

## SPIRITUAL ABUSE POLICY

Churches and places of worship should be environments in which both adults and children are encouraged to develop spiritually, emotionally and relationally, in safe and healthy circumstances. We feel it necessary to include an appendix on spiritual abuse, but no other type of abuse, in the view of the abuses of power and position that have recently come to light in a variety of Christian settings. Further, spiritual abuse is lesser known and researched in comparison to the other forms of abuse.

## AP6.1 SPIRITUAL ABUSE DEFINITION

Only in the last 15 to 20 years has the term *spiritual abuse* been used to describe unhealthy contexts or cultures and unhelpful and damaging psychological and emotional behaviour.

In their book "Breaking the silence on spiritual abuse", Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond define *spiritual abuse* as such: "Coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include:

- manipulation and exploitation,
- enforced accountability,
- censorship of decision making,
- requirements for secrecy and silence,
- pressure to conform,
- misuse of scripture or using the pulpit to control behaviour,
- requirement of obedience to the abuser,
- the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position,
- isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context."

(Breaking the silence on spiritual abuse. Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond (2013), p.21).

To begin with, it is important to understand that spiritual abuse is a form of psychological and emotional abuse that takes place within a faith context. Sufferers therefore experience being controlled, coerced and pressurised within church communities and places of worship. It is important to realise that there is no evidence that its proponents necessarily intend to harm others. Instead, controlling and unhelpful ways of behaving might develop unwittingly and, once a pattern is established, it continues.

However, as with other forms of abuse, it is also possible that other forms of abuse will be occurring alongside spiritual abuse (such as sexual or physical abuse or neglect) – sometimes, indicators of these other forms of abuse are the first that bring attention to wider spiritually abusive practices.

Spiritual abuse can happen in any place of worship or spiritual context. Spiritual abuse can happen anywhere – but it does not happen everywhere.

Although it is suggested that leaders perpetrate spiritual abuse, it is important to understand that anyone can be a perpetrator of abuse (of any form), and leaders can be spiritually abused by others as much as those without any position can abuse others in faith communities.

However, 'spiritual abuse' is a broad term that has often been vaguely defined and poorly understood. Whilst we want to acknowledge the reality of unhealthy and controlling cultures that have recently come to light, we do not want to condemn legitimate biblical spiritual authority. For a model of categorising legitimate use of authority in spiritual settings, see Marcus Honeysett's 'Audit of abuse of power' ([https://spckpublishing.co.uk/pub/media/PDFs/Powerful\\_Leaders\\_Digital\\_Resource\\_Final.pdf](https://spckpublishing.co.uk/pub/media/PDFs/Powerful_Leaders_Digital_Resource_Final.pdf)).

## AP6.2 KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE

So what does spiritual abuse look like? This is quite a difficult question to answer. It may help to use the acronym BADIS (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013) which sets out its key features (of which some or all may be present):

### AP6.2.1 Blame

In an unhealthy context a great deal of censorship is likely. People may themselves be blamed for any issues or problems they identify. They often find that they are unable to raise issues or to ask questions without being accused of either threatening unity or causing trouble. Generally, those in an unhealthy context feel pressurised to be silent and not to raise concerns.

### AP6.2.2 Accountability

This is being required, forced or coerced to share personal details or to include another person in your decision-making. It is important to note that accountability can be positive if the person involved chooses to engage with it, without feeling pressurised in the relationship.

### AP6.2.3 Damage

One of the key features of spiritual abuse is the damage that it does to the individual, which often occurs through manipulation, fear and shame. Manipulation may be connected to someone feeling pressured to perform different actions or behaviours. They may also be expected to be extremely committed to the place of worship, even if this means they are unable to fulfil other commitments. People often feel scared of the consequences of not conforming. They may also feel shame. Sometimes they will experience acceptance, followed by rejection, as a way of controlling their behaviour.

### AP6.2.4 Inability to work with others

Often a spiritually abusive individual will find it very difficult to work with others and to be able to take on-board alternative opinions. There is often absence of team decision-making.

### AP6.2.5 Scripture

When used out of context to pressurise individuals to behave in a particular way or to make a particular decision. Misuse of scripture is extremely important to understand because individuals with a faith will hold their sacred texts in very high regard. If passages are used to control or manipulate behaviour this can be very difficult to argue against and may be very damaging in the long term. A warning sign of spiritual abuse is when scripture is used to support an individual's personal agenda. Instead, it should focus on the needs of others and should encourage people to consider and choose their responses for themselves.

## AP6.3 PREVENTING SPIRITUAL ABUSE

As with all forms of abuse, it is not easy to prevent spiritual abuse, but there are some suggestions that might help. Again an acronym may be helpful here. ESSTA (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013) can be used as a quick reminder:

### AP6.3.1 Empowerment

It is important that we encourage individuals within spiritual contexts to develop autonomy. That means healthy spiritual cultures encourage people to develop as individuals who can think for themselves and are able to express disagreement or concern.

### AP6.3.2 Supervision

Many places of worship do not have regular supervision or support for those in paid or unpaid leadership roles. Supervision should be a healthy practice within spiritual contexts whereby discussions of helpful and unhelpful behaviours can be held.

### AP6.3.3 Support

It is essential that support is developed for those who have experienced spiritual abuse. As support is openly offered and training provided for those in pastoral care roles, people may begin to better understand spiritual abuse. Greater awareness may help to prevent further abuse.

#### AP6.3.4 Training

Training is important to ensure that individuals keep developing and operating safer practices. A feature of training should be healthy team working, as team leadership seems to be a protective factor against spiritual abuse.

#### AP6.3.5 Awareness

There is a need to increase awareness around spiritual abuse as it is still little understood. Individuals may be unaware of the impact of their behaviour on others, or of alternative methods of behaving. Further, there is a need to raise awareness of scripture and sacred texts, in order that individuals are better prepared to identify when these texts are being manipulated.

### AP6.4 GENERAL PROCEDURES TO PROTECT AGAINST SPIRITUAL ABUSE

This is a list of procedures to encourage a healthy church culture in practice:

- Leadership Team to invite feedback via the elders@ email address or personal conversations.
- Trustee Responsible for HR to meet termly with each member of staff and invite feedback.
- Leadership Team to meet at least annually with those in paid and unpaid leadership roles – to include an invitation for feedback. This may include e.g. termly Grace Group Leaders meetings, Grace Kids training sessions etc.
- Pastoral care team to support those who have experienced spiritual abuse, including signposting people towards appropriate counselling services.
- Staff and Elders to meet socially to promote good working relationships.
- Opportunities for the Leadership Team and Staff to attend healthy team culture workshops and training events.
- Opportunities for the Leadership Team and Staff to attend training sessions run by thirtyone:eight e.g. Understanding Spiritual Abuse, Leadership: The role of leaders in creating safer cultures etc.
- Spiritual Abuse Policy to be read annually by those in leadership positions and those working with children, young people or adults at risk of harm.

### AP6.5 WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Follow the guidelines under Section 4 of our main Safeguarding Policy, 'What to do if you suspect abuse', i.e. documenting the concern and reporting it to the Safeguarding Lead.

The most important thing in providing support is in responding well when people share their experiences. As spiritual abuse is still relatively unknown, many people may not really understand what is happening to them. Therefore, the most important thing is to listen and to respond supportively to the individual.