

Spiritual Abuse

A position paper

February 2018

Foreword

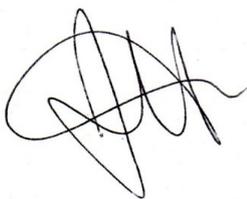
The aim of this paper is to openly state our position in relation to the subject of spiritual abuse. In recent weeks, CCPAS has released the findings of a ground-breaking new research study undertaken by Dr Lisa Oakley and Bournemouth University exploring understandings of spiritual abuse within Christian communities. This has provoked significant attention and highlighted the real need to enter open and respectful dialogue about the challenges that are created by such realities.

It is not our desire to enter unhelpful or polarised debates on this issue. As an organisation, our mission is to educate, empower and equip the Church to create and maintain safer places for all through research, training, policy and practice guidance, consultancy and the provision of criminal records disclosure checks. Our research therefore informs all our services and ensures that they are evidence-based and focused on the areas of greatest concern for those that we support.

As stated in our recent research findings and later in this document, there is a real need for the church at large to demonstrably make efforts to explore definitions and indeed terminology surrounding spiritual abuse so that we can collectively be better prepared to create cultures and environments that are less likely to facilitate abuse and harm and respond appropriately when it is identified.

We trust that this document is therefore helpful in bringing clarity to our position and will be seen as a clear indication of our basis for continuing work in this area alongside others who also are committed to being active in pursuit of safer and healthier churches everywhere.

With love, grace, humility and respect.



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Introduction

The term 'spiritual abuse' is currently contentious and the topic of much debate. In some areas the use of this term is generally accepted, in others it is questioned, and in yet others it has raised anxiety and concerns. The purpose of this document is to explain the position that CCPAS holds on this subject, and seek to address the issues associated with it. We seek to provide a rationale for the use of spiritual abuse as a term and suggest a definition for it that can enable an ongoing dialogue and exploration across the Christian Church and beyond.

It is important to state that the reason for being engaged with this work is to educate, empower and equip the Church and Christian organisations to create safer places that are healthy in their cultures. To support them in responding well to those who have experienced this type of abuse where it has occurred, and to consider how to work towards the building of good preventative practices that help to reduce any form of abuse occurring by those in positions of power, authority, responsibility or influence

Background and historical context

The term 'spiritual abuse' is relatively contemporary. It entered literature and discourse about 20 years ago through work such as 'The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse' first published in 1991 (Johnson and VanVonderen, 2005). However, issues around coercive control and misuse of power have a long history of discussion within the Christian context (Baxter, 1956; Plowman, 1975; Enroth, 1992).

The term spiritual abuse was used initially in America but in more recent years in Australia, New Zealand and the UK (Ward, 2011, Davis-Weir 2015, Diederich 2017). Many Denominational safeguarding policies already include mention of spiritual abuse (for examples see [The policy for protecting children in the Church of England](#) and [Policy for the Methodist church](#)). The term itself is being used more frequently and in a variety of contexts and so it can be argued to be becoming part of common Christian discourse.

The challenges of the term 'Spiritual Abuse'

Currently, there is a lack of a universally agreed definition of spiritual abuse which has led to anxiety in some areas. The anxiety is in part related to recent discussions of this as a term, which have linked spiritual abuse to certain theological positions. Therefore, it is important to unpack the term, consider how it should be defined, and address some of the key issues associated with it. In doing so it remains of the utmost importance to ensure that the voice of survivors is heard and brought to bear on any decisions.

Categorisation and criminalisation

It is important to state that we are not calling for spiritual abuse to be made a distinct or statutory category of abuse. In earlier work (Oakley 2009, Oakley and Kinmond 2013) that CCPAS has drawn upon, it was argued that spiritual abuse should be a separate and distinct category. However, as with all forms of abuse, our understanding develops over time. Spiritual abuse would appear to be at least in part, adequately addressed by the range of categories of abuse that already exist in both safeguarding adults and children. It is also important to be clear to state that where abuse of any kind takes place, it will always have an emotional or psychological element to it. These situations are often complex and multi-layered in nature and we should not shy away from acknowledging the fullness of the impact that these experiences will have for victims and survivors. What cannot be addressed through statutory and subsequently law, is the spiritual element to the abuse suffered. This is the domain and responsibility of the Church or other faith context.

Spiritual abuse is characterised by an ongoing, systematic pattern of coercive control within a religious context (Oakley, 2017). Key elements of this experience are manipulation, exploitation, control through the misuse and abuse of scripture and divine position, censorship of decision-making, pressure to conform, enforced accountability, requirement of obedience, and isolation (Oakley 2009, Oakley and Kinmond 2013). [Emotional abuse](#) and [psychological abuse](#) are similarly characterised by perpetuating patterns of behaviour that include blaming, shaming, intimidation and controlling behaviour. As in all other types of abuse, spiritual abuse will sometimes co-exist with and be used to legitimise other forms of abuse and harmful cultures. As already stated, there will always be an emotional or psychological element. In some more extreme cases, there may also be physical and even sexual abuse occurring allied to the spiritually abusive elements. In such cases,

it is clear that there would need to be some form of statutory involvement (notwithstanding issues of consent and capacity). Current legal provisions already adequately cover such cases. Therefore, there is no need for any additional criminalisation of spiritual abuse.

However, what we do know from our experiences of working across the spectrum of abuse over many years, is that legislation on its own is not enough and as stated above, not always applicable. To bring about cultural change and to create healthy environments that are safer for all, requires the Church to demonstrate active commitment from organisational leaders, the development of robust policies, the embedding of safer practices, and sufficient training and support of workers and those responsible for responding when issues arise. These issues cannot be brought within the purview of statutory or secular legislative systems; these are matters for the Church to take responsibility for (such as in the recent [Clergy Discipline Measure verdict against TD](#) in the Anglican diocese of Oxford).

The nuances of this type of abuse are the religious context in and framework through which it occurs, and the manner in which coercive control is operationalised within these contexts. For example, the misuse and abuse of scripture to control behaviour, the notion of 'divine position' as giving unquestionable authority and the use of God to coerce and control (Oakley and Kinmond 2013, Oakley and Kinmond 2014) are specific aspects of the experience of coercive control, which is labelled as spiritual abuse. The term 'divine position' relates to the idea that an individual is 'called' by God to a position and the assertion that because of this they cannot be questioned or disagreed with. Sometimes 'divine position' also incorporates the notion of being the primary (or exclusive) mediator of God's expectations and directions to the individual or congregation; thereby reducing (or removing) the element of choice for the recipient of 'messages from God' for their lives. The nuances of this experience suggest that spiritual abuse should be afforded the ability to be recognised within and alongside the existing categories, in order that the differences are fully considered.

As already stated, it is often when other forms of abuse (e.g. emotional, psychological, physical, sexual and financial) are identified and assessed in relation to the risk and harm they present that statutory agencies will become involved. This is an important point, as in some circumstances our experience has been that spiritual abuse was only discovered following concerns being raised regarding abuses of other forms that are maybe easier to identify and understand.

Leaders and leadership

One obstacle and one of the biggest challenges posed to work in this area is the perceived impact on leaders and leadership. Concern is often raised that if we discuss issues of coercion and control, leaders will be unable to lead effectively. Christian leadership is challenging and there is concern that leaders will not be able to exercise appropriate authority if spiritual abuse is discussed and recognised. As commented by a participant in our latest research (Oakley & Humphreys, 2018), it is important that we don't 'throw out the baby of leadership with the bathwater of spiritual abuse'.

In this research into understanding spiritual abuse there was an overwhelming call to consider the topic of leadership. The strong message received was not to stop doing the work, but rather to understand that leaders experience this as well. Spiritual abuse happens where leaders of churches are harmed by the people they are leading and are manipulated by them and/or at the receiving end of verbal abuse and gossip. Throughout the research people asked for consideration of how to better protect and nurture church leaders and help them to respond when they experience control. It is important to recognise many of them are victims of this type of behaviour. As harm can be perpetrated by anyone misusing power, authority or influence within a relational dynamic, it is important to recognise that attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours can be used to subvert healthy culture by those within a congregation as well as those that lead congregations from a formally recognised position (e.g. minister, vicar, pastor etc.). When this occurs from within congregations, it is often directed towards the leader in a manner that seeks to coerce and control that leader to conform to a different way of thinking and/or operating. In these situations, power and influence can be derived from a governance position within the church (e.g. Wardens, PCC members or Trustees), financial contribution/giving to the church, family connections within the church and/or legacy involvement in the establishment or development of the church or personal power in relationships. All of these may then be used to manipulate, bully and control leaders and others within churches.

For balance it is important to understand that, currently the majority of cases of spiritual abuse being shared are perpetrated by those in leadership positions, who coerce and control those that they lead. However, it is essential that we reflect the many examples of those in leadership positions exercising this authority with care, compassion and for the good of those who follow.

We would argue that the focus should not be on stopping an exploration of spiritual abuse because of a possible threat to leadership, but rather, that there should be a focus on how to support and nurture leaders to lead in an authentic and healthy way, which allows the use of authority and the development of those they are leading. The ability of leaders to be able to self-reflect and self-regulate is a key requirement in understanding how power and authority are used in the day-to-day interactions with those around them, such that they do not cause harm. Evidence shows that a significant amount of spiritually abusive behaviour is not intentional, but comes as a result of a failure to self-manage emotions, attitudes and beliefs and their impact upon others in day-to-day interactions and relationships. That is why much of our recent work has been on healthy leadership and healthy culture.

Theological position and religious freedoms

In addition to concerns about spiritual abuse preventing leaders exercising authority, there are also concerns about spiritual abuse being used to justify a particular theological position or becoming tied to it. It is possible to misuse or abuse all theological positions, whether conservative or open evangelical, charismatic, liberal, catholic, pentecostal or other, to assert unhealthy power and abuse of others. Our view is that holding a theological position is not in itself spiritually abusive. It is not spiritual abuse to hold a particular position, which has a theological basis. This is an important clarification because many people will seek to use the language of spiritual abuse to support their own theological position or campaigning on a particular issue. At times they may suggest that to think differently is always spiritually abusive – this view is problematic. However, it is how the position held is shared and practiced that matters. Disagreements between Christians and indeed Christian leaders and their congregations are commonplace – this is not spiritual abuse. However, where stances are held and communicated in dictatorial, controlling and coercive ways, this can be harmful and can result in spiritual abuse. Learning how to disagree well or accept that different perspectives are held is essential to embracing diversity and loving one another, regardless of position, tradition, background or upbringing. Those seeking to protect religious freedom are keen to ensure that all theological stances can be taken and there is much sympathy for this. However, each position should be shared and practiced in an attitude of love, grace, humility and respect.

The word 'abuse'

Another concern and question often raised is around the use of the term 'abuse' and its connection to the word 'spiritual'. In many discussions people have repeatedly stated that they feel uncomfortable with the word 'abuse' being used in this context. In a national context, where stories of abuse are prolific, there is understandable concern about the strength of this word. However, the stories told by people who have had these experiences illustrate the immense harm and trauma done to them (Oakley, 2009, Deiderich, 2017). The definition of the term abuse is 'to cause significant harm to another'. In turn, the definition of harm to a person is 'to damage them or make them less effective than they were'. The stories collected over the years show that significant harm is caused through these spiritually abusive experiences. Although there may be discomfort with the word, this is exactly what is experienced – on an emotional, psychological and spiritual level (as well as in other ways alongside these on occasions). As with other forms of abuse, there is initial concern about the use of the term. However, we would argue that the term is important to recognise the depth of the experience for the individual and its impact upon their functioning and flourishing. We therefore believe that continuing to use the term 'abuse' is the most appropriate to describe the experiences we have identified and the impact they have upon people emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

Summary

The term spiritual abuse should continue to be used, however, it must be carefully qualified. We put forward the following definition:

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. However, holding a theological position is not in itself inherently spiritually abusive, but misuse of scripture, applied theology and doctrine is often a component of spiritually abusive behaviour.

A recognition of the term and definition should allow for the focus of work to move to providing effective responses to disclosure of spiritual abuse through policy and procedural guidance. Importantly, it should also allow for a detailed consideration of healthy and safe Church culture in addition to healthy and authentic leadership.

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