, is this... The survivor/victim told a woman in the church about the abuse, but she slapped him

around the face and denied that the Scoutmaster would have done this as he was a Christian man and Christian men don't do that. The survivor / victim here is sharing the deep harm caused by another person's reaction and a lack of openness to his disclosure. I can't speak into the woman's motivations or thought processes, but we often don't want to accept that negative things happen within our spheres because it may also implicate us or disrupt what we find comfortable. If you do an internet search for complaints department sign, you'll find several images, all communicating and depicting similar messages: The image shared has the words 'complaint department, 100 miles' on an arrow pointing to the right hand side of the image. The message here is a little clearly intended to be comical but it does convey a real truth. No one enjoys hearing negative feedback, we'd prefer to hear about the things we're doing right. However, when we're open, we create the possibility of hearing helpful feedback when our behaviours are still manageable, infrequent, or easy to change. Difficult feedback can protect us and our organisations from far greater

pain later on. Not to mention the pain the people on the receiving end of our negative behaviours are already experiencing. Openness can create the chance to respond with kindness and grace even when we have different perspectives. Consider Jesus' reaction to the woman caught in adultery. Openness can help us avoid causing harm by judgmental or oppositional reactions and openness allows us to grow and improve. Openness is such a valuable tool, but we need to be wise with it. Think about your boundaries. When do we make room for people to share things that we may find difficult to hear? Do we have boundaries in place that prevent this happening last thing at night, for example? Or when we're stressed and working to a deadline? Do we allow ourselves to hear this kind of feedback when we have time to weigh the feedback and consider our response before responding to the person? Here's another question, who is the Roger Black in your life? British athlete Chris Akabusi shares his Roger Black made him a better sprinter by challenging his preconceived ideas about how things had to be done. He shared that it was a

challenge that was born out of mutual respect and wanting the best for the other person. Being open to criticism or correction about our behaviours is not the same as allowing a 'free-for-all' for negativity or verbal abuse, but with healthy boundaries in place ahead of time, it's an invitation to hear, to respond, to improve and to grow.

[Awareness]

How aware of the multiple, contrasting and overlapping cultures around us are we? Remember how we defined culture as systems of symbols and meanings that even their creators can test, that lack fixed boundaries, are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another? The behaviours and attitudes that we and those around us are co-creating, reinforcing and contesting all the time are the cultures of our organisation. So how aware are we of the other cultures we are part of? Think about the culture of the society around us where we meet on a Sunday. Or the online cultures we overlap with, the culture of our larger denomination or the culture of our nation? What about the social challenges or the environmental

or economic challenges? Having that broader awareness will help us look outside the 'smallness' of our own organisation and be more prepared for the different challenges people will be carrying through the doors with them when they join our faith communities. This will help us be proactive in how we put mechanisms in place to protect them from the negative behaviours that lead to spiritual abuse.

[Processes]

Finally, let's look at healthy processes. We need to make sure we get the whole organisation on board. We taught in the first session that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and as we look forward, we need to make sure that the whole of our organisation is playing their part in preventing spiritual abuse.

To prevent spiritual abuse, we need to change our culture or actively preserve a healthy culture and that requires everyone.

The aim of these discussions is that we are required to address harm when it happens and help all faith-based organisations to become healthier cultures, as we all have an impact on our

culture. We either change it or we reinforce it, no one is a neutral player. Either we're influencing the culture or it is influencing us, so let's ensure that our behaviour, which builds our cultures, is driving towards the green fruit polo and healthy cultures, and that we remain accountable for when things stray towards yellow and red behaviors. How do we do that? What processes do we need to make sure that everybody knows what their role is in this? We should aim to teach and talk about issues such as bullying, accountability and transparency, and what we as a group feel about those things. We need to articulate at all levels what our processes for responding to them are. Create moments - that could be for your safeguarding lead sharing at your AGM, or it could be Safeguarding Sunday. Maybe you could have or could invite an organisation such as Safe Families or Home for Good talking about cultures and shared responsibilities and openness and inclusion. Or it could be that you actively invite people to read the minutes from your leadership meeting. Any of the processes that promote the healthy cultures we discussed in

the first session, are going to play an active part in creating healthy cultures, as well as preventing spiritually abusive cultures developing and enabling you to be a place of restoration for those who have lived experiences.

[Conclusion]

That brings us to the end of our training. I want to thank you for being with us today, and for your engagement with this topic. If any of the discussion today has brought up uncomfortable or painful feelings or memories for you, especially if it's caused you to understand what you've previously experienced in a new way, we do encourage you to find support, to reach out for help. Let me encourage you to find and create environments that are restorative, that encourage growth, and that are healthy places where we can all thrive together. May we be organisations that preserve accountability, humility and openness. May we be willing to hear and accept criticism as an opportunity for growth rather than an act of betrayal. If you have any questions or would like to give feedback, please do that. Our training team is always there and willing to help. Please

make a note of anything that you've learned, any questions that you have, or topics you would like to explore further. We have some resources in a handbook that you might be interested in. Thank you once again for joining us today and for all you do to create safer places.