Information Sheet 3
Spiritual Abuse

What is spiritual abuse?

Spiritual abuse generally refers to the misuse of a position of power, leadership or influence within a faith community in order to control members of that group. Spiritual abuse can result in the abuser gaining power over the group or individuals within it, committing sexual crimes or seeking personal financial gain or social status.

Spiritual abuse can happen in every religion and in every denomination. In recent decades, we have seen that some clergy and others with positions of power or authority in churches have abused that power to exploit children, young people and adults.

Spiritual abuse as a form of domestic abuse

Spiritual abuse can also occur within intimate partner relationships or within families. It can occur as part of a patterns of abusive behaviour or as a standalone form of abuse.

In a domestic setting, spiritual abuse often includes the abuser:

- Ridiculing or disparaging the other person's religious or spiritual beliefs
- Preventing their partner from practicing their religion
- Exploiting their partner's religious or spiritual beliefs/practices to manipulate or shame them
- Misusing religious texts, beliefs and practices to minimise or rationalise abusive behaviours such as controlling behaviour, physical, emotional or sexual abuse and rape
- Claiming that cultural values are mandated by religion
- Using religious or spiritual beliefs to control any children in the household including controlling their religious life

Research does not show any significant differences between different denominations or theological standpoints in the rates of domestic abuse.

What does this mean in a Christian context?

Faith is a core part of the way we live our lives and the way we understand our world. Although spiritual abuse can happen within any religion, it is inevitable that Christianity shapes the experiences of Christian survivors of domestic abuse.

Christian faith, and churches, can be a source of comfort and strength for survivors offering love, hope and support to challenge abuse and leave abusive partners. However, spiritual abuse is an example of deliberately using someone's faith against them and of how Christian faith and teaching can be misused, causing pain, suffering and despair.

Spiritual abuse justifies and excuses beliefs and practices which reinforce gender inequality through misusing God, Jesus, sacred texts and church doctrine. It creates a dynamic where Christian teachings can be used to reinforce abusive behaviours and make it harder to seek help both inside and outside the church.

Where survivors do seek help from their faith leaders or community, spiritual abuse can often be furthered by inappropriate responses. Sometimes survivors are put under pressure to stay with, support and even pray for their abusive partner. Often, women are put under pressure to preserve their marriage and home over their personal safety. Sometimes, women are discouraged from seeking advice or support by initial responses from their faith community in which they are disbelieved or dismissed. In other cases, churches have chosen to support the perpetrator of domestic abuse or to push the survivor into forgiving him. This means that spiritual abuse, and the advice given by faith leaders, can be a major factor in survivors leaving the Church for good.

We believe that each person is created equal in the image of God and that all are precious. We must find ways to ensure that our faith and our Church empowers all, nourishes all and promotes fullness of life for everyone. Any violation of a person's integrity, of her body, her dignity, her autonomy, including spiritual abuse, is a violation of God.