

Abused and In Need of Apology

An article for Church Times 2006

What is it that makes it so hard for some people who have been sexually abused to go to Church? Most survivors of abuse don't want to talk about what happened to them. Most church people don't want to know - or live happily like the curate who said of his large congregation "There is no one like that here." So there are all the makings of a conspiracy of silence, one which is more comfortable to maintain than to address. The one place where survivors ought to find a place of acceptance and healing is the one place from which many feel excluded.

The statistics are familiar but still shocking: apparently about one in 4 girls and one in about 9 boys are abused in childhood - sexually, physically or in other ways. Many survivors cope well and live normally. Some, however, although they present a 'normal' face to the world may be suffering, sometimes unable to say what the problem is. Depression, suicidal feelings, self-harming, holding inappropriate feelings of guilt, lack of trust in others, difficulties relating to those in authority, hostility, not wanting to be close to people, cutting off from reality - all of these may be symptoms of abuse. And the grim fact is that a significant number of people have been abused in the context of the church by clergy, youth workers, and others in positions of responsibility - no wonder many survivors do not want to come to church any more. In a recent straw poll among a group of sixty survivors, all of whom described themselves as committed Christians, only two go to church.

The ecumenical report *Time for Action*, published by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland in 2002, and Jane Chevous's in-depth book *From Silence to Sanctuary (SPCK)*, have not been given the prominence they deserve. *Time for Action* was commissioned "as an ecumenical report attempting to address the failure of the Churches, as yet, to respond adequately to the needs of those who are survivors of sexual abuse." Why is this report so little known?

So what do survivors need from the church? First, that the Church will try to understand how hard it is to belong. It ought to be obvious that the Church should be more compassionate and pastorally caring. And yet many survivors feel they cannot be part of it. The Lord's Prayer seems to require immediate forgiveness; words like "Father" and "sin" can trigger painful memories; the Peace can frighten those who do not want to be touched; anointing is difficult for people whose body boundaries have been violated; so is queuing for the altar with people behind you. One of the issues, of course, is power. All abuse is an abuse of power, which means that survivors often have a problem in responding to people in authority. Others are just scared "They wouldn't understand" said Sophie, "and I feel so ashamed."

Survivors need someone to listen to them and most important, someone to believe them - even if the story comes out incoherently. There is no quick fix for healing, and often professional counselling will help. Survivors need to be given time and space to recognise the effects of trauma on their inner world and given support as they work through their emotions before they can forgive meaningfully. They need to make a start on dealing with their nightmares, 'flashbacks' (sudden intrusive

memories), low self-esteem, phobias and debilitating fears. They do not need to be pressurised into forgiving too quickly.

Sue's new book "*Breaking the Chains of Abuse*" is written from her personal experience and is a practical guide for survivors and those who care for them, including church workers and parents.

But more than this, those who have been abused in a church setting also need to hear is a note of apology. The Anglican Church Synod in Adelaide passed this resolution in June 2004:

"That this Synod and we as members of it acknowledge with deep regret and repentance the past failings of the Church and its members. On behalf of the whole Church in this diocese we apologise unreservedly to those who have been harmed by sexual abuse perpetrated by people holding positions of power and trust in the Church.... We are ashamed to have acknowledged that we only took notice when the survivors of abuse became a threat to us. We apologise and ask forgiveness for the Church's failure... We commit the Church in this diocese to listen to survivors of abuse, to respond with compassion to all those who have been harmed..."

Can we find a way in which this note of apology can also be heard here? In his commendation of *Time for Action*, the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote: "Few if any issues in recent years have so stained and compromised the credibility of various Church institutions and hierarchies as the record of ignorance and evasions over questions to do with the abuse of children and adults by Christian professionals, especially clergy. Honesty about this is painful, but essential for the Church's health and the Church's mission. This report is sometimes devastating reading, but it is timely, necessary and – if we are prepared to hear and act on some unwelcome truths – ultimately hopeful." In 2006, this is still timely. There is a new report on providing a safe church for vulnerable adults expected from the Church of England in the near future which takes all this further - let us hope it gets the hearing it deserves.

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Dr David Atkinson is Bishop of Thetford; Dr Sue Atkinson's book "*Breaking the Chains of Abuse*" was published by Lion in August.