

ABUSE IN THE CHURCH – SOME PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

By Alistair Ross

Anne Townsend spends much of her time listening to those who have been abused, often by leaders within the church. As a consequence she has co-written *Hidden Treasure*, its message much needed by the church. The question explored here is, 'What do we do when we discover abuse in the church?' Here are four suggestions.

Firstly, the question of abuse is often raised by those dealing with teenagers who are discovering, physically and emotionally, their sexuality. One of the consequences of the current widespread discussion of abuse is that anything and everything may be attributed to it. Teenagers are capable of a frightening and sometimes distressing range of behaviours arising from a whole variety of causes. Youth workers, social workers, foster carers, secondary teachers and others can provide insights into what teenagers normally do and don't do. They are likely to give advice based on broad experience, rather than jumping to conclusions such as those ('It must be abuse') sometimes received from concerned parents in the church.

Secondly, if in the course of working with teenagers or children, you come upon certain practices or behaviour patterns which seem unhealthy, these should be investigated. Take someone with you who is capable of being a witness and maintaining confidentiality, and visit the person responsible in the manner suggested in Matthew 18:15-17.

Thirdly, if a child or teenager claims to have been abused, it is important that he or she is believed. Disbelief brings the pain of being locked into a situation with no escape. If an allegation of physical or sexual abuse is brought to you, you should contact a duty social worker at the local Social Services or someone in the Police Child Protection Team. They will initiate the procedures required by the 1989 Children's Act, investigating whether the child is 'likely to experience significant harm'. The resulting train of events, while difficult and painful for all involved, is necessary

for the ongoing protection of the child concerned. The child and other threatened members of the family may be taken into care, although this is always a last resort. The pastoral needs of the entire family, whether or not the allegation is substantiated, are enormous, and anyone from the church involved in supporting such individuals or families will in turn need support.

Fourthly, try to ensure that members of the congregation involved with needy children or adolescents (e.g. social workers, foster carers) are given sufficient pastoral support. For one such couple in my congregation, we have formed a monthly support group. Here they find space to vent their feelings about the traumas caused by abuse, and their frustrations at bewildering decisions sometimes caused by the inflexibility of statutory care systems.

The church needs to think clearly about its role in the care of the abused. Anne Townsend and Muriel Green's book will help to dispel some of our naivete; there could also be value in asking someone from Social Services or the Child Protection Team to come in to help children's, youth and pastoral workers think through the issues involved.

Alistair Ross is Director of Psychodynamic Studies, and Associate Professor in Psychotherapy at the Department for Continuing Education. Alistair trained as a psychodynamic counsellor at Leicester University, and as a psychodynamic supervisor at Birmingham University. He led the MA in Psychodynamic Counselling at the University of Birmingham. He is a senior accredited counsellor and supervisor with the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), was Chair of BACP's Professional Ethics and Quality Standards Committee (2010-2015) and is Chair of BACP's Expert Ethics Reference Group. He has also trained as a Psychodynamic Interpersonal Therapist and a Dynamic Interpersonal Therapist (accredited by the British Psychoanalytic Council). He is an accredited Baptist minister. He has also been a Board member of RBIM.