

Guidelines for the prevention and management of Spiritual Abuse **V.5: September 2023**

1.0 Background – why is this document needed?

This document reflects the spiritual abuse guidance published by the National Church of England in the Safeguarding e-manual section 2.4 (Spiritual Abuse), in December 2021 <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-e-manual/safeguarding-children-young-people-and-vulnerable-adults/42>. In the Diocese of Portsmouth, a small working group has been meeting since April 2023 to consider the application of this national guidance against local safeguarding cases which would meet the thresholds for spiritual abuse. National guidance recognises that the term “spiritual abuse” is subject to ongoing review and discussion, but currently this is the language used by survivors and others in describing this very specific form of harm, and the term will be used by the Diocese of Portsmouth for the foreseeable future.

The working group has decided to adopt the national safeguarding team guidance in full. This document provides a single point of reference for clergy, lay, staff and volunteers in the Diocese of Portsmouth, and whilst nothing has been removed from the national guidance, our local approach to preventing and managing spiritual abuse is set out in full in this document.

2.0 Definitions, including key characteristics and impact

Definition

“Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional (child) and psychological (adult) abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context” (Oakley, 2017).

The key aspect of spiritual abuse is the religious context within which the abuse occurs and the ways people are controlled through the misuse and abuse of religious scripture, divine position, spiritual threats, fear of spiritual consequences and the suggestion of God as complicit. Some or all of these features can be used to control or coerce.

When discussing cases of alleged spiritual abuse with statutory agencies, it is important to frame the abuse as psychological or emotional abuse within a religious context. Spiritual abuse can be an integral element of other experiences of abuse within a faith context, and this should be considered when investigations into the disclosure of other forms of abuse are carried out.

Key Characteristics of Spiritual Abuse (these would normally be seen within a pattern of behaviours):

- Use of religious position to coerce and control e.g. use of scripture, threats
- Enforced accountability, often on a 121 basis to church leaders or established church members
- Inappropriate mentoring relationships and the misuse of pastoral relationships; lack of boundaries
- People cannot make their own choices, a lack of personal choice or control
- Manipulation and exploitation
- Pressure to conform and a requirement for unquestioning/blind obedience, which can be framed by a need to keep unity
- Coercion through censorship e.g. pressurising people into silence or secrecy
- Use of 'divine calling' to coerce
- Exclusion and isolation for disobedience or non-conformity
- Public shaming and humiliation for disobedience or non-conformity
- Threats of spiritual consequences (suggestion that "God is complicit")
- Acts of omission

3.0 Culture and management practices, (including the prevention of bullying and harassment)

Healthy Christian cultures are characterised by:

- Genuinely open dialogue
- Everyone being valued, respected and nurtured; no one being isolated or excluded
- Harmful behaviour (e.g. bullying) can be challenged by anyone and not being allowed to persist
- Power being distributed; not vested in 1 or 2 individuals
- Self-reflection is promoted
- Safeguarding is promoted, preventative & responsive
- Survivors are heard, supported and responded to.

4.0 Application – who does this document relate to?

These guidelines are designed to support all parishes, deaneries, archdeaconries, cathedral staff, diocesan staff and ministry leaders. They are also relevant to those providing Spiritual Direction, mentorship and counselling in a faith-based context.

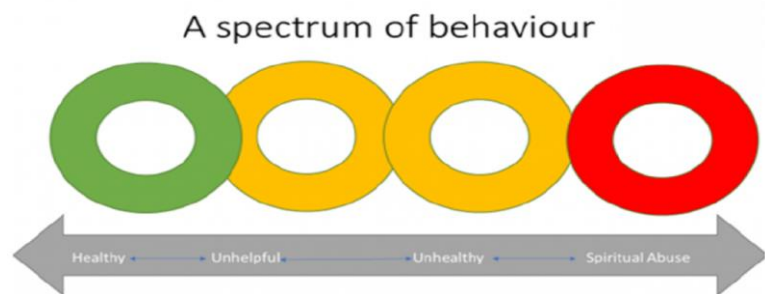
Who can be affected by Spiritual Abuse? Any church member, attendee or officer, diocesan staff can be impacted by spiritual abuse including:

Those in positions of leadership	Those in positions of parallel leadership
Those in equal power positions	Those in lower power positions
Clergy (e.g. from congregations/PCCs etc)	Members of congregations and organisations (e.g. from clergy)
Individuals	Groups

5.0 Thresholds and identification of risk

A Spectrum of Behaviour: (Oakley, 2021) : Oakley defines a spectrum of behaviour ranging from:

- **HEALTHY** e.g. good, nurturing, people flourish and grow.
- **UNHELPFUL** e.g. behaviour or a reaction is not harmful, but it is not helpful (we all behave in this way at times).
- **UNHEALTHY** e.g. a consistent pattern of negative behaviour, the person is not open to questioning and we may fear approaching them.
- **SPIRITUALLY ABUSIVE** e.g. a persistent pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour that is harmful and has crossed the threshold of spiritual abuse.



In the Diocese of Portsmouth, the level of response is mapped to these stages on the continuum:

Table 1: Spiritual Abuse thresholds

Behaviour type:	Healthy	Unhelpful	Unhealthy	Spiritual Abuse
Level of resolution	No action or response needed. Reinforce good behaviours at both local parish and diocesan levels. Usual feedback routes for effective behaviour e.g. reviews and appraisals	PARISH LEVEL Parish priest response with support from Area Dean where relevant.	DIOCESE LEVEL ARCHDEACON More robust formal response including investigation and intervention.	DIOCESAN LEVEL SAFEGUARDING TEAM Case management under current safeguarding procedures. Senior clergy involvement. Follow “Managing Allegations” process.

Table 2: Worked examples relating to the *Spectrum of Behaviour* and thresholds:

Example of Behaviours				
Category	Healthy	Unhelpful	Unhealthy	Spiritually Abusive
Financial Giving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching about financial giving in a way that allows understanding of biblical passages and discipleship Accepting that some will be able to give more than others, if at all. Wider, appropriate conversations about gifts and giving in the church. Transparency regarding finances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suggesting that most people could give more if they managed their finances effectively. Being overly defensive when speaking to someone who has a different opinion to you. Making people feel guilty or pressurised. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pressurizing individuals or groups into financial giving. Giving more attention to individuals who are able to give financially. Developing a pattern of defensive and critical conversations with individuals who are unable to give financially. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent, intrusive, coercive requests for financial giving. Suggesting that the level of giving is the most important measure of the individual's commitment to God The use of biblical scripture to persistently coerce financial giving or using threats of spiritual consequences to invoke fear if finance is not provided.
Suggested Response	Parish/Diocesan response Affirm good practice	Parish/Area Dean Response If a one-off situation provide pastoral support or assistance with capability.	Archdeacon/Diocese Response More robust formal intervention needed to help individual move back down the spectrum to healthy behaviour.	Diocesan Safeguarding Team Response If child or vulnerable adult, report as a safeguarding concern. Independent investigation and recommendations. Support for Victim.
Open Questioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All individuals in the congregation are able to question, discuss and respectfully challenge messages that are shared and how things are done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being overly defensive when asked a question or being challenged respectfully. Not actively listening to a concern. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a pattern of defensive and aggressive responses to any question or challenge. Creating a culture in which challenge and questioning are seen as threatening unity. Regularly suggesting that anyone raising an issue are themselves the issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A consistent pattern of controlling behaviour suggesting that questioning or challenge is an inability to be obedient to God and a reflection of a problematic personal faith. Seeking to use scripture or spiritual threats to close down discussion or silence an

				individual rather than engaging with the issues they are raising.
Suggested response	Parish/Diocesan Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affirm good practice 	Parish/Area Dean response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a one-off situation provide pastoral support or assistance with capability. Does the individual have insight into their behaviours? If not, this is a warning flag which might trigger a more robust response. 	Archdeacon/Diocese Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More robust formal intervention needed to help individual move back down the spectrum to healthy behaviour. Interventions might include: supervision, retraining on safeguarding or disagreeing well, coaching, mentoring or counselling. 	Diocesan Safeguarding Team response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a persistent pattern involving a child or vulnerable adult, report as a safeguarding concern. Independent investigation and recommendations. Support for Victim.
Spiritual Guidance Contexts include: Spiritual direction, mentoring, pastoral support, prayer and healing ministry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering spiritual mentorship and support which is mutually beneficial and withing agreed boundaries. Aiming to be self-reflective and self-aware about 1:1 pastoral conversations. Being aware of the likely power imbalance in a pastoral mentoring situation. Having confidential supervision for 1:1 pastoral conversations and/or checking in with a 3rd party ensuring confidentially about these conversations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being a little too directive in a mentorship conversation. Being overly defensive when one piece of advice is disagreed or ignored. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requiring the individual to share personal details which they do not wish to share. Going beyond boundaries. Becoming very directive and difficult to disagree/not comply with. Exploring and interpreting personal history to a depth only appropriate for a trained counsellor or psychotherapist. Inappropriate use of prophecy or scripture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent pattern of highly controlling and directive mentorship. Use of scripture or prophecy to control behaviour consistently. Making someone feel unable or afraid to disagree with any advice given. Using God's name to enforce actions the mentor recommends. Presenting oneself as akin to a professional counsellor, anointed by God for this role, with equivalent skills and competencies. Grooming and manipulation. Sexual abuse, e.g. inappropriate suggestion or touch.
Suggested response	Parish/Diocesan Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affirm good practice 	Parish/Area Dean Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a one-off situation provide pastoral support or assistance with capability. 	Archdeacon/Diocese Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More robust formal intervention needed to help individual move back down 	Diocesan Safeguarding Team Response

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the individual have insight into their behaviours? If not, this is a warning flag which might trigger a more robust response. 	<p>the spectrum to healthy behaviour.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interventions might include: supervision, retraining on safeguarding or disagreeing well, coaching, mentoring or counselling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a persistent pattern involving a child or vulnerable adult, report as a safeguarding concern. Allegation of sexual abuse involving a child or adult, report as a safeguarding concern. Independent investigation and recommendations. Support for Victim.
Towards Clergy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Checking to see if the member of clergy is OK Ensuring the member of clergy has protected time to rest. Following the guidance in the C/E Clergy Covenant https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/clergy-resources/national-clergy-hr/supporting-clergy-health-and-wellbeing/covenant#na 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scheduling meetings on clergy days off. Inappropriately suggesting clergy competence issues e.g. in a public forum. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistently undermining a member of clergy both privately and publicly including commenting on working hours as a means of undermining them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently using scripture e.g. on servant leadership, to control and undermine a member of clergy and to exploit them in demanding excessive working hours with the rhetoric that this is required by God.
Suggested response	<p>Parish/Diocesan Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affirm good practice 	<p>Parish/Area Dean Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a one-off situation provide pastoral support or assistance with capability. Does the individual have insight into their behaviours? If not, this is a warning flag which might trigger a more robust response. Appropriate involvement of church wardens and/or area dean. 	<p>Archdeacon/Diocese Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Escalate to archdeacon and HR. Identify the behaviour and agree a plan for change with the person (s) involved. Request formal support for clergy member from a senior colleague. 	<p>Diocesan Safeguarding Team Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigation. Recommendations. Senior clergy support. Consider escalation to Bishop.

6.0 Management of concerns/allegations – processes and pathways

The Church of England sets out the following aims relating to Spiritual Abuse:

- Preventative
- Responsive
- Protective

Process:

1. If you been subjected to spiritual abuse or you have a concern, please speak to your own Parish Safeguarding Officer, and/or incumbent if it is appropriate and safe to do so. You can also talk to a member of the Portsmouth Diocesan Safeguarding team via:
 - Email: safeguarding@portsmouth.anglican.org
Telephone: 0239289 9665 between 09.000 and 17.00, Monday to Friday
 - Out of hours, contact Thirtyone:eight helpline on [0303 003 1111](tel:03030031111), selecting option 2.
 - All new safeguarding concerns should be reported the Diocesan Safeguarding team within 24 hours, using the form which can be found on the safeguarding page of our Diocesan website: [SG Report Form_OzgHWHb.docx \(live.com\)](#)
2. If allegations are against a church officer, the process will follow that set out in the national Church of England managing allegations framework: www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/responding-to-assessing-and-managing-concerns-or-allegations-against-church-officers.pdf
3. If allegations are against a non-church officer or congregation member, the process to follow would be similar to the above. The safeguarding team would be responsible for responding to the concern, ensuring that any abuse meeting statutory referrals was completed, and that any ongoing risks were assessed and managed within the parish.
4. Where a parish, deanery or archdeacon's review is necessary for ordained office holders, Human Resources advice and guidance should be sought and due process followed a set out in the Clergy Handbook, including:
 - Complaint Procedure
 - Grievance Procedure (informal and formal stages)
 - Capability Procedure
 - Clergy Discipline Measure
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7.0 Support for victims and survivors

The Church of England has robust guidance on responding to disclosures of abuse (all types, and this should be followed when managing a disclosure of spiritual abuse. The latest guidance is available in the safeguarding e-manual via this link: [Section 1: Responding well to all victims and survivors | The Church of England](#).

Locally, the Diocese has a clear process for responding to concerns and this will guide those responding to allegations or a disclosure as to the correct course of action. This guidance can be found here: [Reporting a Concern - Diocese of Portsmouth \(anglican.org\)](#)

The impact of Spiritual Abuse:

- a. **Financial**, debt, financial hardship,
- b. **Physiological**, stress response; cardiovascular disease, diabetes, gastrointestinal disorders, and cancer. Fibromyalgia and CFS, autoimmune
- c. **Emotional** e.g. shock, sadness, anger, grief, fear, powerlessness, guilt
- d. **Mental** – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, poor concentration, disturbed sleep, emotional numbing, addiction, anger, triggers
- e. **Social** – isolation, loss of support and friendships, impact on family and work relations, loss of trust, loss of belonging,
- f. **Personal** – poor self-image, loss of identity, self-blame, loss of esteem/self-worth, loss of reputation and respect, feeling unsafe
- g. **Faith** – altered faith beliefs, loss of faith

In addition to the requirements and advice set out in the guidance set out by the National Safeguarding Team *Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse*, those responding to a disclosure concerning spiritual abuse must:

1. Listen carefully, avoid interrupting and allow a full disclosure without feeling you must defend the Church or the individual.
2. Respond in a non-judgemental manner, demonstrating that the disclosure of spiritual abuse is being taken seriously.
3. Avoid minimising what they are being told or showing disbelief or denial.
4. Be aware that victims may have experienced harmful teaching.
5. Avoid suggesting the use of Matthew 18 (resolving disputes by speaking directly to the person). It is harmful to suggest that someone speaks to their abuser about their abuse.
6. Be aware that a disclosure of spiritual abuse may also be part of a disclosure of other forms of abuse.
7. Where abuse has involved use of scripture or prayer, think carefully and be judicious about whether it is appropriate to use this as a first response to a disclosure.

Church Bodies must offer support to all people who report abuse by a Church Officer or disclose that they have experienced abuse in a church setting. Support for those who have experienced or are currently experiencing spiritual abuse at national and diocesan levels can be found here: [Section 3: Summary of support for victims and survivors of Church-based abuse | The Church of England](#). In addition, support may be accessed from independent charity Replenished Life - www.replenished.life or via this link: [Home - Replenished](#)

8.0 Training and resources

Members of the Diocesan Safeguarding team and the Diocesan Spiritual Abuse Working Group have completed training on spiritual abuse provided by both the National Church of England Safeguarding Team and by independent experts on the subject. There would be insufficient capacity at national level to provide training for all relevant roles in the Diocese of Portsmouth. Therefore, a local training model has been developed.

The diocesan approach to raising awareness and increasing knowledge and skills in the prevention and management of spiritual abuse is based on 3 distinct levels which are matched to the learning needs of church officers in specific roles. In addition, reference to spiritual abuse will be made in the leadership pathway and local leaders/PtO safeguarding leadership module.

Currently there is no plan to mandate this training or require updates e.g. 3-yearly, however, the ambition is to raise awareness, and competence in spiritual abuse prevention and management with as many parish church officers as possible. The training requirements will be kept under review and may be amended in the future. It is anticipated Level 1 and Level 2 training will commence in the Autumn 2023, and level 3 training be provided between January and April 2024.

All Diocesan Safeguarding training is evaluated and reported to the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel where independent scrutiny can take place. Registration will follow the current method via Eventbrite. In addition, Deaneries or Parishes may request local spiritual abuse training provision, where the current requirements for venues and cohort size must be met.

Table 3: Diocese of Portsmouth Spiritual Abuse Training Provision

Level of training	Module Learning Aims	Target Participants	Length and Mode of Delivery
Level 1: Basic Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Spiritual Abuse • How to recognise it • Understanding impact • What to do if you have a concern 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any church officers or members who are interested. • PCC members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 hour • In person or via Zoom <p>Provided monthly by Diocesan Safeguarding Team members.</p>

Level 2: Managing Spiritual Abuse Allegations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporates level 1 above • What is Spiritual Abuse • How to recognise it • Understanding impact • The process for managing allegations of spiritual abuse • How to prevent it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PSOs • Church wardens • Children and Young People Leaders • Anna Chaplains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 hours • In person or on Zoom <p>Provided monthly by Diocesan Safeguarding team members</p>
Level 3: Leading, Managing and Preventing Spiritual Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporates levels 1 and 2 above • What is Spiritual Abuse & links to deliverance ministry • How to recognise it • Understanding impact • The process for managing allegations of spiritual abuse • How to prevent it • How to support those using poor behaviours • How to support those affected by poor behaviours • Getting the right culture • Managing conflict • Justice and reconciliation • Self-care • Supervision and reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clergy • Curates • Readers/LLM • Spiritual Directors • Chaplains • Archdeacons • DST 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 day • In person • Use of case examples <p>Delivered by DST, Safeguarding team, Bishop's Chaplain, registrar and HR</p>

9.0 Liaison and information sharing

The Data Protection Act 1998 is not a barrier to sharing information but provides a framework to ensure that personal information about living persons is shared appropriately. Be open and honest with the person (and / or their family where appropriate) from the outset about why, what, how and with whom information will, or could be shared, and seek their agreement, unless it is unsafe or inappropriate to do so. It may not be appropriate to inform a person that information is being shared, or seek consent to this sharing. This is the case if informing them is likely to hamper the prevention or investigation of a serious crime, or put a child at risk of significant harm or an adult at risk of serious harm.

Seek advice if you are in any doubt, without disclosing the identity of the person where possible. Legal advice from the Diocesan Registrar and consultation with the Diocesan Secretary / Connexional Safeguarding Team / DSO must be sought, if there is any doubt as to whether or not you can share information.

Share with consent where appropriate and, where possible, respect the wishes of those who do not consent to share confidential information. You may still share information without consent if, in your judgement, that lack of consent can be overridden in the public interest. You will need to base your judgment on the facts of the case. Consider safety and well-being: base your information sharing decisions on considerations of the safety and well-being of the person and others who may be affected by their actions.

10.0 Keeping records

Good record keeping is an important part of every safeguarding task. Records should use clear, straightforward language, be concise, and accurate so that they can be understood by anyone not familiar with the case. They should clearly differentiate between facts, opinion, judgements and hypothesis. In a church context, safeguarding records are needed in order to:

- Ensure that what happened and when it happened is recorded.
- Provide a history of events so that patterns can be identified.
- Record and justify the action/s of advisers and church workers.
- Promote the exercise of accountability.
- Provide a basis of evidence for future safeguarding activity.
- Allow for continuity when there is a change of personnel.

The Principles of a Good Safeguarding Record Keeping:

1. **Proportionality** – Only record information that is relevant and necessary for your specific purpose, avoiding where possible repetition of written information.
2. **Accountability** – recording practice must comply with legislation, case law, professional standards and codes of practice and guidance where relevant.
3. **Transparency** – where information in a case record is classed as personal data pursuant to the Data Protection Act 1998 it is likely to be available to those about whom it is written, in accordance with the provisions of that Act (unless one of the exemptions apply). In any event, it is good practice for the information contained in the records to be available to the subjects of those records, whenever it is safe and possible to do so.
4. **Accessibility** – the written record is a vital tool and should be accessible to those who have a need to know this information. As an example, this means that you must ensure that an authorised individual from within the church is able to access the records in the event that the initiator of the record is absent or otherwise unavailable.

5. **Accuracy** – the subjects of these records are entitled to expect that the records are accurate. Under the Data Protection Act 1998, it is a requirement that personal data is accurate and where necessary kept up to date. Bear in mind that making such records accessible upon request (where it is possible to do so) is a good way of ensuring this accuracy.
6. **Security** – Records should be stored securely and measures taken to avoid loss, theft, damage and inappropriate access or onward disclosure. In an age of digital storage and exchange of information, this requires additional care.

The following approach is helpful in considering what should be written.

- A written record of the event or conversation should be made as soon as is practicable (after the event or conversation but always within 24 hours)
- Who is it about? (the names of all key people including any actual / potential witnesses).
- What happened? (use exact quotes where possible, in quotation marks).
- How did it happen?
- Where did it take place?
- When did it take place?
- Why did it happen? (this allows you to record any explanations offered to you by the people involved. It is not the place for your own analysis).
- What should happen next (what action will follow, for example, what are you going to do next, what is X going to do next).
- Records must always be dated and the author identified.
- Summary. The safeguarding adviser should ensure, if a church worker has a separate personnel file, that a summary of any concerns and the outcome is filed on the personnel file.

11.0 Useful References:

- David Johnson & Jeff Van Vonderen. The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse. Bethany House: Minnesota, 1991.
- Wade Mullen. Something's not Right: Decoding the hidden tactics of abuse and freeing yourself from its power. Tyndale, 2020.
- Chuck DeGroat. When Narcissism Comes to church: healing your community from emotional and spiritual abuse. Intervarsity Press: Illinois, 2020.
- Diane Landberg. Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church. Brazos Press: Michigan, 2016.
- Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys. Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian cultures. SPCK: London, 2019.