



## **Redemptive justice?**

**A Gospel framework for The Church of England's on-going  
conversation with survivors of church-related abuse.**

**by David and Sue Atkinson**

## Redemptive justice

This paper covers:

- (i) Justice as fairness;
- (ii) God's justice in the Bible: 'putting things right'; compassion;
- (iii) Justice on the side of the powerless and vulnerable; justice, power, and love;
- (iv) Justice and Truth, including the truth of survivor experience; truth and disclosure; the truth about trauma; the truth about how hard it is for some survivors to be regular worshippers;
- (v) Justice, lament, and penitence;
- (vi) Justice, forgiveness and reconciliation: trivialising forgiveness, harsh forgiveness; reconciliation?
- (vii) Redemptive Justice; and what steps might be taken towards redemptive justice?

The General Synod debate (25th November 2020) on the report from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse began with contributions from three survivors of church-related abuse. When the proceedings were opened for debate, there was some acknowledgement that there had been some progress in Safeguarding (in the sense of seeking to prevent abuse happening), but much concern that the Church<sup>1</sup> had failed in its care for victims and survivors of abuse. It is in the light of that failure that this paper is offered as a contribution, a theological underpinning, for the on-going conversation between survivors of abuse and the Church of England.

Among proper pleas at the Synod for repentance, humility and a change of church culture away from self-preservation and improper deference, there were many hopes expressed for more listening to survivors, more awareness of the long-term effects of trauma, more adequate redress, and more accountability at all levels of church life. All that is right and good. However, among those proper hopes for a more Christ-like compassion, there were several calls for justice, for what has been called 'restorative justice', for truth and reconciliation.

Justice, truth and reconciliation are all hugely important Christian themes at the heart of the Gospel. But in the context of survivors of abuse, each can prove problematic and needs

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<sup>1</sup> When we speak of 'the Church' (in conversation with survivors) we are almost always referring to the Church as institution, or to church leaders or church officers, or church authorities within the Church of England. We are trying to avoid any sense that 'survivors' are not themselves part of 'the Church'.

careful thought. This paper acknowledges that the Church has too often got things wrong, sometimes catastrophically so, leaving some survivors coping with depression, even suicidal thinking. We argue that a wide-ranging change of culture is needed. We regret also that the conversations between survivors and the Church have not been easy. In this article, we are not only talking about pastoral care of victims and survivors by the Church, but also an on-going conversation between survivors and the wider Church about their mutual discipleship. As the organisation *Survivors' Voices* makes clear in their Charter<sup>2</sup> many survivors are trying to turn the pain of what has happened to them into power that changes things. Within the Church many survivors have gifts to offer from which the wider Church needs to learn, and they have much to teach the wider church community from their own experiences of ill and good.

It is our hope that this article may contribute to the on-going conversation.

### **(i) Justice as fairness<sup>3</sup>**

What do we mean when we speak of 'justice'? In ordinary human speech, justice is about 'rights' - the legitimate claim which one person exercises on another or others, for fair dealing<sup>4</sup>. When we say that a person is 'just', we mean that they act in a way which fairly respects others' rights. Justice in this ordinary sense is about the minimum requirement for a society to live in the sort of order which respects rights: justice as fairness.

Nicholas Wolterstorff<sup>5</sup> in *Justice, Rights and Wrongs* argues that the Bible gives a basis for talking about 'inherent rights' for human beings - just because we are human, because we are made in God's image, and especially because God loves us - that is the basis for our inherent 'worth'. We have worth because we are loved by God.

'Justice as fairness' is of course important. It is foundational for holding perpetrators of abuse to account<sup>6</sup>, for any response or any equitable redress the Church should make towards

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<sup>2</sup> <https://survivorsvoices.org/charter/>

<sup>3</sup> Of course there are different ways of framing the concept of justice. The paper *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse* (2017), from the Faith and Order Commission, for example, identifies these four, which converge with our approach in various ways: (i) justice as a state of affairs in which there are right relations between people; (ii) temporal justice as a work of judgement to be done in circumstances when right relations are harmed, such as in cases of abuse; (iii) justice as a virtue; and (iv) eschatological justice as God's final judgement. That paper refers to Oliver O'Donovan *The Ways of Judgement*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> This is the basis for the work of philosopher John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1971; and of Amartya Sen in *The Idea of Justice*, London: Allen Lane, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff *Justice, Rights and Wrongs*, Princeton University Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Holding to account is a crucial aspect of justice, although not all survivors would necessarily wish to instigate police investigation.



someone who has suffered church-related abuse. It rebukes any discrimination between people on the grounds of, for example, background or status.

For some victims and survivors of abuse, encountering the Church's structures and responses to church-based abuse has not felt like fairness; instead it too often feels like being faced with a wall of bureaucracy, particularly by Core Groups (church groups set up in dioceses to examine allegations of abuse) which can sometimes seem to care more for the views of reputational advisors, or insurers, or lawyers (sometimes over-powerful lawyers), than for the views (and worth) of the survivor. Survivors ask for justice, but Core Groups concentrate primarily on assessing and managing risk<sup>7</sup>. At the very heart of the Church's response needs to be a prior acceptance that a survivor is a hurting human being who has worth precisely because God loves him or her. She or he has inherent rights which may well have been wronged. Sadly, the Church has too often failed at recognising the need for basic justice as fairness. The Church structures at this point need a radical rethink.

In a powerful new book, *The #MeToo Reckoning*<sup>8</sup> Ruth Everhart, a survivor and pastor of a Presbyterian church in the USA, gives examples from her experience of many ways she believes churches avoid the call to do justice. She says that doing justice is complex, and it is often easier for the church just to talk about healing. She notes the way verbal apologies can be offered which do not lead to actions of repentance. Churches can tend to confuse justice with fiscal responsibility, can fail to hold clergy to account, can tend to treat offences as violations of rules rather than betrayals of relationships. 'Why', she asks, 'is the church so far behind secular culture in standing up for justice? . . . Instead of exposing wrongdoing and calling for justice', Everhart says, 'the church is too often the culprit. Even

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<sup>7</sup> Some have drawn a distinction between 'justice as adjudication', which includes what we have called 'fairness' (assessing allegations, and guilt, and penalty), and 'justice as "putting things right"' (our next section), which includes what survivors need: redress, restoration, healing. There is a perception that the 'adjudication' work of Core Groups eclipses any 'restorative justice'.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Everhart *The #MeToo Reckoning* IVP. 2020. Ruth Everhart is an author, survivor and pastor of a Presbyterian Church in USA, from conservative Christian background, now calls herself a radical feminist and progressive Protestant. In a very accessible, but hard-hitting book, she tells her own story of rape and later assault, and others' stories of abuse, and reflects on these from biblical stories, especially the Gospel narratives of Jesus' attitudes to people. She offers Christian perspectives on, for example, power and patriarchy, shame and secrecy, justice, vulnerability, clericalism and lamentation. Her hope in writing is that the church will be known as a place where people can welcome survivors, hear their stories and heal their wounds. She argues that churches should protect the vulnerable, challenge and prosecute abusers. They need to become a space that is both safer and braver.

worse, it's the place where culpability hides.' Everhart's plea, which we share, is for the church to take a lead in the quest for justice for survivors.

When we turn to the Bible, God's justice, is depicted not so much in terms of fairness and rights, as in terms of 'putting things right'. God is indeed described as judging the people fairly: 'with equity' (Ps.96.10). Jesus appeals to our worth as human beings to explain God's care for each and every one of us (Matt.6.26; 10.31). To be human is to have worth. Rights, and therefore 'fairness' are important, but God's justice, 'putting things right', which includes fairness, is much richer and broader.

## (ii) God's justice

God's justice in the Hebrew Bible refers first to the will and nature of God: 'The Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice'. (Dt. 32.4). One of the Hebrew words usually translated 'justice' or 'judgment' (*mishpat*), is very often related to discernment of right from wrong, and to judicial decision and actions. It means 'put things right', that is get things sorted out justly (as a magistrate does) where there is conflict or broken relationships.

Another Hebrew word (*tsedaqah; tsedeq*), also sometimes translated 'justice', is more often rendered 'rightness' or 'righteousness'. This is the way God is. It is God's loyalty to his people, committed to 'seeing them right'. It also gives a standard by which God measures human conduct, punishes what is wrong and vindicates what is right. In some scriptures the two words merge closely together, and are linked also with God's covenant faithfulness, mercy and loyalty (*chesed*), often translated 'steadfast love'.

'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you'. (Ps 89.14).

The prophet Jeremiah also brings all these themes together: 'I am the LORD, I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD'. (Jer 9.24). '*Chesed*' is a word which encompasses God's mercy and compassion, and describes both the character and the redemptive actions of God<sup>9</sup>. Thus, 'justice', 'righteousness', and 'mercy' are almost indistinguishable as aspects of God's 'steadfast love'.

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<sup>9</sup> *Chesed* is variously translated 'goodness', or 'kindness', 'mercy', or 'merciful kindness', 'compassion', perhaps especially 'loyalty', or 'lovingkindness'. The NRSV gives us 'steadfast love'. This range of meanings essentially refers to God's loyalty to his covenant and to God's gracious actions of redemption and justice.

By the time we reach Second Isaiah, justice and righteousness with mercy are together treated as part of the meaning of 'salvation' - in the sense that God will rescue and stand by his people. God's justice gives more than ordinary human justice requires. God acts to redeem and vindicate his people, both now and ultimately at God's Day of Judgement. Divine justice and righteousness transform human justice, merging into love and grace, with wise discernment and merciful judgment. Divine justice becomes redemptive.

God's redemptive justice and righteousness, then becomes the standard by which human conduct is measured: 'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice (*mishpat*) and to love kindness (*chesed*), and to walk humbly with your God?' (Mi 6.8).

### **New Testament**

In the Gospels the ministry of Jesus is rooted in redemptive justice. Jesus was in the synagogue in Nazareth when he read from the prophet Isaiah:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Lk.4.16-19; referring to Isa.61.1-2<sup>10</sup>).

Jesus, anointed with the Holy Spirit, declares that he is God's promised Redeemer, who will create a new people, a new community rooted in God's justice and God's liberation. Jesus is opening the way, in line with prophetic promises about Messiah, for God's people to live in freedom, release from burdens, and in *shalom*.<sup>11</sup> In the ministry of Jesus, as God's new world dawns, God's kingdom is manifest, and his ministry brings *shalom*. '*Shalom*' includes

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<sup>10</sup> In Isaiah 61, the Preacher, picking up themes familiar from the earlier chapters 40 - 55, speaks a message of restoration, redemption and comfort for God's people for whom the experience of exile was still very real. Isaiah speaks of the year of the Lord's favour alongside 'the day of vengeance of our God. (that is the day of God's judgement against all evil, all oppressors); to comfort all who mourn.' Jesus stops the quotation at 'the day of the Lord's favour', indicating that at that stage of his ministry he had come to save and not to condemn (cf. John 3.17), although he also taught about a coming day of God's judgement (John 5. 22-29).

<sup>11</sup> 'Shalom' is discussed more fully in Jane Chevous' ground-breaking 2004 book *From Silence to Sanctuary: A guide to Understanding, Preventing and Responding to Abuse*. (SPCK), pp. 45-52.



the flourishing of right relationships between people, between nations, within the whole created order, and all with God. In the context of our conversation, seeking and doing *shalom* would involve restoring well-being and joy in the lives of survivors, repairing the rupture between survivors and the institutional Church, and then seeing what that might mean for the relationship between survivor and abuser.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus indicates that the new life of God's kingdom includes those who 'hunger and thirst for God's justice'; those who are 'merciful'; those who make 'peace'. (Matt. 5. 1-12). And St Paul responds to a clash of cultures in the Church, where different groups are arguing about Jewish law by saying: 'The Kingdom of God is [actually about] justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit'. (Rom.14.17).

### **Compassion**

The motivation of much of the kingdom ministry of Jesus, through his healings, is often described as 'compassion' or sometimes 'pity' ((Matt.9.35-6). The word used relates to a deep yearning in the guts. It is the motivation of the Good Samaritan who 'has pity' on the victim of a mugging; and of the Father of the Prodigal Son, 'filled with compassion'. This is what the ministry of God's kingdom is: compassionate, merciful, peace-making, healing, supporting, comforting, guiding, shepherding, doing justice with shalom.

This is what pastoral care should look like in today's church. Our goal as Church, working with survivors, should be together to find a response which liberates those who are oppressed, which is good news for those who are hurting, which brings light into dark places, which brings justice, righteousness, mercy and compassion together, and whose goal is the healing of relationships through the gift of shalom. Too many survivors (such as the contributors to *Letters to a Broken Church*)<sup>12</sup>, say that in their view the Church has significantly failed in aiming towards that goal. Victims and survivors have much to teach others of us in the church about what compassionate pastoral care means.

We are now in a position to unpack some further aspects of God's redemptive justice and God's righteousness in relation to the conversation between survivors and the Church.

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<sup>12</sup> Janet Fife and Gilo eds. *Letters to a Broken Church*, Ekklesia, 2019.





### **(iii) Justice on the side of the powerless and vulnerable.**

The prophet Amos makes very clear how God is opposed to the leaders who fail to 'establish justice in the gate' (Am 5.15); he illustrates the injustice of the oppressors ('push aside the needy', Am.5.12); the failure of the religious leaders ('I despise your festivals, and take no delight in your solemn assemblies', Am.5.21); and the powerlessness of the oppressed ('you oppress the poor, and crush the needy', (Am 4.1). But, he strongly announces: 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' (Am.5.24).

This great verse applies first of all to God's relationship with Israel, but it is widely interpreted to mean much more than that. Amos insists that justice and righteousness are qualities that should be manifest in the ordered life of God's people. In the Psalms, also, God's justice is seen in particular in his passion for the needs of the poor and oppressed. Again, God's justice and righteousness are closely linked to God's compassion expressed most clearly in his desire to lift up the powerless, and alleviate the needs of the poorest. So there are numerous references in the psalms to God feeding the hungry and caring for the disadvantaged and oppressed. In Psalm 72, to give one example, the psalmist draws a picture of the ideal king, who is to reflect something of the justice, benevolence and bounty of God's kingly rule:

'May he judge your people with righteousness  
and your poor with justice...  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor'.<sup>13</sup>

The theologian Karl Barth's comment on the human righteousness which should 'pour down like a mighty stream' is that it has the character of a vindication of right in favour of those who are oppressed. 'For this reason... God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege, and on behalf of those denied and deprived of it.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Psalm 72 ends with a doxology, a vision of God's glory filling the whole earth, a vision in which justice, righteousness, and shalom are seen in their fullness.

<sup>14</sup> K. Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1.p.386.





In the New Testament, the healing ministry of Jesus is marked by his care for the powerless: his restoring of sight to the blind, giving the ability to walk back to the lame; cleansing the lepers; giving hearing to the deaf, raising the dead; and preaching good news to the poor. (Matt. 11.4-6).

What does all this imply for the Church's conversation with victims and survivors of abuse? Many testimonies from *Survivors' Voices*, or in the book *To Heal and Not To Hurt*<sup>15</sup> in effect say to the Church: 'you have let us down; you have misused your power, you have not shown the light of the character and ministry of Jesus, you have been nearer to the religious leaders of which Amos warned'. In fact there is too often a sense of powerlessness for victims and survivors coupled with a sense of oppression from the institutions of the Church.

There are several dimensions to these 'power relationships'.

First, whenever and wherever abuse happens there is an abuse of power. Whether they recognise it or not, in pastoral contexts, clergy are people with power, so someone coming to a clergy person to disclose abuse is in a position of relative powerlessness. If clergy or church leaders are themselves perpetrators of abuse, their victims are likely to feel devastated, wounded, betrayed and powerless. How are they to come to terms with the effects of the abuse: loss of identity, mixed emotions, loss of faith, their confused view of God<sup>16</sup>?

Secondly, there are power relationships within the institutional church and its bureaucracy. The lack of clarity in the system, should the survivor choose to disclose abuse, the long delays when they do, the apparent lack of care, leave victims feeling deskilled and uninvolved in decisions which affect their lives. When a survivor reaches the stage of finding enough courage to disclose abuse, they need first to be listened to and taken seriously with a compassionate response: 'That was terrible; how can we help?' Instead, too often, they are referred to statutory agencies, or to a diocesan Core Group made up of people they may never meet and who in their absence will make decisions affecting their lives. Some survivors may even be encouraged by their priest or bishop, to show a 'Christian attitude' and

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<sup>15</sup> Rosie Harper and Alan Wilson, *To Heal and Not To Hurt*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Susan Shooter, *How Survivors of Abuse relate to God*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012.



seek reconciliation with their abuser as a first step (which would almost certainly be inappropriate, even dangerous, perhaps because of the perpetrator's denial, unwillingness, or death), and is itself a misuse of pastoral power.

How are judgements to be made between the senior, well respected and plausible male church leader who denies that anything happened, and the younger female staff member who says that he sexually assaulted her? In situations of 'he said, she said', where no corroborative evidence is possible, it is pertinent to ask 'Why would a survivor keep reaching out to the church for help, year after year - perhaps decades after the event - unless she was hurting, or unless she was telling the truth?' Is that not evidence enough?

Consider the survivor whose disclosure to a bishop is simply ignored; or the church leader who tells a survivor that 'it is really not that bad'. Consider the DDO during safeguarding training who reacts by asking : 'Why don't survivors just pull themselves together?'<sup>17</sup> or the churchwarden who says 'Not this again!'. Consider the lawyer who appallingly advises the bishop to make any redress conditional on the signing of a Non-Disclosure Agreement<sup>18</sup>. In each case, the powerful person is discounting the pain, hurt, sense of betrayal and often brokenness of a survivor.

Some survivors are in a very vulnerable state when they decide to disclose their abuse, and can be at different stages of healing. Inappropriate pastoral interventions can be manipulative, and can themselves be abusive.

This altogether broken situation means that the survivor is being asked to engage with an institution which, instead of helping them come to terms with what has happened in their abuse, or how now to relate to their abuser, has itself becomes a further and distracting problem with which the survivor has to engage. On this point, it was Marie Fortune<sup>19</sup>, a Christian writer on abuse who said that one pastoral role the Church might helpfully take on is the responsibility of justice-making for victims and survivors when their perpetrator does

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<sup>17</sup> completely ignoring the devastating trauma abuse can cause, and the widespread nature of abuse.

<sup>18</sup> Quite apart from being morally questionable, and forming more secrets around abuse, such a requirement robs a traumatised survivor of her need to tell and re-tell her story. As Judith Herman demonstrates (*Trauma and Recovery*, New York: Basic Books 1997), such re-telling is a crucial way of enabling trauma to dissipate.

<sup>19</sup> Marie M. Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred?* Cleveland Ohio, United Church Press, 1999.



not or cannot repent or offer restitution<sup>20</sup>. This could be a crucial role for the Church, but too often the Church has not given the survivor that needed pastoral support, but created instead the double problem of not only how to find justice in relation to their abuser, but also how to deal with what has too often felt an obstructive and too powerful Church.

It is worth at this point also asking about the power structure within the church organisation itself. Where does the power of decision-making lie within the Church of England's structures in relation to the needs of survivors of abuse? Structurally, the C/E is complex. It has developed traditions and structures over a very long time, which now often result in lack of clarity about where power lies in decision-making. Who holds the power to reform the system that responds to survivors of abuse? Who decides that the Core Group system, for example, has to be reformed so that it gives more support and provides independent advocacy for survivors? Is it the Archbishops' Council, or the House of Bishops? Is it the General Synod, or the National Safeguarding Team? How much power rests with the Diocesan Bishop, or with the Church's financiers, lawyers, or 'reputation managers'? The proposal that oversight of Safeguarding should be given to an external independent body is welcome, as is the overdue reform of the Clergy Discipline Measure. What is also very clear, however, is that wherever decisions lie, it is imperative for decisions to be made concerning responses to survivors of abuse which will change the culture within the Church.

So what is it that is preventing a just and compassionate conversation with survivors? What does redemptive justice mean for a structure, and system, and a church culture which - at least in the view of many survivors - is broken?<sup>21</sup> How does the Church recover something of the compassionate, redemptive, liberating and healing ministry of Jesus in relation to victims and survivors?

### **Justice, power and love**

Much of what we have said about the powerlessness of victims relates to the abuse of power by others, or by an organisation, which is damaging and destructive. It is important at this point to recognise that there is a proper use of power and authority that can be life-giving and healing. God's purposes for humanity included giving us the authority and responsibility of

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<sup>20</sup> Jane Chevous *From Silence to Sanctuary* also discusses this, and relates it to accountability and forgiveness.

<sup>21</sup> cf. *Letters to a Broken Church*.



care for the rest of God's creation, and the authority to create a life-giving culture within which life could flourish. (Genesis 1. 26-7). Within that derived authority there needs to be a proper interaction between state justice (criminal and civil), institutional justice (for example Clergy Discipline), and what we have called 'the justice of God'. Any abuse of that derived authority, any abuse of power, is a symptom of the fracture of relationships between humanity and the created order, or between each other, or between humanity and God. Augustine described the effects of sin in terms of the disintegration and fragmentation of God's creation, and then imagines God to be a sort of Art-Restorer, bringing the broken pieces back together.

We recall our earlier reference to Psalm 72, which emphasises that authority must be expressed primarily in care for the poor and in the crushing of oppression. Authority, when framed by the justice which 'puts things right', is there to reunite what is divided, to restore what is fragmented. Or, in New Testament terms, power within a framework of justice is an exercise of love in which the poor and the vulnerable are lifted up<sup>22</sup>, and the broken healed.

John's Gospel describes the action of love when Jesus, who loved 'to the end', and who with the authority of the Lord and Teacher, washes the feet of his disciples. 'If I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' (Jn 13.1,14).

The power of service, the power of self-giving love, is also evident when Jesus' disciples James and John, seeking places of authority for themselves, receive this response from Jesus: 'You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them...But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant... The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'. (Mark 10.24-45).

The power and authority within God's kingdom, the power which heals and unites, is the power of self-giving sacrificial service and love. Love, as Mirolslav Volf puts it, shapes 'the

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<sup>22</sup> In Canon Dr Stephen Edwards' reflections on Paul Tillich's *Love, Power and Justice*, Oxford University Press, 1954 ( Worcester Cathedral lecture 28 November 2020), he helpfully simplifies Tillich's complex argument thus: 'Justice is the releasing of power in order to bring about love.'

very content of justice<sup>23</sup>. What would it mean for a powerful organisation like the Church of England to understand its power in terms of loving service?

#### **(iv) Justice and truth**

God's steadfast love, righteousness, mercy are often spoken of together with 'truth'.

'O LORD God of hosts....Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne, steadfast love and truth go before you" (Ps 89.14).

"Mercy and truth will meet,

Righteousness (*tsedeq*) and peace (*shalom*) will kiss each other.

Truth will spring up from the ground,

and righteousness will look down from the sky'. (Ps.85).

Jesus describes himself as the Truth: 'I AM the True and Living Way' (Jn 14.6). He says to the believing Jews; 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' (Jn. 8.32).

The Incarnate Word in John's Gospel, is described as 'full of grace and truth' (Jn 1.14).

In the Bible, truth often means reliability, faithfulness, veracity, integrity, freedom from deception. It is sometimes used to say that a person's deeds should match their words. God reveals his truth in his gracious and redeeming actions: 'doing the truth'. In our world disfigured by relative 'truth', 'your truth and my truth', 'fake news', 'alternative facts' and so on, it is more than usually important that the Church is known for its faithfulness, integrity and reliability.

The conversations between the Church institutions and victims and survivors of abuse needs to be marked by grace and by a ministry of living in the truth which sets free. That would mean a refusal of a culture of secrecy, and an acceptance of the public nature of truth, so that truthful justice is seen to be done.

#### **Truth of experience**

One major misconception about abuse is that it is rare. In fact, as Roz Etwaria said in her talk to the General Synod in November 2020<sup>24</sup>, one in four girls and one in six boys

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<sup>23</sup> Mirosalv Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Nashville, Abingdon Press,1996, p. 220

experience abuse before the age of sixteen. (Child abuse covers emotional, physical, sexual abuse, or witnessing domestic abuse).

Child abuse is a hidden crime; one in seven adults who contacted the NAPAC<sup>25</sup> helpline had never disclosed before.<sup>26</sup> There are no accurate statistics about the level of abuse in churches. However, the General Synod paper GS 2184 refers to '449 child sexual abuse concerns recorded, more than half of which related to church officers' in the year 2018 across all dioceses. In the Church of England, also in 2018, there were 2504 safeguarding concerns reported to dioceses about either children or vulnerable adults<sup>27</sup> There are no statistics collected in relation to spiritual abuse, which is recognised as a form of emotional and psychological abuse and coercive control.<sup>28</sup>

This means that there are likely to be survivors in every church congregation. Maybe they are looking for hope, help and healing from the Body of Christ?

Speaking at the opening of the General Synod debate in November 2020 on the IICSA Report, Jane Chevous,<sup>29</sup> a survivor of church-abuse and co-founder of *Survivors' Voices*, concluded her talk with these words:

'Abuse is not just a betrayal, it is a huge loss; a loss of safety, a loss of connection, a loss of self, a loss of worth. And healing is a grieving process. So why is it so impossible for the Church to have a safeguarding process that says to survivors: 'We believe you. We're so sorry. How can we put things right?' Because that is not what happens.... How did safeguarding become about risks and secrets, not compassion and justice? When did we start to contract out healing, pastoral and spiritual care? How did we create a safeguarding machine that excludes survivors?'

The stories told in *Letters to a Broken Church*, and in *To Heal and Not To Hurt*, add many similar and sometimes different perspectives.

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<sup>24</sup> Roz Etwaria from [littlero.org](http://littlero.org), and an ambassador for *Survivors' Voices*, quoted these statistics from One-In-Four. But, she commented, "with years of experience, we know the figure is higher than that".

<sup>25</sup> National Association for People Abused in Childhood.

<sup>26</sup> Statistical Bulletin: *Child Abuse in England and Wales*; January 2020, Office for National Statistics.

<sup>27</sup> IICSA: *Safeguarding in the Church of England and the Church in Wales*. Investigation Report, October 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Oakley, L, and Humphreys, J. *Understanding Spiritual Abuse within Christian Communities* - summary findings. CCPAS, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Chevous: author of *From Silence to Sanctuary*.



Several writers<sup>30</sup> talk about abuse resulting in 'the disintegration of the self'. Susan Shooter<sup>31</sup> refers to 'The Annihilated Soul'. Abuse can have a profound impact on the lives of victims and survivors. It is absolutely not a matter of 'pull yourselves together', which is still too often heard. One person described such a response, using New Testament terms, as 'a millstone issue: They are brushing off one of God's children who has experienced life-changing events.' And Jesus had harsh words about such people.

Poling<sup>32</sup> helpfully explores the deep ambiguity in trauma that childhood sexual abuse can cause, especially when the perpetrator is someone the victim loves, admires or respects, for example a priest. The child ends up with the very basis of their personhood caught up in conflicts between love and hate, good and evil, life and death - which can last through life. No wonder such victims can struggle to cope with life's usual anxieties, with forming relationships, and with other issues which get in the way of a full and satisfying life.

### **Truth in disclosure**

It is hard to disclose abuse. After many years, sometimes, perhaps following therapy, a survivor may find the courage to disclose to someone what has happened. It is hard to do because many survivors feel that they will not be believed. They usually feel shame and guilt that the abuse happened. One of the hardest things for a survivor of church-related abuse is to disclose to church leaders what happened, and then find they are not believed. Instead, many have found the Church seems to turn in on itself at that point to protect its own. Sometimes the Church will be often completely unaware that their actions may be an unintended response to manipulation and grooming from the abuser. Some investigations into abuse which focus on specific incidents miss grooming, manipulation, and coercive control - all of which can be much more damaging than any single incident: they can keep the church colluding with perpetrators.

Referring to the early stages of coping with disclosure, Susan Shooter writes, 'For all survivors in therapy, the deconstruction of protective barriers and conscious remembering of events is extremely painful since exposure of their woundedness and vulnerability is

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<sup>30</sup> for example Vito Zepinis in *Psychology and Behavioural Sciences*, 2016

<sup>31</sup> Susan Shooter, *How Survivors of Abuse relate to God*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Poling, J., *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, Nashville TN, Abingdon, 1991..





excruciating, but it is necessary. Suicidal thoughts, depression and anxiety are common at this stage.<sup>133</sup>

What compassionate and pastoral role could the Church be playing to support survivors through such painful times? It is very significant that in some survivor focus groups drawn together to explore the conversation between survivors of church-related abuse and the Church, what all survivors most wanted in the process of disclosure was to be held safely in the pain of betrayal, to be heard, to be listened to. After that, some wanted compensatory justice. Some just wanted help to heal<sup>34</sup>.

### **The truth about trauma:**

Almost certainly church people, like the general public, do not know enough about trauma. It is increasingly being realised that reacting to the effects of trauma is a large part of what many survivors of abuse are coping with, often long term. As Gilo helpfully reminded the General Synod in November 2020: 'The IICSA recognises the life-long impact of abuse and needs of survivors.' Trauma often affects a survivor for their lifetime, leading to unpredictable vulnerabilities: for some, the inability to hold down a job, sometimes even homelessness, which deepens the sense of injustice for them. The Church, which they may believe has hurt them, can appear to be well-off, whereas they may live in poverty. Trauma often leads to mental health issues, such as the daily sense of being vulnerable and afraid, and sometimes feeling disconnected from their 'true self'. The Core Group structure cannot deal with this. The Church could helpfully follow the NHS in adopting 'trauma-informed practice', i.e. 'seeing through a trauma lens'.<sup>135</sup>

Judith Herman<sup>36</sup> has written about the 'stages' of recovery from trauma - though these are usually not distinct and often the survivor moves between stages in a chaotic way: that is just how trauma is. However, with expert help, there is hope that the survivor will arrive at a

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Shooter *How Survivors of Abuse relate to God*.

<sup>34</sup> Chevous, J. and Etwaria, R. Survivors' Voices: *Safeguarding - Church of England Consultation Report*. 2020

<sup>35</sup> cf. the paper: 'Out of the silence: towards grassroots and trauma-informed support for people who have experienced sexual violence and abuse' *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, **28**, 598-602, by A. Sweeney, C. Perôt, F. Callard, V. Adenden, N. Mantovani and L. Goldsmith. Published online by Cambridge University Press: 12 April 2019: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796019000131>.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, New York, Basic Books, 1997.

point where they can find positive coping behaviours<sup>37</sup>, and start restoring the connections between themselves and their community<sup>38</sup>.

The needs of a survivor still coping with trauma is often much more long-term and requiring of more expert intervention than the Church is geared to provide, although where the Church is responsible for the abuse, they should be responsible for ensuring survivors get the help, including financial help, that they need. How can the whole church become more 'trauma-informed'? How can it aid the restoration of life-giving connections?

### **The truth about surviving in a church service**

We noted earlier the damage to a survivor's faith, and their view of God, as a result of church-related, indeed any, abuse. Particularly when the abuse has been perpetrated by a clergyperson or church leader, the sense of betrayal and loss of trust is profound. Any kind of abuse can have a massive effect on a survivor's faith, and their general sense of well-being. Coping with Church, which many survivors had hoped would be for them a source of comfort and stability, has proved to be extremely difficult for them.

The earlier Church of England Report *Promoting a Safe Church* (2006), helpfully commented on the problems many survivors have coping with church services. The following draws on a list in that Report of some common struggles which attending church can provoke:

- '● Saying the Lord's Prayer (believing that they must forgive immediately or God will reject them).
- Specific words can trigger unwanted feelings or images, such as 'Father', 'sin', 'let Jesus come into you', 'overshadow'.
- The Peace can frighten survivors because they often don't want to be touched, particularly hugged.

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<sup>37</sup> Sgroi S.M, ed., *Sexual Abuse Treatment for Children, Adult Survivors, Offenders and Persons with Mental Retardation: Vulnerable Populations Volume 2*, New York, Lexington,1989. REF.

<sup>38</sup> There is a growing body of strengths-based practice that recognises and supports what is called 'post-traumatic growth' - how, from the struggle with traumatic experiences, we actually change, grow and develop. cf. eg. Tedeschi,R.G& Calhoun,L.G (2004) 'Post-traumatic growth:conceptual foundations and empirical evidence.' *Psychological Inquiry*, 15. 1 - 18. doi.10.1207/s15327965pli1501\_01.



- The emphasis on sin can be so difficult for some survivors that they leave the Church altogether, unable to cope with their sense of shame.
- Anointing and touch is very difficult for someone whose body boundaries have been violated.

Holy communion can be extremely problematic.

- Words such as 'blood' and 'body' can trigger memories of the abuse.
- Some can't cope with anyone behind them, so queuing to get to the altar is difficult.
- Having to get physically close to others might lead to unwelcome smells, such as deodorant, aftershave or the smell of alcohol.
- It can be hurtful to kneel with a man standing over them delivering wine at crotch level.

Those who have been ritually or spiritually abused face particular difficulties. Triggers may include ritual symbols and equipment such as the altar, candles, chalice, crosses and crucifixes, the sacrificial lamb, etc. People abused by those in ministry may have been told 'it was ordained by God, a special service to those who serve the Lord, a blessing from God, Spirit-led', etc. Sensitivity, care and ideally informed input are needed to help people work through these issues to discover the liberating truth of the Gospel'.<sup>39</sup>

The sense of pollution is frequently internalized. Some survivors even feel that if they go to church they will 'pollute' the service for others.

Clearly not all of this is true for all victims and survivors of abuse, but that it is common is shown by the response to a question put to a group of about 60 Christian survivors as to how many of them regularly attended church? Answer: two.

Part of the pastoral care of the Church is to help survivors connect with their local congregations, should they want to. Clearly, some have been so hurt that they may not wish to belong to a worshipping community, and for others, even after much of their trauma has been resolved, the nature of their woundedness may mean that they still find church too triggering. For many reasons Church, for some, is not a safe place.

#### **(v) Justice, Lament, and Penitence**

One component of 'doing justice' is the expression of lament. In the history of Israel, in some of the prophets, and especially in the psalms, lament is a form of prayer to God.

Lament expresses sorrow, pain, longing for change; it exposes injustices. Lament is used to

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<sup>39</sup> Church of England, *Promoting a Safe Church*, 2006.



express complaint, or a sense of deep distress, sometimes wondering why evil triumphs; often pleading for justice. Several times we hear the plaintive prayer: 'How long, O Lord?', or the plea: 'O God, You have helped us in the past: help us now'. The poet in Psalm 7.11 reflects: 'God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day'. Lament psalms often lead eventually to a renewed trust in God: 'Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me! ... O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me.... Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God' (Ps. 43. 1,3,5.).

We know of survivors who have helpfully found in the psalms words to express their own laments.

Some laments are deeply personal, from times of illness or persecution; some are corporate laments when God's people feel oppressed by 'enemies'. Ruth Everhart comments that the #MeToo Movement in her context is a form of corporate public lament, which has in fact significantly changed the culture<sup>40</sup>. In many ways *Letters to a Broken Church* can be understood as an act of lament. But what of the wider Church? Some of the communal laments in the psalms are prayers expressing not only pain and sorrow but specifically penitence. Can the Church find a corporate way to hear the laments of survivors, and to express before God its own sorrows for the sufferings caused by church-related abuse, and can it link this with acts of penitence and the repentance which demonstrates change? Although multiple apologies have been issued in the Church of England, there has been no corporate sense of lament and penitence. To quote Gilo again: 'Talk of the Church apologising to survivors seems to us just more words.'

How can the conversation between the Church and survivors of church-related abuse find ways of working at this together? In his speech to the General Synod Gilo called for an act of penance. We agree, but our preference would be to include that within a wider process of

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<sup>40</sup> Ruth Everhart describes her book as itself 'a lament that sexual abuse is prevalent, and a call to action. I hope to inspire churches', she says, 'to stand passionately with survivors, pursue justice by prosecuting abusers, and make our faith communities safer and braver.' (212). 'The process of lamentation will grow our hearts large enough to contain our sorrow and despair. The consolation of lamentation will turn our wounds into scars. The energy of lamentation will spur us to action.' (219).

intentional lament and penitence. It would need to acknowledge not only sorrow for abuse, but also penitence for the ways in which by its ignorance, or neglect, its collusion or bad legal advice, the Church has magnified and added to that abuse. It would need to embody a call for all churches to pursue accountability, stand for justice, express lamentation and repentance. We believe that such a public process could contribute to a change of culture so that the Church stands alongside survivors providing emotional and practical pastoral care and support, engaging in conversation, sharing skills, pursuing justice, holding abusers to account, and making churches places where abusers no longer have a place to hide.

Perhaps this is a task for the weeks of Lent, perhaps culminating in a service of worship, penitence and recommitment to renewal - a service which, offered centrally in the Church, could then over time become part of the worship of different diocese or regions in the Church? The liturgy should be co-produced by the Church and survivors together. Such a service could bring to an end the general apologies, and make space for specific apologies for specific abuse and mishandling by the Church, ideally face to face between each survivor and the Bishop. It could also be held on All Survivors' Day<sup>41</sup> in November, perhaps to coincide with the LOUD fence initiative<sup>42</sup>.

It is our belief that we in the Church together need corporately to engage in lament and penitence. It is only then that the questions of forgiveness and reconciliation can properly be raised.

#### **(vi) Justice, Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Two of the great Gospel words which cause most anxiety to some Christian survivors are the words 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation.' We need to ask why.

We referred earlier to the psalmist's appeals to God's justice as bringing healing and salvation<sup>43</sup> that is, God's gracious actions in deliverance, healing, victory, liberation, and restoration. And one key salvation word is 'forgiveness'. In the Hebrew Bible, one word

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<sup>41</sup> <http://allsurvivorsday.org/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://facebook.com/loudfence/> tying ribbons and messages in support of survivors of church and institutional abuse.

<sup>43</sup> It is this same sense that is picked up centuries later in St Paul's affirmation in Rom 1.16-17: *I am not ashamed of the good news; it's God's power bringing salvation to everyone who believes... This is because God's covenant justice is unveiled in it.* (N.T. Wright translation).



translated 'forgive' (*nasa*) also means: 'lift up', or 'carry away' (so when God forgives, God carries away the wrong done and bears it himself).

In the New Testament one word translated 'forgive' (*apolouo*) can also mean: release, let go, or loose. A different word translated 'forgive' (*aphiemi*) also means: cancel, give up, leave behind.

The primary emphasis in God's forgiveness is on the action of God who heals, releases, lifts a burden, cancels a debt, restores a relationship. The New Testament even speaks of God's faithfulness and justice precisely in his forgiveness (1Jn 1.9). The costliness of forgiveness is seen in its frequent link to the Cross of Christ.

Forgiveness is not trivial or easy. Without a heartfelt apology, or in situations of on-going abuse, it may not even be appropriate or safe. One area of difficulty for survivors is the way the word 'forgiveness' has come to be used, sometimes more trivially, sometimes more harshly, than the Bible uses it.

### **Trivialising forgiveness**

'Forgiveness' is a word which in common use has too easily becomes trivialised. In the House of Lords on 24th November 2020, Lord Bishop Richard Harries acknowledged that the Home Secretary had apologised if she had inadvertently caused offence, after an independent report supported accusations of bullying. The Bishop suggested that the Prime Minister's decision not to take action was bound to raise eyebrows. In reply, Lord True said 'I learned in Sunday School that forgiveness is a Christian quality, and I believe we should accept the apology and move on.' In the Bible, forgiveness is not that cheap. However this 'Sunday School' understanding is widespread, not least among journalists - like the one who, many years ago, directed a microphone to the Rector of a London Church which had just been bombed by the IRA: 'Are you going to forgive the bombers?' The Rector quite properly replied that as far as he knew, no one had asked for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a relational word, which in its fullest meaning (which we might call 'full forgiveness', or what Anthony Bash<sup>44</sup> calls 'thick forgiveness') is applicable only after the perpetrator of the wrong has penitently acknowledged the wrong, and sought forgiveness. Even then forgiveness is not

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<sup>44</sup> Anthony Bash *Just Forgiveness: Exploring the Bible, Weighing the Issues*, London, SPCK, 2011



automatic, it is costly; not to be trivialised, especially when it follows the sort of abuse which Stephen Cherry, in his remarkable book *Healing Agony*, appropriately called 'Shattering Harm'<sup>45</sup>.

### Harsh Forgiveness

On the other hand, there are some in the Church who have so latched on to the central importance of God's forgiving grace, that they build on that to require forgiveness for any and all wrongs. 'God will not forgive you unless you forgive the person who abused you' is not uncommon. For a survivor of abuse to hear these words from the pulpit is enough to deter them from ever coming to that church again. It compounds the abuse - and in any case it is not true. The forgiving attitude to which Jesus refers in the Lord's Prayer, is part of the corporate prayer of the whole church: 'Forgive us as we forgive.' If a survivor finds it hard to say those words, and many do, we all need to remember that this is the prayer of the Church, and others are praying it for you, carrying the burden. Tom Wright helpfully comments<sup>46</sup> 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...*isn't* saying that we do this forgiving in order to *earn* God's forgiveness.'

The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 also causes many survivors much anxiety. The last difficult line 'So my heavenly Father will also do to you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart' has been used far too often to say to survivors of abuse: 'If you do not forgive, God will not forgive you' - even 'you will go to hell.' Yes, this has been heard. This is wholly to mistake the primary thrust of the parable, which is about the unexpected abundance of God's mercy. The lesson for the disciples is NOT 'unless you forgive, God cannot forgive you', which would make God's mercy conditional on our actions; rather that in response to God's abundant mercy we should have a forgiving and generous attitude *to those who ask us for mercy* (see also Luke 17.4). The parable in Matthew concerns how we should respond to a person who penitently seeks mercy from us, not how we should relate to someone who does not acknowledge their need for it (such as a perpetrator who denies actions which the survivor received as abusive). So a survivor who receives a full and genuine apology together with a request for forgiveness is to respond with

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen. Cherry, *Healing Agony:Re-imagining Forgiveness*, London: Continuum, 2012; p.14.

<sup>46</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, London SPCK, 2002.





mercy. The parable is not a threat to survivors but rather a message about the abundant and undeserved mercy of God.

The sort of human 'full forgiveness' which responds to God's forgiveness (the God who is described in our liturgy as one 'who forgives all who truly repent') is a relational act of the will responding to repentance. It is a costly action, to restore a relationship. It is never easy, and by no means always possible. However, what Anthony Bash calls 'thin forgiveness' focusses on the 'letting go' aspect of forgiving. This is appropriate when there is no apology or repentance; it is about letting go of feelings of hatred, resentment or retribution. We can, with grace, learn to 'let go' of the burden of carrying negative thoughts, and this can express a right 'forgiving attitude'<sup>47</sup> even when no apology has been given, and 'full' forgiveness is not possible. Such 'letting go' would set a person free from allowing the perpetrator's wrong to dominate their emotional life.

### **Reconciliation?**

It is possible that sometimes the 'thinner' sort of forgiveness we have called 'letting go' can lead to reconciliation, and to the recovery of a broken relationship. But we still need great care in thinking about this. Perhaps the abuser has died. Perhaps the perpetrator does not accept any wrongdoing and shows no penitence. Perhaps even a willingness for reconciliation is simply impossible for someone whose hurt is deep, and whose loss of personal selfhood is profound, or who is still at the stage of experiencing 'triggers' - reliving the abusive events - that can sometimes result in debilitating mental health issues.

We need to be very clear here what we are talking about. Up to now we have had in mind the difficult thought of a possible reconciliation between a survivor and their abuser. Advice from abuse charities is that suggesting survivors approach their abuser directly could be dangerous and is certainly very unwise. If that could ever be possible, with help, there should always be a third party present.

One of the pastoral tasks of the Church could be to assist a hurting survivor find a way of reframing their attitude to their perpetrator, away from a persistent tendency to see them only

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<sup>47</sup> A helpful phrase used in Sue Atkinson's *Struggling to Forgive : moving on from trauma*. Oxford: Monarch, 2014.

in terms of the wrong they have done, but as a needy person, yet of worth because loved by God. That can happen, over time, even when full forgiveness and reconciliation is not possible.

Here are some wise words from Nicholas Wolterstorff (he is not speaking of what we called 'full forgiveness', or 'thick forgiveness', but of the 'letting go' of resentments)<sup>48</sup>:

- 'Forgiveness, so I suggest, requires letting go of one's negative feelings towards the *wrongdoer*; it does not require letting go of one's negative feelings toward the deed done'.
- 'The victim may put the deed out of mind; but that does not alter the moral fact that she has been wronged'.
- 'It is possible to forgive him for the wrong, while nonetheless holding out little if any hope of reconciliation'.

That said, there may be occasions when, over time, with the grace of God, both victim and penitent wrongdoer may come to see the other not in terms only of the wrong that has been done, and this might open ways in which a fresh, and doubtless very different, relationship could be established. It is not quick, painless or easy; it is not usual, and cannot be required.

There may well be a role here, though, for the Church to work with an abuser where the victim cannot, to support them towards penitence and reformation. A survivor might not ever be ready to restore a relationship with their abuser, or forgive them; the Church might be able to do what an individual survivor cannot.

There is a different aspect of reconciliation which we must consider: that between survivors and the Church. Is reconciliation possible between a survivor of church-based abuse, and the Church as an institution? How is the survivor to feel they can 'let go', and be welcomed back into the church family, indeed, to see the Church *as family*, able to exercise his or her gifts for the good of others, if all they feel they have received from the Church is denial, rejection, exclusion and further hurt? Heartfelt apologies to individual survivors would be a good start. What can the Church learn from survivors of Church-based abuse? Some survivors, for example, have theological insights to bring from what they have learned from their

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<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice and Love*, Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2011. p. 169ff.

suffering in the light of the Cross. What needs to happen to enable them to feel again that they are persons of worth, loved by God, and equipped to contribute to the life of the Church?

Can the conversations between the Church and survivors lead to a healthier relationship of cooperation, mutual learning, and healing? After understanding more of lament, and of finding appropriate ways to express penitence, such a process, indeed such a journey, may become more possible.

### **(vii). Redemptive Justice.**

A number of survivors are speaking of 'Restorative Justice', and of a 'Truth and Reconciliation Process', and we have hesitated over those phrases. In some secular settings, for example the prison service, restorative justice in which supervised meetings are set up for victims to meet perpetrators, have proved of value. We know of course of the political use of the term for 'Truth and Reconciliation' processes in South Africa and Northern Ireland, and elsewhere, where again perpetrators meet victims, in each of which there have been reports of benefit, as well as, it has to be said, of some hurt and damage. However, any process which *requires* a meeting between a survivor and their abuser would not often be a good choice for survivors of church-related abuse; large warning signs here need to be heeded.

If, however, 'Restorative Justice' refers to a process whereby survivors of church-related abuse seek to find common ground with the Church, that could be healing, and aid understanding. So we need to be very clear what we are talking about. If 'Restorative Justice' can mean the sort of justice which heals rather than punishes or harms, it could be really helpful. It then becomes an aspect of what throughout we have called 'Redemptive Justice.' There is room for considerably more work on this. This could draw from community-based transformative justice approaches which bring together communities to support survivors and their families, and provide community accountability.<sup>49</sup>

### **Summary**

To summarise our journey so far: all human beings have worth (and therefore rights) because we are all loved by God. God's justice and righteousness transforms and broadens our

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<sup>49</sup> In the UK, see e.g. <https://standingtogether.org.uk/faith-vawg>. A toolkit is published in the USA - see <https://www.creative-interventions.org/>

'ordinary' human understanding of justice. God's justice is redemptive: its expression is compassionate, merciful, peace-making, healing, supporting, comforting, guiding, shepherding, and doing justice -with-shalom. This is what the ministry of Christ's kingdom requires of the Church. We have been trying to suggest that it is a mutual ministry in which survivors contribute their unique understandings and gifts to enable the whole Church together to grow in redemptive justice. It is a ministry which recognises abuses of power, learns how to do the truth and live in the truth, and seeks the shalom, the well-being and flourishing of all God's people. It is a ministry which seeks to aid the 'letting go' of attitudes which cripple and hurt, and the recovery of the sort of reconciliation that heals.

### **In Conclusion, then, What steps might be taken towards Redemptive Justice?**

We hope that, as the conversations between survivors of church-related abuse<sup>50</sup> and the Church (as institution) continue, we may explore at least the following:

(i) *The survivor's relationship with the abuser.* Can the Church find a way of taking on what Marie Fortune called 'the responsibility of justice-making for victims and survivors when perpetrators do not or cannot repent and/or offer restitution'? The Church must find a way, despite all the necessary processes and protocols associated with Safeguarding, not to neglect its primary pastoral responsibilities to a victim/survivor who is hurting and needs care.

(ii) *The survivor's relationship with The Church as an institution.* Survivors can teach the wider Church what it would mean to move into structures of grace. The question of adequate redress and financial compensation for people abused by representatives of the Church needs at the least to match up to the needs of basic fairness towards people loved by God. The Church can work for greater transparency in its structures and processes, and seek to make them not only just, but redemptive. It could provide more support and advocacy as survivors go through the process after disclosing. The need is for the Church to change its culture away from its history of compounding the hurt of abuse, and towards helping survivors to heal, and to reconnect with their Church if they wish to do so.

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<sup>50</sup> Our primary focus has been on church-related abuse - that is, it concerns any abuse committed by people associated with or identified with the church. Much of what we have written applies also to church members who have been abused by someone outside the church context., but who look to the church for support. Of course, the church has a pastoral role for any survivor of any kind of abuse, whether church-related or not.

(iii) *The survivor's relationship with their church leader.* Maybe the survivor has disclosed their abuse to their vicar or their bishop? The victim/survivor of church-related abuse deserves help in moving from a place of disturbance, where - for some - the Church has become a symbol of betrayal, and of the destruction of faith and trust, even squeezing God out of the picture, to a place of acceptance, inclusion and healing grace.

(iv). *Survivors need to help the Church understand about trauma.* The Church needs to find some pastoral response to a victim/survivor whose suffering from trauma may have been caused years ago, and may now take years to heal. Could there, perhaps, be a provision of expert trauma therapy available, provided by the Church - say from a retreat centre from which survivors receive care. Maybe the Church could support places that already offer such care, for example Holy Rood House.<sup>51</sup> (Other social needs have become Church priorities in the past: health, schooling, housing. Care for survivors of abuse is one of today's social priorities).

(v) *What role should a Bishop play in all these processes?* Too often, the bishop is wheeled in to write a letter of apology at the end of a long process of investigation or statutory agency involvement, and often feels constrained to 'keep out of the process' because of legal advice, when they would rather be more 'pastoral'. How can bishops again recover the image of the Chief Pastor and Shepherd in relation to the issues of abuse? Does the Church of England need to designate a Bishop (not with diocesan responsibilities, but a member of the House of Bishops) to work alongside the crucial role of the Lead Bishop for Safeguarding, but with a particularly responsibility of care for and liason with survivors?

(vi) *Survivors contribute to training.* Many survivors are best placed to assist the Church in its training programmes for Safeguarding, and for appropriate pastoral ministry to people who are hurting. It is important that training is provided by the Church and survivors working together.

(vii). *A liturgy of lament, penitence and renewal?* Could survivors and church leaders together offer a joint liturgy of lament, penitence and recommitment, of healing and grace,

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<sup>51</sup> Holy Rood House: <http://www.holyroodhouse.org.uk/index.html>

which could bear witness to the grace of Christ's Gospel? It could be seen as part of the Church's ministry of healing, and could serve to bring some closure to our present painful situation, and direct the whole church into ways of wisdom for the future.

**Gracious and loving God, our Creator and Redeemer, guide us in the ways of your justice and peace; strengthen us by your Spirit; in your healing compassion, renew our lives, and restore to us the joy of your salvation; that we may grow in love and service to you and to each other.**

**Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Dr. David Atkinson is an Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Southwark, and has written about pastoral theology. He is a supporter of *Survivors' Voices*.<sup>52</sup>

Dr Sue Atkinson is a writer, a survivor of childhood abuse. Her doctorate is in professional development and how groups learn to change. She has contributed to various Church of England Reports on responding to abuse, and is author of *Climbing Out of Depression*, Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1993; *Breaking the Chains of Abuse*, Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2006; and *Struggling to Forgive*, Oxford: Monarch Books, 2014. She is a member of *Survivors' Voices*.

We are very grateful for help received from Jane Chevous of *Survivors' Voices*.

(January 2021).

## **Join the conversation**

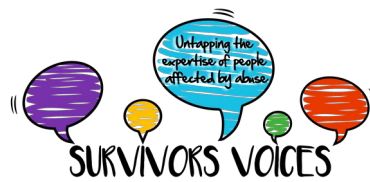
Survivors Voices will be hosting round table discussions about the issues in this paper, and creating and gathering other resources relating to safeguarding, abuse, survivors and faith communities. Please see our website for details, and to sign up our mailing list for information about our work and support for survivors: [www.survivorsvoices.org](http://www.survivorsvoices.org).

Read on for more information about survivors and survivors letters to the church...

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<sup>52</sup> [www.survivorsvoices.org](http://www.survivorsvoices.org).





### Who we are

**Survivors Voices** is a survivor-led organisation that harnesses the expertise of people affected by abuse in order to change society's response to trauma.

We work with survivors of all types of abuse, whether experienced as a child or as an adult.

We are part of Reshapers CIC, a non-profit organisation. Our work is undertaken by an experienced network of volunteers and freelancers from a variety of backgrounds.

### What we do

We run **peer support** groups for survivors.

We have **peer networks** for survivor researchers, writers, therapists and other survivor activists. We are always open to survivor activists who wish to join us.

We have a survivor and allies network for survivors of abuse in faith communities. Currently we are concentrating on survivor engagement with the Church of England and other Christian settings.

We **educate** about abuse and trauma-informed practice. We can speak at your event or run training or workshops.

We **research** survivor experience of abuse, safeguarding, help-seeking and recovery. We can help you to engage well with survivors in your research project.

We **publish** research and resources for survivors and those who work with them.

We work anywhere to engage and amplify the **voice of survivors**. If you are a survivor who wants to be heard, a professional or service who wants to listen, or an ally who wants to support us, we want to hear from you.

[connect@survivorsvoices.org](mailto:connect@survivorsvoices.org)

### Survivor/Trauma-informed theology

This is the first paper in a series we are developing on survivor spirituality and trauma-informed theology. We'll be holding virtual round-table discussions on Redemptive Justice and other topics throughout 2021. Sign up to our newsletter here <https://survivorsvoices.org/contact-us/>

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## Letters to a Broken Church

edited by Janet Fife and Gilo

***A message that can no longer be ignored...***

Drawing on the personal experience of survivors of abuse and their allies, *Letters to a Broken Church* speaks directly into the existential abuse crisis facing the Church of England and other Christian denominations right now.

Its powerful message is that the structures, leadership, practices and culture of the Church must change radically to face up to the historic scale of abuse within its institutions at all levels.

The clear requirement for transparency and accountability after decades of evasion and denial is also highlighted in these essays, along with the need to make proper recompense to those whose lives have been impacted.

Contributors to *Letters to a Broken Church* include a serving bishop, a well-known newspaper columnist, several theologians and others from public life – but principally people in the shadows whose voices and experience as survivors have frequently been pushed aside, marginalised or silenced within the Church.

Here is a searingly honest, multi-voice call for action and redress that can no longer be ignored.



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