

Transcript for Safeguarding and Spiritual

Abuse

Session 1

[Welcome]

Welcome to your Safeguarding and Spiritual abuse training with Thirtyone:eight. We're pleased to have you with us for this session. Our live webinars last between 2 and 3 hours and include set screen breaks—when you can take the opportunity to grab a drink and stretch, your trainers will let you know when these will be. You're also welcome to stand or move around during the session if that helps you to stay comfortable.

All your documents are available in your learning portal. Our handbooks and guides are valuable resources you can refer back to at any time, and a full transcript of the course is also provided if you find that helpful. At the start of the session, the co-host will share a document in the chat containing the scenarios we'll be using—just click to open it.

We encourage you to keep your webcam on if you're comfortable—it helps the trainer engage with you and supports those who lip-read. You

can also activate closed captions if you need to see what is being said, your cohost can help you with this. Please keep your microphone muted while the trainer is speaking, but questions and comments are very welcome. You can unmute to speak or use the chat box at the bottom of your screen. The co-host may also use the chat to share links or respond to queries. You can message the co-host privately at any time if you need assistance.

Some content may be sensitive. If others are nearby—especially children—you may wish to use headphones, adjust your screen, or move to a quieter space. Please remember this is not a confidential setting, so avoid sharing names or identifying details when discussing personal experiences.

We recognise that some participants may have personal experiences of harm or abuse. Around two in five people experience abuse in their lifetime, and childhood abuse is often not disclosed for over 20 years. Any safeguarding training can bring up unexpected emotions or realisations. If you need to take a break, turn off your camera, or reach out for support, please do so. You can also message the co-host privately at any time.

Whether dealing with live situations, safeguarding principles, or lived experience, you never have to do safeguarding alone. Thirtyone:eight

have a suite of online safeguarding support available from our website, including our fully searchable Knowledge Hub, Frequently Asked Questions and signposting to additional sources of support.

If you are a victim-survivor or person with past/present lived experience of abuse, who needs safeguarding advice, a Thirtyone:eight member, or a professional working with statutory agencies, you can also call our helpline on 0303 003 1111 or contact us via your member portal.

Members also have access to a wide range of policies, templates and other safeguarding resources to support you.

Everyone here today will have a different motivation for engaging with safeguarding. You may be part of a charity seeking to provide people with safe and compassionate support, or you might be motivated by your faith, as care for the vulnerable is a core mandate for many of the major faiths. Thirtyone:eight is a Christian charity, and we have a passionate belief that safeguarding is close to God's heart. Our name comes from a verse in the Bible, Proverbs 31:8 "Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable." Whatever your motivation for being with us today, we want to equip, empower and encourage you in this important work.

We're excited to begin this journey with you and hope today's training and resources will support you in creating safer spaces for everyone.

[Introduction]

Let's start with a poll to see what brings people to this training today.

Please select one or more of the following that best describes your reason for joining:

To prevent spiritual abuse happening; to respond to concerns or spiritual abuse; as a victim-survivor of spiritual abuse and/or as someone supporting a victim-survivor who wants to learn more; as someone simply interested in the topic; other. If other, share a few words to explain that.

This course explores spiritual abuse and how we can create safer, healthier spiritual spaces. Spirituality at its best supports people - giving meaning, identity, purpose, and belonging. But when power or belief is misused, spirituality can also become a setting where real harm occurs. Spiritual abuse often harms twice: through the abuse itself and the loss of faith's protective strength.

By the end of our time together, the aim is that you'll feel more confident recognising spiritual harm, understanding how it happens, and contributing to environments where spirituality supports wellbeing rather than putting people at risk. This course isn't going to examine specific religious beliefs – spiritual belief must always be a personal choice. As a safeguarding organisation, we will, however, discuss principles and

safeguards for how we outwork our beliefs in faith communities.

Throughout, we'll consider 'what would a safer situation/healthy culture look like'?

As with all our training, we want to centre the experiences of victim-survivors, doing so also helps us understand the impact of harm and abuse. Spiritual abuse can be a hidden and unrecognised part of other abuse. For example, it can be part of the experience of being sexually abused by a member of his religious community.

When a male was abused by a priest as a child, he was told by his abuser that what they were doing was what God wanted. 'God is pleased with you for doing it'. But he was quite sure that what they were doing was wrong. This confused his childhood understanding of what it meant to be a Christian and as a young person he struggled with his faith.

We recognise that some people here may be victim-survivors, and others may identify their own experiences as the course progresses. If you need support at any point, please reach out. We hope that everything we cover in this course feels safe, respectful, and affirming for those with lived experience of harm or abuse, and offers meaningful insight for those who haven't encountered these issues personally.

When we understand the real impact that harm has on people's lives,

we're much more motivated to make changes that genuinely protect others — not as a 'tick-box' exercise, but because people matter. As one podcast on this topic put it, our faith communities should place 'people over processes'.

Because this topic is sensitive, we begin by offering a choice of 'framing scenarios' so you can select the one that feels safest or least triggering. Most scenarios are real life situations, while one is fictional. They include a modern Western evangelical context, the fictional world of the animated film *Wish*, a Buddhist case study, and a recent report involving an international church. We provide a range of contexts because familiarity can sometimes obscure patterns that feel 'normal' or easy to rationalise. Different traditions and cultures express harm in different ways, and varied scenarios help us recognise the shared dynamics of spiritual abuse wherever they occur. Throughout the course, you'll return to your chosen scenario and reflect on simple framing questions.

[Module 1: The Harm]

In this first module, we are going to explore what we mean by spiritual abuse: that it is harm that's impacts a person's emotional, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing.

This module will help us understand: What spiritual abuse is in a safeguarding context, how power operates in spiritual environments,

why vulnerability is normal in any community, and why it matters, and how to start recognising the early signs of harm.

Throughout the next sections, we will reference survivor voices, stories, and examples to make sure that we don't miss the very human impact beneath the definitions and practices. Let's begin by sharing the knowledge that we already have in the room. What is abuse? Thank you for your thoughts. In safeguarding terms, abuse describes any behaviour — active or passive — that causes harm to another person. What about emotional and psychological abuse? Thanks again – as you may have identified, emotional and psychological abuse involves patterns of behaviour that humiliate, frighten, undermine, isolate, shame, control or diminish a person's sense of self. In spiritual abuse, these behaviours are wrapped in religious language, spiritual expectations, or faith-based authority which can make them much harder to recognise.

How would you define spiritual abuse? Spiritually abusive behaviour might sound something like: “God told me you need to...”, or “The faithful ones always...” When someone uses faith, spiritual authority, scripture, ritual, or a religious community's expectations to control or coerce another person, this crosses the line into spiritual abuse.

Before we jump into the definition we're using throughout this course, we just want to be clear that all organisations do need leadership and

governance. What we are absolutely not saying is that leadership and governance are bad things in and of themselves. They are necessary and good things. The world tends towards chaos, so without some governance and leadership, we would get into messy spots very quickly. What we are talking about in cases of spiritual abuse is when that organisation, authority or governance is used poorly.

A widely accepted definition of Spiritual Abuse was coined by Lisa Oakley, which we will use throughout this course. It defines it as emotional and psychological abuse, characterised by a persistent pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context, or with a religious rationale (Oakley, L., 2023). All three elements need to be present to meet the threshold of spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse may be part of a religious community's culture, or it may describe the behaviours of individuals in an otherwise healthy community.

It's not recognised as a specific offence under UK law, but that's not uncommon in safeguarding. Currently neither is grooming or romance fraud. However, in Feb 2026, Spiritual Abuse was included in guidance for the Crown Prosecution Service. See handbook for more information. For those in other cultural and national contexts, an alternative definition of spiritual abuse is offered in your handbook with some considerations

for non-western contexts. Please do take a look at this if it applies to your context.

Let's turn to the occurrence and co-occurrence of spiritual abuse. Like other forms of abuse, it can occur anywhere - from national structures and whole organisations, to small teams and even intimate partner relationships. Stories and records suggest that no culture, religion, or period in history is exempt.

Emotional, psychological, and spiritual abuse can occur on their own, but in reality, they rarely come to wider attention in isolation from other types of abuse. For example, the physical abuse seen in the John Smyth case, sexual abuse, as exposed in the Sogyal Lakar case and financial harm, such as concerns raised about the London International Christian Church. In each of these, emotional abuse with religious components was a significant element.

When it does co-occur with other forms of abuse, it may be easier for statutory agencies to recognise the harm and become involved. What does that mean for us? We must recognise the harm it causes and take it seriously, whether it accompanies more visible forms of abuse or not. If it co-occurs with other forms of harms, police/social work involvement might be required and appropriate.

Noting that spiritual abuse can be a hidden and unrecognised part of other abuse is an important part of understanding the experience of victim-survivors. Spiritual framing of other types of abuse can deepen confusion and harm and can have a lasting impact on faith, identity and meaning making. The following quote illustrates this powerfully. It was shared with Sikh Women's Aid by a victim-survivor:

“At first, it was amazing, we were welcomed and there was no judgement about my dad's problems. We would listen to 'godman's' sermons where he would preach that he was a reincarnated Higher Being sent to Earth to do God's work and heal the suffering. We were told to do 'seva' (seva is voluntary service) of him as it was akin to doing seva of God. We believed this because he demonstrated his 'powers'.

After a few months, I was sought out by 'godman', he had a small room in the mandir (temple) where he held private 'spiritual guidance' sessions with his 'special followers'. I was invited to his room one day and felt very excited and privileged to have the opportunity to do personal seva for him. In my eyes, he had convinced me he was God, he said he could hear my thoughts and feelings no matter where I was. So, I felt like I was doing God's service....

...[following almost a decade of sexual, emotional and physical abuse]...I was nearly destroyed mentally, physically and

emotionally...and decided I wanted nothing to do with the godman and his people.”

Some traits of spiritual abuse are reasonably common, so it's worth looking at them briefly, but this is a guide, not a comprehensive list and it can look different in varying cultures, situations and faiths. We encourage you to look out for these traits throughout the training.

Examples of harm might be spiritual needs are neglected; the victim-survivor experiences physical symptoms, they are blamed and that they have difficulty trusting others after this experience.

Common traits of coercive control might include manipulation or exploitation; enforced accountability; the demand for silence and pressure to conform.

Some of the frequently noted spiritual or religious traits reported are that sacred text are used to justify harm; religious teaching is co-opted for personal gain and the threat of divine or eternal consequences.

Let's turn to a fictional case study to apply this learning. In the breakout rooms, you'll discuss the scenario together and explore what you notice. Group one will focus on identifying elements of coercive control, group two, please can you see if you can identify signs of harm. Group three will consider any spiritual or religious elements present in the scenario.

After that, everyone will reflect on what a safer or healthier version of the situation might look like. Here's the situation:

Alex is a mid-level employee in a faith-based organisation when a senior leader asks her to ensure the team is 'in alignment,' including monitoring attendance, and financial giving. Over time, the expectation expands.

Alex is asked to keep informal notes on how much individuals donate, how often they volunteer, and whether their spiritual enthusiasm seems to rise or fall. When giving increases, Alex is praised; when it drops, her leadership is questioned.

Team members confide that they feel pressured, but Alex is urged to remind them of their responsibility before God. The senior leader implies that withholding time or money shows spiritual immaturity and could threaten their roles. Two years in, a staff member is dismissed for failing to be 'truly aligned.'

When Alex raises concerns, the weekly leadership meeting is suddenly 'paused for reflection.' Weeks later, Alex sees the same group meeting without her. She's told, "This is a new group. You're not needed for this."

Thank you for your feedback. Group one may have noted that Alex is being pressured into monitoring colleagues' private behaviour. The gradual change in expectations, combined with how praise and blame is used could signal a pattern of control. In terms of harm, the situation

creates anxiety, division, and job insecurity within the team. Alex becomes increasingly isolated, and a staff member even loses a job for failing to meet vague spiritualised standards, showing both emotional and practical damage. In some situations, in religious or faith-based communities, we've not only got all of those elements of community and spirituality and belonging, but we also have employment and that dependence on day to day living that we see in Alex's scenario as well.

As for spiritual or religious elements, language about 'responsibility before God,' and 'spiritual maturity' is used to legitimise pressure and justify consequences. The leader frames organisational demands as spiritual obligations, blurring boundaries and increasing the power imbalance.

A healthier culture in this context is one where power is named openly in both teaching and governance, rather than left unspoken or assumed. Discomfort is treated as useful information rather than as a sign of disloyalty, creating space for honest reflection. Above all, the organisation assumes that 'harm is possible here', just as it is anywhere, and therefore builds practical safeguards rather than trusting the stories they tell themselves about their own culture.

[Break 1]

We're now going to have a comfort break. Please stay in our Zoom training room, but feel free to turn off your camera.

[Module 1 continued]

Okay, welcome back. I hope you've had a good break.

We want you to start us off by sharing your thoughts again. What kinds of power might we hold? You might have thought of the formal authority that comes with a role or position, the relational influence built through trust or mentoring or who you're related to, or the expertise we gain through training and experience. You may also have considered the power that comes from access to information, networks, or financial resources, as well as the cultural norms or organisational expectations that quietly shape how others respond to us. Some of us may carry spiritual or symbolic authority, being seen as moral guides, while others may benefit from forms of physical or social power that certain cultures still privilege. Power is not inherently negative; in fact, healthy power structures keep people safe. But unaccountable, or spiritualised power can create the perfect conditions for harm.

Power can also be non-obvious, and our own demographics can shape it in ways we might not even notice. For example, while travelling

recently I realised that, as a short, white female, I'm often perceived as approachable and non-threatening. People frequently share – often deeply - personal stories, giving me a kind of relational and social power that I've done nothing to earn. My brown husband pointed out that he never has this experience. Even something as simple as how we're perceived in public spaces can create a form of power or privilege. It's a reminder that power isn't only formal or positional — it can also be embedded in cultural norms, and the assumptions people make about us before we even speak. Spiritual power is perhaps the most influential form of power in faith settings. People seen as spiritually mature, prophetic, wise or specially gifted are often trusted, even if they do not hold an official title.

Let's consider how power can be used well – what comes to mind? You might have mentioned using power in ways that protect and empower rather than control, creating safety and choice for those with less influence, encouraging openness instead of secrecy, holding leaders accountable, supporting people's wellbeing and dignity, and using authority responsibly within clear boundaries and shared processes.

Finally, what would you consider is an 'abuse of power'? How does this sit with spiritual abuse? Thank you again for participating. An abuse of power occurs when authority is used to benefit the one holding the

power, or those close to them. Spiritual abuse always involves a misuse of power.

Recognising the power we hold begins with noticing not only our roles but also the forms of power others may lack because of social identity or relational dynamics. Power isn't only top-down; it can be structural, cultural, relational, or spiritual, sometimes visible and sometimes subtle. For example, the individual or group that decides who can serve, who can speak, or who gets 'invited in' holds very real power — even if they never teach or lead from a platform. A simple indicator of healthy power is when those with influence make space for different ideas or approaches, while unhealthy power shows itself when disagreement is punished or avoided. In spiritual settings, we should ask all the uncomfortable questions about power, especially whether those with the most power are also the most transparent, or whether we hold assumptions that if they hold so much power, they must have divine authority and aren't under human accountability anymore. If we fall into the second category, we should be very concerned.

Power is an important concept to understand if we're going to safeguard against spiritual abuse, but so is vulnerability. Vulnerability holds particular definitions in safeguarding law and guidance, you can read more about this in your handbook, and these definitions absolutely apply

to cases of spiritual abuse. However, in faith communities, vulnerability can have a broader and more neutral meaning. It can be associated with the normal ages and stages of life and is something all of us have and will experience. It's associated with people's situation/circumstances rather than a description of them as an individual. It can also be caused by social factors – for example; unemployment, inability to communicate in the dominant language of the society you're in, being recently bereaved and grieving, and many, many other factors. In religious communities, we should also consider situational vulnerability because people often enter them seeking meaning, belonging or guidance. This means they have an open, receptive posture because faith environments invite trust and dependence. Often, like our first quote, people are drawn into faith communities because they're experiencing some kind of personal crisis. Sadly, this can be exploited. When spiritual authority is used to pressure, silence, or control people, those who are situationally vulnerable may find it harder to question or step away.

Vulnerability is not weakness — it's simply the state of being open to influence and connection – it's neutral. The issue can be what other people do with it. When power is used responsibly, vulnerability becomes a gateway to growth and belonging. If spiritual authority is used to control rather than care, vulnerability that could have been a

positive trait becomes the thing leaves someone at greater risk. Healthy communities honour vulnerability by empowering people, reinforcing boundaries, and creating real choices.

A common theme in reports of spiritual abuse is that the abuse becomes 'accepted' by the community. This is often underscored by how behaviour is excused with phrases like, "That's just how they are." When this happens, attention shifts to the assumptions the community has learned to hold about it. These shared narratives shape what feels normal and what goes unquestioned.

In many religious settings, culture forms slowly through teaching, expectations, and the behaviours that are rewarded or ignored. Over time, this can create a grooming effect in which language, norms, and boundaries subtly shift, teaching people how to behave, what to value, and what not to question. People learn to comply because they want to belong, they trust their leaders, or they fear being viewed as disloyal or spiritually lacking, especially when questioning has been framed as dangerous or dishonouring.

Another dynamic is the loss or absence of healthy difference. When a community expects everyone to think, feel, or act the same way, homogeneity can feel spiritual or safe, but it removes the diversity of perspective that prevents harm. Spiritual abuse can thrive where

disagreement is treated as rebellion and where only certain voices or personalities are given spiritual weight.

Spiritual abuse can also be tricky to respond to because not everyone in a faith like this will experience the same thing. For people close to the centre, everything may look healthy, while those on the edges can feel hurt or overlooked. How someone is treated can depend on how much power they have, their personality, or aspects of their identity and status. Different experiences don't cancel each other out—they just show that the impact isn't shared evenly.

All of this raises some helpful questions: What were people taught about obedience, loyalty, and leadership? Which behaviours became 'normal', and which worries were brushed aside? And what did people learn they had to do to stay safe, accepted, or spiritually 'in'?

One victim-survivor quote sums up this reality: "I scour books and online resources about Spiritual Abuse. It's so affirming yet why do I still feel so alone? My abusers' actions are almost prescriptive of everyone else's experiences. But why does no one else see it? "She [my abuser] was having a hard summer." "She had health issues." "She was doing her best." "She has done so much good for the church." Oh, how I wish to stop hearing these excuses for their actions. It makes the bystanders feel better about not taking a stand against abuse, but it isolates me

more and more and makes me question reality. I know I'm not crazy and yet the church isn't validating my abuse; they are gaslighting me. All I hear is "thanks for sharing your story." Only people outside the church will actually use the words, Spiritual Abuse. Why is it so hard to say these words when the actions were so clear?"

Like all disclosures of abuse, we need to make sure we respond well when people share their experiences with us. The normal safeguarding advice applies here. When someone shares an experience of spiritual abuse, the most helpful thing you can do is stay calm. Speaking up can take a lot of courage, and a steady response helps them feel safe. Listen without interrupting, because many people expect to be blamed, corrected, or not believed. Give them time and space to talk at their own pace, and show you're listening by being present and attentive. It also helps to show acceptance—avoid anything that sounds like testing their story—and let them know they were right to tell you. If you need to ask questions, keep them gentle and minimal, just to make sure you've understood. Offer reassurance too, because spiritual abuse often leaves people carrying guilt or fear.

Be clear and honest about what happens next. Use straightforward, non-spiritualised language and explain who you may need to inform and why. Finally, ask what they would like to happen going forward.

Restoring a sense of choice and agency matters deeply, especially when control has been taken from them in the past.

That brings us to the end of module 1. Before we move on, we invite you to think about the learning so far and apply it to your chosen framing scenario. Who had power? Who had been vulnerable? What could safety have looked like? What community narratives made harm possible? While the answers for each framing scenario will be different, the same themes will likely be present. We've put some thoughts on these and the framing questions for the upcoming modules in your handbook. Feel free to take a look and see if you had similar or different thoughts.

[Module 2: The Distortion]

Welcome back. In Module 1, we explored what harm is, how power functions, and the role vulnerability plays in spiritual environments. In this module, we'll explore how faith is a protective factor, what coercive control is, and what we mean by 'religious context or with religious rationale'. We'll also look at how we can minimise spiritual harm.

Many people's spiritual lives have been shaped by positive, meaningful experiences and because of this, faith can be protective. In safeguarding terms, protective factors are things that increase people's ability cope with stress, harm and adversity.

Faith and spirituality can act as protective factors in some of the ways shown on the slide, would anyone like to explain why some of these things can be 'protective'? One of the strongest is the sense of community and social connection that many faith settings offer; belonging to a supportive group reduces isolation and helps people cope in difficult times. Faith also shapes a person's identity, giving them values, stability, and a clearer sense of who they are. For many, spirituality offers purpose and hope—ideas like calling, meaning, or being part a bigger story—which can make overwhelming situations feel more manageable.

People also draw on faith-based coping practices such as prayer, meditation, rituals, or acts of service, which can strengthen resilience, though it's worth noting that fear-based beliefs can have the opposite effect. Healthy faith communities also help reduce risk by promoting care, moral guidance, and accountability, often spotting concerns early before they escalate. Across research, religious involvement has been linked with lower rates of serious self-harm, likely because of these combined protective elements.

Taken together, faith isn't only protective because of the religious belief itself; but also because of the community, identity, meaning, and coping structures it provides. When these elements are healthy, they become

safeguarding strengths in their own right. That's why we refer to spiritual abuse as abuse that harms twice, because it can take away important protective factors in someone's life.

We're about to head into our second break now, but as we do, we invite you to reflect on this question: If you're a person of faith, has your faith acted as a support or protective factor at some time in your life?

[Break 2]

Okay, we're going to go for our second break now.

Feel free to turn your cameras off and go and have a screen break. I'll see you again in five minutes. Thanks everyone.

[Module 2 continued]

Going back to our definition, all three elements need to be present before a situation would meet the threshold of spiritual abuse. We've already looked at the emotional and psychological, so now we're going to focus on coercive control and the religious context or reasoning that can sit around it. Looking at how these behaviours show up in faith settings helps us see why the spiritual element matters, and why spiritual abuse is a real form of harm that faith communities need to recognise and safeguard against.

Coercive control can involve pressure, threats, fear, humiliation, or limiting someone's choices. The aim is to make the person dependent, cut off from support, and unable to make decisions freely—while controlling their daily behaviour. Often, people are most familiar with these traits in situations of domestic abuse. In a spiritual setting, coercive control happens when religion, authority, or spiritual ideas are used to dominate another person.

But it can take different forms. Sometimes it involves pressure or fear—subtle or direct messages that make someone feel they have to comply, that they'll disappoint others, or that there will be spiritual or relational consequences if they say no. Over time, the person may feel they no longer have a real choice at all. They might feel guilty, spiritually inadequate, or afraid of judgement if they try to set boundaries or step back, whether that's about their time, their relationships, their money, or even their own body. Coercive control can also show up in how someone's daily behaviour or spiritual life is directed—shaping how they serve, pray, or participate. It might be framed as 'God's will', spiritual growth, or commitment.

The case study that follows focuses on how faith communities sometimes use people's time, but it's important to remember that

coercive behaviour can appear in many areas of life—relationships, finances, sexuality, spiritual practices and wellbeing.

We're about to go back into break out rooms. As we look at this scenario, we'll explore a few simple questions. Group one, we'll ask you to consider what elements of pressure / fear / threat can you see, if any? Group two we'd like you to discuss whether people able to make decisions freely, Group three, can you discuss whether there's control of daily behaviour or spiritual life. Finally, if all groups can identify about what a safer or healthier version of this situation might look like.

Musa is a new believer, eager to serve but he has a mortgage and cannot reduce his paid work. When the church announces an unpaid internship -shared as a fast track to real calling - the senior pastor's assistant, Olu, says that only the 'strong in spirit' will thrive, implying others may not be ready for deeper things.

Musa knows he cannot join, yet Olu focuses on him privately, praising his potential while stressing that 'real growth requires sacrifice', and that God cannot use those who stay comfortable. Musa is urged to prove his readiness by serving more. Tasks multiply, often last minute, reinforced by reminders that true believers "don't say no."

Exhausted, Musa feels guilty even thinking of stepping back. Olu frames burnout as spiritual attack. Gradually, Musa realises he is serving out of fear of seeming weak, disappointing Olu, or losing his place in the community.

Thank you for participating in that discussion. Some of the things you might have identified or discussed talked about include the pressure Musa was put under — the way ‘sacrifice’ was linked to having real potential, or how hesitation was framed as weak faith or missing out on God’s calling. You may also have noticed the spiritualised pressure in lines like, “God can’t use people who stay comfortable,” which creates fear around saying no. You might have seen that Musa didn’t feel free to make his own decisions either; his financial reality was minimised, and his choices started to be shaped more by guilt and fear than by genuine willingness. There were also signs of someone else taking control of his routine and spiritual life, with extra tasks given at short notice and ideas about what a true believer does shaping how Musa saw himself. A healthier version of this situation might for you have looked like honest conversations about serving, clear boundaries, freedom to say no without judgement, leaders who reflect on whether they value character over compliance, and whether people are seen as equally ‘spiritual’

when their ministry happens outside the faith community's walls, rather than inside of them.

Before we move on, we want to unpack why scenarios like Musa's matter. Coercive control in spiritual abuse has a long-term internal impact. Musa's situation shows how subtle spiritual pressure doesn't just affect someone's schedule — it can influence how they see themselves and their relationship with God/deities. It can lead to identity damage. When messages about 'true commitment' or 'spiritual strength' are repeatedly used, those messages can take root. Healthy spirituality builds people up. In a safe environment, leaders help people discern what is right for their life, capacity, and wellbeing. They support growth grounded in grace — not pressure. Coercive control spirituality erodes a person. When spiritual authority is used to demand, pressure, or manipulate, it undermines a person's confidence, freedom, and sense of worth. The result is often confusion, self-doubt, and lingering spiritual harm. This sets the stage for the real survivor voice we will look at next:

"I was taught that I was a deceiver and that belief is now deep in my soul. I have no idea how to get rid of that belief from my inner spirit. I feel devastated – and so very afraid of who I am."

This quote is heavy and deeply personal. It shows the real-life impact that patterns like those in Musa's story can have over time.

Lisa Oakley, one of the main researchers in this area, describes spiritual abuse as: “A form of emotional and psychological abuse characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context or with a religious rationale. This context includes religious or spiritual institutions, places of education and homes in which there is a religious, spiritual or faith belief. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it and can be experienced in a variety of different relationships.” (Oakley, 2023).

This fuller definition reminds us that spiritual abuse doesn't take one single form. It can happen in churches, temples, mosques, faith-based schools, or any home shaped by spiritual belief. It can take place between partners, between leaders and followers, between peers, or even from followers towards leaders. There are even cases that have affected whole communities or nations.

It involves the distortion of normally healthy religious practices — things that are usually good and life-giving — which become harmful when they're used to control, shame, or pressure someone. Very few religious practices are harmful on their own, but the misuse or distortion of them can be.

In spiritual abuse, harm is often wrapped in religious language or practices, which can make the behaviour harder to spot or challenge.

One way this happens is through the use of sacred texts to pressure someone into decisions that benefit the other person. Verses about obedience or sacrifice may be used to make resistance feel like disobedience to God rather than simply disagreeing with a human with some form of power.

Spiritual practices can also be used to influence decisions — things like prayers, prophecies, or ‘God told me that you...’ statements that push someone toward a particular choice. It moves the power dynamic where it's almost like saying, “If you disagree with me, then you're disagreeing with God. You're disagreeing with the divine.” It's a very different position to saying, “I feel like I have this. Please weigh it. It might be wrong. I've also shared it with this person to see what their input is.” It's a very different position around the same practice, and it's one that gives the person receiving the word or the prophecy or the prayer autonomy and choice, whereas the misuse of it restricts the person's autonomy or choice, applying religious beliefs as leverage. When disagreement feels spiritually risky or tied to eternal consequences, the power imbalance grows.

Religious beliefs themselves can be used as leverage too. Teachings about blessing, judgement, or spiritual danger can create fear and make even normal decisions feel heavy or unsafe. This can push someone

into going along with things that don't fit their wellbeing, capacity, or conscience. Another pattern is elevating those with power to an almost infallible status, treating them as especially anointed or uniquely able to 'discern the divine.' When certain people's instructions carry more weight than a person's own spiritual sense, unhealthy dependence and risk grows. A parent with teenagers once described his role as a parent, saying, 'the goal is raise healthy adults, not teach them to depend on me for every need forever.' This same principle is a good one for faith communities.

All of the dynamics that we see in coercive control in religious contexts or with religious rationale, increase the power being misused and leave people at greater risk of manipulation.

But how do we build safer spiritual situations? One helpful step is to encourage regular 'theological audits' – simple check-ins where a community asks whether any of its teachings or practices might, whether intentionally or not, create pressure, control, or shame.

Alongside this, it helps to grow a power-aware spirituality. That means making sure things like prophecy, prayer, or counselling are offered with genuine opt-in consent, using clear language, and reminding people to weigh what they hear rather than assume it's automatically right. It also means not treating a leader's preferences as if they were God's

direction, and making sure healthy boundaries are seen as part of discipleship. Ideas like autonomy, proportionality, and consent matter just as much in spiritual life as anywhere else.

When we think about minimising harm in spiritual situations, it can help to notice the good practices we've seen in healthy communities. I'd love to hear your examples. One simple question is whether a teaching or practice gets changed if it's hurting a particular group, or whether people rush to defend it instead. Another is whether someone can say no to a spiritual request without being judged or penalised. These small checks go a long way in creating safer, more life-giving environments. Thank you again for sharing your thoughts and experiences.

When we talk about the power of voices, it's important to remember that quiet voices are often the first to be hurt or are those with the most to lose. 'Quiet voices' can also be people who are on the margins and those without status, or perceived to have 'moral failings'. Their concerns are easily dismissed because they're not seen as the 'right' voices.

There are also the missed voices — people who aren't necessarily silent, but go unheard because there's no safe way for them to speak. It's worth asking who never gets the chance to say anything at all, such as staff members, spouses of leaders (although in some situations, they

can be the ones holding a lot of informal power). It likely also includes our children.

Sometimes the voices we need come from outside the community — consultants, reviewers, safeguarding partners — but this is only helpful if we don't hand-pick people who will unquestioningly agree with us. Real safeguarding means being willing to hear the uncomfortable or challenging voices, because they reveal what those inside the system often cannot see.

Quiet voices, missing voices, and outside voices aren't threats to unity — they're what keep a community healthy and safe. Ignoring them creates space for spiritual abuse to grow; listening to them is how harm is caught early and how communities become genuinely life-giving.

As we finish module 2, we invite you again to think about your framing scenario. How was spirituality experienced? Where had it been distorted? What could healthy practice have looked like? Whose voice was missing or silenced? Again, have a look at your handbook for some framework.

As we wrap up this first session, it's worth remembering that not all harm in spiritual communities counts as spiritual abuse. For something to meet the threshold, there needs to be a repeated pattern of emotional or psychological harm, it has to involve coercive or controlling behaviour,

and it must take place in a religious setting or be justified with religious reasoning. If all three aren't present, it wouldn't be classed as spiritual abuse — but that doesn't mean that everything is fine or that there's nothing for us to pay attention to. It simply means the situation may be more nuanced or unclear, which is what we'll explore in the next session. We'll also look at the safeguarding steps we can take to help people in our faith communities thrive and stay protected from harm.

Session 2

[Module 3: The Ambiguities]

As we move into Module 3, I want to acknowledge something that often comes up at this point in safeguarding conversations around spiritual abuse: That very few situations clearly present as spiritual abuse in moment, or ever, but there're concerns and overlaps. In the first two modules, we were exploring the foundations — harm, power, vulnerability, coercive control and spiritual distortion. Many of those concepts, once seen, are relatively straightforward to understand. But in practice, real situations are rarely clear at the outset.

The rise of awareness around spiritual abuse has been positive but there're grey areas that can cause faith communities confusion or concern: What is spiritual abuse? What is not? How do we respond proportionately?

Naming and addressing some of these real-life grey areas can empower us to act in ways that safeguard people well in our faith communities.

They also have specific and important safeguarding considerations.

Remember, there are three distinct elements to the definition we gave yesterday of spiritual abuse. Keep these in mind during today's session too: Firstly, emotional or psychological harm and abuse, secondly,

coercive control or coercive and controlling behaviours. And finally, that religious context or rationale.

The first of our ambiguities or grey areas is behaviour that doesn't meet the threshold. We ended session one by noting that not all negative behaviour in a faith community reaches the level of spiritual abuse, and understanding that difference helps protect both survivors and communities. Sometimes what we're seeing is simply an unhealthy environment rather than an abusive one — things like poor communication, unclear expectations, or a culture of overwork. These can still be damaging, but they're not necessarily abuse.

It's also important to remember that criticism or feedback isn't the same as harm. Honest conversations about performance or behaviour can feel uncomfortable, but neither are abuse unless they cross into personal attack or misuse of power. And everyone has 'off' days. A single bad reaction doesn't make something spiritual abuse; that involves patterns, systems, or repeated misuse of authority. Even so, those one-off moments can be helpful clues that someone is stressed or that something in the culture needs attention.

This is why safeguarding tools matter — clear codes of conduct, simple policies, and easy ways to raise low-level concerns help us spot problems early and build safer, healthier communities for everyone.

Let's take a moment to think about this together. What kinds of behaviours would make you say, "This needs an informal conversation," rather than, "This needs a formal safeguarding action"? Feel free to share your thoughts in the chat or unmute. And if it helps, you can keep Alex's scenario in mind as you think it through.

The second area of ambiguity is intent and impact. Many people causing harm in faith settings are not trying to coerce or control. Spiritual abuse can be unintentional, emerging from unhealthy beliefs, fear, and unchecked power. Their heart may be to guide disciple, or 'speak the truth in love.' But good intentions don't prevent damage. Intent matters for safeguarding when thinking about future risk since it allows us to weigh whether patterns are deliberate or will likely be repeated without awareness and oversight. Risk assessing for future is impossible without this information. It also matters for considering whether or not it's safe to restore a person to a place of influence or authority. It gives us chance to think through 'can someone reflect, listen, and grow?' Restoration to a position cannot happen without there first being a recognition of wrongdoing.

Accountability is similar, if we know whether harm was perpetuated knowingly or through blind spots we can put appropriate supports in place.

When someone's responses to feedback include defensiveness or minimisation the impact on victim-survivors can be more significant than the original intent. Considering intent doesn't ever excuse harm, but we are distinguishing motivations so we can respond proportionately and restore safely where possible.

Pause and consider – if someone meant well but harm was still caused, what is the appropriate next step? Hopefully you thought of various safeguarding processes. Often these are the clear actions we have available to us. We're going to explore these a little more in the last module.

Our third area of ambiguity is that of challenge and discipleship, possibly one of the biggest concerns for faith communities with a growing awareness of spiritual abuse is identifying the line between healthy spiritual challenge and coercive discipleship. Challenge itself is a good thing — it's often part of growth — but what matters is how that challenge is offered and how people are treated in the process. Healthy challenge feels like an invitation rather than pressure. It respects a person's agency and their ability to choose. It's also open and transparent, with no spiritual strings attached. It's a bit like pruning a plant: done well, it helps growth; done harshly or at the wrong time, it causes damage.

Healthy challenge turns into coercion when disagreement is treated as rebellion or weak faith, or when ‘pastoral care’ becomes monitoring or controlling someone’s spiritual life. It also crosses the line when people feel they can’t slow down, set boundaries, or even step away without being judged or punished.

Stop for a second and reflect – what examples of healthy and unhealthy challenge have you seen and experienced? What language or ways of doing things made a difference?

“Today’s victory, should have been, could have been, Yesterday’s.” This line from the poem Too little too late on the Tears of Eden website captures something many victim-survivors feel – the painful knowledge that their calls for help went unheard for far too long. As we move into the next two areas of ambiguity, it’s important to hold this in mind. Their experiences remind us to look honestly at why communities didn’t act sooner — how inner-circle loyalty, spiritual explanations, and group dynamics can all slow down recognition. Hindsight often brings greater clarity, but victim-survivors were usually trying to speak long before anyone listened.

[Break 1]

We’re now going to have a comfort break. Please stay in Zoom, but feel free to turn off your camera.

[Module 3 continued]

Our fourth area of ambiguity is what responsibility should be taken by those in the 'inner circle'. Most unhealthy faith cultures don't start with a plan to become unhealthy — they tend to grow slowly through loyalty, trust, fear, or the urgency of the mission. Inner circles often form naturally, not because anyone intends harm, but because the people closest to a leader feel responsible for defending or justifying them. Over time, silence becomes a kind of complicity; even doing nothing can keep an unhealthy system going. These inner circles often act as gatekeepers as well, filtering out concerns, brushing off early warning signs, and reassuring others that the leader 'means well', even when there are clear patterns of harm. Many people feel spiritually responsible for keeping the peace, protecting the leader, or putting the mission first. Others stay quiet out of fear — fear of losing belonging, influence, or spiritual standing — or because they believe they're too unimportant to raise a challenge.

This raises important questions for all of us: What makes thoughtful, compassionate people miss or minimise red flags? And how do we build communities where concerns can move upward, not just downward? If we want healthier cultures, inner circles need support too — training,

accountability, and clear permission to ask hard questions without being labelled disloyal.

Our fifth area of ambiguity is an interesting one – that of spiritual abuse being clear with the benefit of hindsight. There is often a long delay between when abuse happens and when people are able to recognise it, and this is true across all kinds of harm. Part of that delay comes from the time it takes a victim-survivor to find words for what happened or to feel ready to face it. Another part comes from the reality that faith communities sometimes only act once the damage has become too obvious to ignore.

Many communities eventually have to look back at practices that once felt normal but now clearly look unsafe or harmful. This isn't unusual — research in many fields shows that distance creates moral clarity. It's much easier to recognise harm from the outside, when we're emotionally detached and not tangled up in relationships or loyalties. But seeing concerning behaviour in our own setting is harder because it means confronting identity, friendships, and the culture we're part of. Hindsight gives clarity; being close clouds our perception.

If this feels familiar, it can help to invite in outside voices. Another helpful safeguarding step is to re-frame the situation: If this were a story from another religion or community, would the risks seem more obvious?

Hindsight can be painful, but it's also essential. It gives us the chance to change course now by asking questions like: If people look back on our practices in 50 years, what might they say we overlooked? What would future generations hope we choose to do today? And am I noticing patterns, not just one-off moments? These kinds of questions help us act with moral clarity before hindsight forces us to.

We're going to look at a case study that brings together the role of the 'inner circle' and that of hindsight. Group one will be asked to consider what elements of complicity can you see, if any. We'd like group two to think about why hindsight might have mattered here, and group three to talk about what would have helped action be taken (and harm reduced) sooner? Finally, everyone can have a think about what a safer/healthier version of this situation might look like.

In the House of the Dawn, High Guide Talven shaped every facet of temple life. His closest attendants—the Circle—quietly controlled access to him, deciding which students practised where, or sending individuals to remote huts so Talven could concentrate on those he favoured.

Talven's teaching was severe. In meditation and ritual, he used harsh language to 'break resistance,' calling struggling students 'weak', or 'a burden'. The Circle understood this as sacred discipline. When students left, each departure had its own explanation.

During a retreat, a novice named Rami endured a prolonged, humiliating rebuke and was called “a disappointment to the temple.” That night, Rami left and later posted on social media a clear, calm account of sustained verbal abuse disguised as spiritual growth. Former students quickly added similar experiences: public shaming, years of shouting, and isolation used as punishment. The Circle recognised every name—and remembered Talven’s justifications for them leaving. What once seemed isolated was now a clear pattern. A decade of harm had been normalised. One of the Circle said, “We always had a reason. We never asked why there were so many reasons.”

When looking at this situation, you might have noticed different forms of complicity on the part of the inner circle — things like gatekeeping that protected Talven from scrutiny, harmful behaviour being reframed as spiritual discipline, or people accepting individual explanations for why students left instead of recognising a pattern. Loyalty may have been allowed to outweigh duty of care, and there was inaction even when people saw shaming or distress happening in front of them.

Hindsight mattered because a clear pattern of harm became visible once multiple accounts were shared. Former students’ stories supported each other and exposed wider systemic issues which helped staff see past their loyalty and rethink events through a safeguarding lens.

Several things could have helped action happen sooner: clearer boundaries around teaching practices, independent oversight of leaders, confidential ways for students to raise concerns, better training on recognising spiritual abuse, and follow-up with those who left to spot trends early.

A healthier version of this environment would include transparent leadership with real accountability, teaching that respects people and never uses shame or isolation, and a culture where concerns can be raised safely. Regular wellbeing checks and active safeguarding oversight would help make sure patterns are noticed and responded to before harm grew.

A sixth area of ambiguity is when someone perceives that they've experienced spiritual abuse. Perception matters because it tells us about someone's experience, even if it doesn't always reflect an objective pattern of abuse. Whether or not spiritual abuse took place, the person's distress is real and needs attention. This is a tricky area to navigate, but an important one. A person's perception is meaningful, although it may not meet the threshold for spiritual or other abuse. Past trauma can also shape how someone interprets what's happening now — previous experiences with coercion, authority, or faith can make certain situations feel more threatening. Sometimes current events can trigger old hurts,

making something feel abusive even when the present dynamics are healthy.

In these moments, faith communities need to resist defensiveness. The goal is to hold both compassion and clarity — to validate how someone feels, explore the wider context, and look at patterns rather than relying on perception alone. A practical safeguarding takeaway is that faith communities often walk alongside people who carry vulnerability or past harm, so we need to be trauma-aware. That doesn't mean automatically labelling something as spiritual abuse just because the term is used; we still come back to the definition to see whether it meets the threshold and base our response on that. We should communicate openly and clearly about how we define spiritual abuse and what actions follow from that definition. At the same time, we must also respond thoughtfully to situations that don't meet the threshold but are still painful or harmful to the individual involved. Before we move on, take about twenty seconds to pause and think this through quietly — we're not inviting feedback on this part.: A person's perception may not describe the whole situation, but it always describes their experience. How does this shape our safeguarding responsibilities? Some things that may come to mind include ideas like contextual safeguarding, being more trauma-aware as a community, having teams with clear safeguarding responsibilities, and

making sure safeguarding norms and policies are communicated widely so everyone knows what to expect.

Before looking at our seventh and final ambiguity, we're going to take a quick poll – how should you respond? Here's the situation: During a planning meeting, you and one of the youth leaders are discussing potential locations for a youth event. When he opens his phone to search for the venue's social media account, the 'based on your viewing' feed appears briefly — filled with inappropriate images of young-looking girls. He quickly closes the screen. You follow safeguarding procedure and report what you saw to the safeguarding lead. A week later, you're surprised to hear that he has been telling others you are a “spiritually abusive leader who invades people's private lives” and “polices people's holiness.” Rather than engaging with the safeguarding concern, he reframes your action as overreach, saying that you were spiritually abusive. What is an appropriate safeguarding response? There will also likely be HR implications, but that's beyond the scope of this course.

Thank you for taking part in that poll. Absolutely, regardless of our personal feelings or beliefs about why the youth leader is accusing you of spiritual abusive behaviours, both safeguarding concerns would need to following normal safeguarding processes. We want to clearly hold in

mind the safeguarding actions we need to take even when dealing with the very real, and often painful, reality of spiritual abuse as a distraction.

Most faith communities genuinely want to care for people well, and that's part of what makes this area tricky. The accusation of spiritual abuse can carry huge emotional and reputational weight, so we need wisdom to tell the difference between a genuine allegation and one that's being used to avoid accountability or shut down difficult conversations. The term itself is powerful, and because spiritual abuse is still fairly new in public understanding, people often react with fear or confusion when it's raised. Sometimes accusations can shift attention away from a real concern or a flawed system, shut down necessary discipline, or reframe a fair challenge as 'persecution.' They can also intimidate those who are simply trying to ask honest questions.

The fear of being labelled abusive can push leaders or communities to avoid using healthy authority at all, which creates a different kind of harm. And when the term is misused, it undermines real victim-survivors, making genuine cases harder to spot and harder to believe.

That brings us to the end of our module on ambiguities and as we come to a close, we invite you again to turn to your framing scenario. In that situation, what if anything, clouded perception? You may see one of the seven ambiguities we've looked at mentioned there. Was there a

complicit inner circle? And what made it hard for a victim-survivor to speak?

[Break 2]

Okay, we're going to go for our final break now.

As always, feel free to turn your cameras off and go and have a screen break. I'll see you again in five minutes. Thanks everyone.

[Module 4 - The Practice]

This brings us to our final module, which takes everything we've explored so far and turns it into practical safeguarding steps that faith communities can use — both to prevent harm and to respond well when concerns are raised. We'll look briefly at three key areas: good policy, real accountability, and people-centred practice. Every organisation will already have some things in place and will have other areas that need strengthening. As we go, make a note of where the gaps or weak spots are for your own context. The handbook and our online suite of safeguarding resources will help you work out how to fill those gaps.

Before we look at specific safeguarding practices that help prevent and respond to spiritual abuse, it's important to think about who actually carries these responsibilities. Throughout the course, we've been hinting

at the different roles that shape a faith community's culture, for example the trustees or the safeguarding lead, and how safe that culture feels.

These responsibilities can be grouped into five roles: the role everyone plays; those who work directly with children or adults at risk; those with safeguarding duties in day-to-day practice, such as safeguarding leads or the lead trustee for safeguarding; those with safeguarding responsibility at a governance level, like leaders, elders, or general trustee role; and, finally, statutory agencies such as the police and social services. These roles, or categories, line up with the national safeguarding frameworks used in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

In safeguarding, good policy is one of the main ways a faith community makes safety non-negotiable. Policy creates clarity and removes guesswork. There are five main areas to pay attention to.

First, communities need clear definitions and thresholds. Spiritual abuse has three essential elements — emotional or psychological harm, coercive or controlling behaviour, and a religious context or rationale — and without this clarity it's easy to get tangled up in the ambiguities we discussed earlier. Clear definitions help everyone respond proportionately and transparently, and it's worth including spiritual abuse in your safeguarding policy and making sure decision-makers have some basic training on the subject.

Second, codes of conduct should cover not only finances and leadership behaviour, but also spiritual practices. Written guidance for things like prayer ministry, prophecy, deliverance, discipleship, and pastoral care is essential. Ministry should be consent-based — always opt-in, never assumed. Communities also need ‘weigh and test’ practices, plain language, and an understanding that no one’s preferences automatically equal God’s direction. This protects both the person offering ministry and the person receiving it, and it’s especially important in flat-hierarchy settings, such as the Quakers and Vineyard denominations.

Third, there must be safe reporting and whistleblowing routes. If someone has to be brave just to raise a concern, the system isn’t safe. People ideally need multiple ways to flag concerns and they should know exactly what will happen next. No one should face retaliation, whether that’s exclusion, subtle pushback, or spiritualised criticism.

Fourth, safeguarding responses need proper assessment processes. It’s not just about what happened in a single moment, but what it reveals about patterns, power dynamics, and risk. Because spiritual abuse almost always involves a pattern, communities have to look beyond isolated incidents. Big-picture safeguarding is important - asking what the history of the faith community is, who is vulnerable, and what the wider environment looks like. A really useful tool here is

re-contextualisation: asking, “If this story happened in another faith or setting, how would I see it?” It helps overcome the blind spots that come with being close to the situation.

Finally, policies need ongoing review. Safeguarding shouldn't be static — policies should be revisited regularly, ideally with input from victim-survivors. They should name where power sits and how it operates, because that's often where risk lies. Good policy protects communities from harm — and it protects leaders from unclear expectations.

When it comes to putting safeguarding policies into action, we have those different roles we mentioned. Those in governance roles — such as trustees, elders, or senior leaders — are responsible for writing the policies, reviewing them regularly, and making sure they're clearly communicated to the whole community. Safeguarding leads and those working in day-to-day practice then make sure the policies actually fit the context, put them into action, carry out safeguarding risk assessments, and handle reporting when concerns arise. And finally, everyone in the community has a part to play by offering feedback, raising concerns early, and helping create a culture where safeguarding is taken seriously and understood as a shared responsibility.

To get a sense of how your group is doing with policy practices, take a moment to rate your current approach on a simple scale from one to five — with one being very low, three being average, and five being strong. When you've chosen your number, you can show it by raising that many fingers. If you'd rather not show a number, just raise your hand to let us know you've got one in mind.

Spiritual abuse often takes root wherever there's power, formal or informal, without proper oversight. That's why accountability matters so much — it's the safeguard ensures a faith community has a way to respond when concerns are raised. Accountability tends to break down when only a small group holds all the information, when 'unity' language closes down questions, or when people worry more about reputation than potential harm. When that happens, the people who've been hurt end up carrying the consequences.

Real accountability can be achieved through a few different practices. It includes independent safeguarding leads and a willingness to involve external support if necessary, whether that's for investigations or safeguarding audits. It also means being prepared to step people back when concerns arise. Something organisation often don't realise is that suspending someone from their role while a safeguarding concern is

being looked into is a neutral act and protects everyone while facts are worked out.

Good accountability relies on clear conflict-of-interest policies so no one oversees someone they depend on for their job, status, or sense of spiritual identity. And it requires long-term record-keeping so patterns aren't missed.

Accountability also has to apply to both formal and informal power. It can't stop with official leaders; inner circles, volunteers, and ministry teams all hold influence and need oversight too.

Transparency is another essential part of this. Communities don't need private details, but they do need to know when safeguarding action has been taken. Clear and appropriate communication prevents rumours, models healthy accountability, and reassures survivors that their concerns aren't being ignored. When safeguarding is transparent, faith communities become safer.

When it comes to accountability, each of the five roles has a specific part to play. Statutory agencies — like the police or social services — step in when legal or safeguarding thresholds are met, and they share information as needed to keep people safe. Those with safeguarding responsibility in day-to-day practice focus on protecting the people who raise concerns, making sure everyone in the community is appropriately

overseen, and ensuring reporting routes actually work. Governance roles — such as trustees or senior leaders — make sure the community brings in external consultants when needed, communicates safeguarding decisions clearly, and pays attention to patterns, including themes in why people leave. Those doing direct work with children or adults at risk maintain strong boundaries, record concerns carefully, and escalate issues when something doesn't seem right. And finally, everyone in the community has a role: noticing patterns, reporting concerns early, and questioning any gatekeeping that seems to shut down healthy scrutiny.

Again, to get a sense of how your group is doing when it comes to accountability, take a moment to rate your current approach on a simple scale from one to five — with one being very low, three being average, and five being strong, or again, just raising your hand to signal you have a number but prefer not to share.

People-centred practice should be at the heart of safeguarding. These practices help create communities where power is used well, where voices are heard early, and where harm can be recognised before it grows. A key part of this is victim-survivor-centred safeguarding, which puts safety ahead of reputation or efficiency. Victim-survivors should never carry the responsibility for stopping abuse; that responsibility sits

with those in safeguarding roles. Our systems exist to protect them, not the other way around. Responses need to be trauma-aware, and as we said before, we should always take distress seriously, even when perception doesn't meet the formal threshold for spiritual abuse.

Alongside this, healthy cultures actively prevent harm. They use power responsibly, and they make space for quiet, marginalised, or easily missed voices. Open conversations are encouraged, and disagreement is treated as a contribution rather than a threat.

Communities also send cultural signals, and these matter. This includes teaching and modelling healthy challenge, reinforcing spiritual autonomy as invitation rather than pressure, and questioning the internal narratives that excuse harmful behaviour as 'just their way.' It also means paying attention when spiritual hierarchies 'can't be questioned' and to any gatekeeping by inner circles or patterns of fear-based obedience. The handbook pages on red flags, green flags, and healthy cultures can help guide this.

Finally, embedding real change takes consistency. Safeguarding teaching needs to be routine because the reality is that cultures are only build through repetition. Communities should regularly reflect on their theologies and consider how messages about obedience, sacrifice, or belonging might be heard by someone who is vulnerable, for whatever

reason. At every level, we need to reinforce agency, boundaries, and consent so that people feel safe, respected, and free to make their own choices.

In people-centred safeguarding, those with specific safeguarding responsibilities should respond with trauma-awareness and make sure there are multiple safe ways for people to report concerns. Governance roles support this by properly resourcing safeguarding work and regularly reviewing how power operates across the community. People doing direct work — whether pastoral, prayer-based, or practical — focus on offering consent-based spiritual support and creating safer spaces where disclosures can be made without fear. And finally, everyone in the community has a part to play by choosing safety over loyalty and encouraging healthy challenge when something doesn't feel right. For the final time, I'm going to invite you to rate your group on how you feel you're doing with people-centred practices.

As we finish this section, it's important to remember that recovery from spiritual abuse isn't neat or linear. Many survivor-voices describe healing as a journey with ups and downs, not a straight line. One survivor puts it like this:

“It is vital that we see our journey to living well with our experiences as not being one direction of travel. As survivors of spiritual abuse, we have

good days and not so good days. At times we can take two steps forward and one step back. As a good friend of ours often says this is not going backwards this is just doing the cha cha cha! There will be times when we will go round in circles and revisit bits of our recovery journey and this is all ok.”

This captures something many people recognise: healing from spiritual abuse isn't always straightforward. It often begins with simply reclaiming a sense of safety and rediscovering your own voice. With healthy boundaries, the right support, and safer faith environments, many people also find that their spirituality can grow again. Recovery is allowed to happen at your pace and on your terms.

We've included some resources in your handbook to help with this.

Please use whatever feels helpful for you.

As we come to the end, I'd like to invite you once more to think back to your framing scenario. Consider what accountability was or wasn't in place, what actually happened when people raised concerns, and what might have strengthened safety earlier. Take a moment to reflect on these questions for your scenario before we move on.

[Conclusion and thanks]

We started this training by noting that spiritual abuse harms twice — through abuse itself and through the loss of the faith's protective strength. Our task now is to build communities where safety is intentional; where healthy accountability is normal and transparent; and where victim-survivors are believed and centred.

Small, consistent and practical safeguarding actions create cultures where harm cannot grow and where hindsight is no longer needed to see the truth.

Before you sign off for the end of this training, I'd like to encourage you to take a moment to note down a couple of things that you want to take away from this training and put into action. Your feedback is very important to us, please take a few minutes to complete the feedback form. Thank you so much for being part of our training. We wish you all the best as you safeguard those in your faith communities. Thank you.