

“An entirely different approach...”

The Church of England and survivors of abuse

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In a recent email to senior church leaders I pleaded for “an entirely different approach” in the church’s relationship with victims of abuse in church contexts. Bishop Sarah Mullally encouraged me to spell out what that might look like. This is my brief attempt to explain.

The nature of abuse is to inflict trauma on the personhood of the victim. It is a conscious invasion, intended to violently challenge and destabilise the physical, sexual, cultural and/or spiritual identity of the Other – to fundamentally devalue their Otherness and forcefully mark them with the identity of the abuser. In other words, abuse is intrinsically relational. Where the abuser is ontologically identified with an organisation or culture, as in the case of teacher, sports coach or church officer for example, the identity that is marked includes that of the organisation. So a victim abused by a clergyman is indelibly marked as a victim of church abuse, and the relationship that is damaged is not only that between the victim and their abuser, but also between the victim and the institution. Victims of abuse in church contexts are baptised, not into the identity of Christ, but into a false baptism as a worthless object for the pleasure of the church. Many church leaders fail to understand this, and act as if, in their dealings with victims, they are simply being asked to make good the acts of a previous generation, for which they feel somewhat grudgingly responsible. In fact the role of church leaders is to robustly reverse the previous messages, and affirm the worth and identity of the broken victim as a true icon of Christ.

Because the nature of abuse is ontological, healing from abuse is categorically different from other kinds of reparation. A victim of fraud may be compensated with money, such that reparation reaches a point of full repayment. If there is a dispute about damages, it may be resolved by mediation. A victim of accidental injury may be physically treated so that their wounds reach a point of complete healing. A person whose human identity has been radically traumatised by abuse will never achieve completion, but may have a lifelong struggle with issues of identity and value. Many church leaders understand this from their own experience, but Anglican ecclesiology and culture leaves very little room for leaders to acknowledge their own vulnerability in this area. As a result, most of those who carry the wounds of abuse themselves choose not to speak about them, or if they do, to insist that they have had no lasting effects.

Ironically, those survivors who say that they are content with the way that the church has treated them may be unwittingly saying that they are able to internalise the devalued identity that has been given to them, whilst those survivors who continue

to protest are saying to the church “I am still here, and I still matter.” The latter group have the most to teach a church that is, if truth be told, struggling with its own identity and victimhood in a society where it is increasingly Othered by the culture.

Sadly, instead of seeing the theological and missional opportunity presented by the current crisis of abuse, the church currently chooses to relate to survivors through the managerial culture of the secular polity. Allegations of abuse are seen as legacy problems in the smooth running of the institution. Abuse is constructed as an event requiring an economic and managerial solution, rather than a ruptured relationship requiring restoration. Instead of embracing victims as wounded strangers on the Jericho road, bishops greet each fresh revelation as a problem. That is why the church’s response over the last ten years has been to produce policy, mandate training, increase budgets, and refer to lawyers and insurers – and where possible to avoid or minimise responsibility. Of course the impact of this on a victim, who is continuing to come to terms with their ruptured personhood, is to see the church once again trying to impose its own identity, and to minimise the value of the broken individual in relation to the powerful institution. This is what victims sometimes describe as “re-abuse” – the contemporary church adding its endorsement to the messages of the original abuser.

Very often a victim approaches the church thinking, “Perhaps disclosing my abuse could be a step towards rebuilding my identity?” In practice they find themselves face to face with a bishop thinking “How can I fix this new problem, whilst minimising the cost and reputational damage to the church?” Victims of abuse are often deeply shocked to discover that the church is going to adopt such an adversarial approach to them.

A radically alternative approach is possible.

For Christians, the resurrection of Christ represents a comprehensive and definitive disruption of the natural order. The message of the resurrection is not merely that what has been broken can be restored – though it is that. Nor is it simply that the church can weather the greatest of disasters. Resurrection ruptures the meaning and order of the universe, making non-sense of our ordered managerialism, and fundamentally undermining the church’s self-perception. In the resurrection the church acknowledges that it cannot make sense of itself, and into this chaos, God breathes life. The church that fails to embrace the disorder of the resurrection cannot experience Christ at all. A church that seeks to manage its way through its own sin can hardly be said to have understood the resurrection. But the church that helplessly embraces the destruction of its own identity and still finds itself alive, discovers a mission of conveying God’s reconciliation to the broken world. It is simply impossible to make sense of a church that has perpetrated abuse, and nor should we try to do so. It is impossible to square the experience of resurrection with the insurance-led and solution-focussed approach of the church towards abuse victims.

This is why the church finds itself at odds with itself, and paralysed by the issue of abuse.

Like the resurrection, the experience of abuse, particularly physical or sexual abuse, is fundamentally transgressive and, for most individuals, cannot subsequently be incorporated into their narrative, but remains the event that is beyond meaning, and thus gives meaning to the rest of life. The church that recognises this should embrace victims of abuse, rather than seeking to distance itself from them in what appears to be a fear of their brokenness.

The practical outcome of this is that when a person discloses abuse in a church context, the response of church leaders, acting on behalf of the church, should be first and foremost to draw close to the victim. Recognising that this individual has had their personhood ruptured by an agent of Christ, the bishop should invoke Christ for the restoration of that personhood. In practice this means that instead of taking a managerial approach to dealing with the consequences of sin, church leaders should take a restorative approach, seeking the welfare of the victim above all. Their first and continuing question should be “What can I (and we as the church) do to help this individual? How can we identify with the damage that we have done to their personhood, and enable them to flourish in the days ahead?” Those of us who walk with victims of abuse know that it is their own determination to flourish (or too often their belief that flourishing may never again be possible) that is uppermost in their minds and hearts, not financial recompense or legal resolution. The church, through its leaders, needs to find ways of saying from the outset, “The identity that was forced upon you by my colleagues in the church was untrue, and I am deeply sorry that we forced it upon you. From now on we will treat you with the dignity worthy of a child of God. What is more we hope and believe that you can flourish again, and we commit do everything within our power to making that possible.”

In practice, of course, this rebuilding will not happen in a single meeting or event, any more than the original damage was caused in a single moment. What is needed is a restorative approach. It will require the intervention of skilled reconcilers (not mediators, since mediation implies fault on both sides.) The church may need to find imaginative ways of releasing whatever it is that the victim needs to flourish. Sometimes that may be information; sometimes it will be security in the form of guaranteed housing or sustained income. Sometimes it may involve public apology or other acts of humility. This will be time-consuming and humbling. It will require imagination. It may be costly in ways that insurers cannot comprehend. It will certainly require change from the church and its leaders. One thing is certain - restoration is incompatible with business as usual. The goal throughout should be the flourishing of the victim, and if possible, the spiritual growth of the church and its leaders.

One of the distinctives of the church's response over the past ten years has been what might be described as "event apologies." When a fresh case of clergy wrongdoing comes to light, a bishop is sent out in public – often through the distancing medium of a press statement - to express how deeply sorry the church is for what happened, and how lessons will be learned. This cheap repentance turns the issue into a matter of procedure, and entirely bypasses the needs of the victim. Seldom if ever will a bishop meet the victim to kneel before them, or weep with them and their families, or ask what they need. To do so would be to acknowledge not just legal but more importantly spiritual indebtedness. The number of impersonal event apologies issued by the church over the last ten years has meant that their value is exponentially diminished. Scripture tells us clearly that a cheap expression of apology without tangible acts of repentance is worthless. The church has looked in the mirror a thousand times, but has immediately forgotten what it looks like. If the leaders of the church want to truly represent their repentance for the church's sins, they may need to find far more potent symbols. What does a tangible act of repentance look like? Tearing of robes? Prostration? The wearing of ashes? At the very least surely it involves descending from the palace or bishop's croft to meet victims on their own terms to engage in deep and extended listening.

Those who are choosing how to respond on behalf of the church must recognise that just as the victim's efforts to rebuild and protect the value of their personhood will be lifelong, so the church's engagement with them on that journey must be lifelong too. This means that for victims of church abuse, reparation needs to be framed in terms of ongoing support, just as it is with other members of the church. In practice this means that the church should look to the victim's continuing needs, whether they be for counselling, housing, employment or finance. Reparation should be seen in terms of a stipend rather than a settlement. If this seems onerous it should be remembered that the extravagance with which the church chooses to anoint those whose identities have been utterly broken is the measure of the love it has for Christ. The question that church leaders need to ask in relation to victims of abuse is not how little can I pay them, but how much can I love them.

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