

Understanding **Spiritual Abuse** in Christian Communities

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What is this research about?

There is growing awareness and interest in spiritual abuse in faith communities as a subject (Oakley, 2016). Existing work around this experience (which is characterised by a systematic pattern of controlling and coercive behaviour in a religious context), is still in its infancy, to the extent that there is not currently universal agreement about this as a term. There is some discussion about it being categorised as a form of emotional and/or psychological abuse, however, to date spiritual abuse is the most commonly used term and therefore the one that is used here.

What *is* clear, is that there is a distinct lack of research available on this subject in the UK, which is why this new research is being undertaken to respond to that need. With it, we seek to investigate current levels of knowledge and awareness of spiritual abuse in the Christian faith in the UK, to provide evidence to inform our understanding, and to develop effective responses, policy and practice.

This research builds on two earlier pieces of work in this area (both of which obtained ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan university). The first comprised of narrative interviews with survivors of spiritual abuse to ascertain the main characteristics of this experience (Oakley, 2009). The second was the 'Church experience survey' (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013; 2014) which explored experiences of attending Church and included some discussion of spiritual abuse in the Christian faith community.

A mixed methods approach (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007) has been used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data via a questionnaire which consisted of closed and open questions. For respondents to be included they needed to be from the Christian faith and attend Church or belong to a Christian organisation. To answer the questionnaire participants needed to have heard of the term 'spiritual abuse'.

The questions did not ask individuals to disclose their personal stories of spiritual abuse, although some respondents did incorporate their personal accounts into their answers. The section given to effective response was only available to those who identified themselves as having experienced spiritual abuse. As wide a range of respondents were invited to participate as possible. The research gained ethical approval from the Bournemouth University social sciences ethic committee in December 2016 and the survey was live for eight weeks from 30/1/17 to 30/3/17.

Who is conducting this research?

This research was commissioned by CCPAS (Churches Child Protection Advisory Service), the UK's only independent Christian safeguarding charity. It is led by Dr Lisa Oakley from the National Centre for Post Qualifying Social Work at Bournemouth University.

Who has completed the survey?

In total 1,591 people completed the on-line survey. The results show that of these 1,002 identified as having experienced spiritual abuse themselves. (It should be noted that this was a self-identified sample and therefore cannot be verified). 69% of the total sample were female and 31% male. There was representation from across the age range but the majority were aged between 30-69 years. Respondents came from a spectrum of denominational backgrounds, however, the majority were from the Anglican, Baptist, Independent and Pentecostal traditions. The category of 'other' is quite significant at 17.85%, with the majority of respondents in this category identified as Quakers. It should be noted that the numbers of respondents from Catholic and Methodist denominations were low and this should be taken into account when interpreting the results.



74%

74% of respondents were **confident** they knew what the term **spiritual abuse** meant.

Key characteristics of spiritual abuse identified were **coercion** and **control, manipulation** and **pressuring** of individuals, control through the **misuse of religious texts** and scripture and providing a **'divine' rationale** for behaviour.

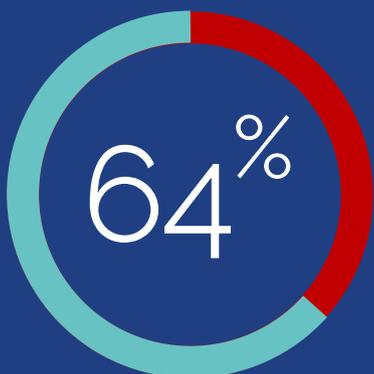


The results show that there is a need for a **clear definition** of spiritual abuse and that defining this term is **complex**.



A key message was that **leaders** can and do experience **spiritual abuse** from those they are **leading**, and this experience needs to be **recognised** and **responded** to.

Respondents noted the important role **culture** can play in coercive and controlling experiences and the need to consider the **hallmarks** of healthy cultures.



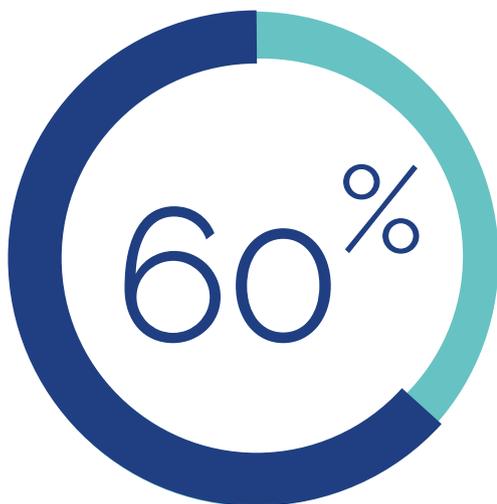
64% of participants were **confident** that they could **respond well** to a disclosure of spiritual abuse.



Features of **responding well** to a disclosure include: **active listening**, **understanding** and **empathy**, taking the disclosure **seriously**, not minimising the story or **blaming** the individual.

Respondents stated the importance of developing **clear policy** and **procedure** in this area.

Only **33%** of respondents stated their Church or Christian organisation had a **policy** that included spiritual abuse.



60% of respondents suggested they knew where to go for **help** or **support** with this experience.

Respondents suggested that Church leaders, CCPAS, Family and friends and statutory agencies could be **effective sources of support**.



Only 24% of respondents had **received training** on spiritual abuse.

Respondents requested training which included: **definition** and **identification** of Spiritual Abuse, **effective responses** and support, and a consideration of **culture**.



The findings suggest leaders should **receive training** on this issue both to raise **awareness** but also to **equip** them to respond to disclosures and **recognise** this behaviour if they are experiencing it.

Some respondents in the survey identified themselves as **counsellors** and requested specific **training** on this issue.

Conclusions:

The results illustrate the necessity to develop work in this area, specifically to develop understanding of this experience, how to respond effectively and how to develop healthy cultures.

When using this information please reference this document as follows:

Oakley & Humphreys (2018) Understanding Spiritual Abuse in Christian Communities.

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