

# Spiritual Abuse and Coercive Control in a Religious setting



**WALKING ALONGSIDE  
THOSE WHO HAVE  
EXPERIENCED  
ABUSE AND TRAUMA  
WITHIN FAITH.**

**GET SUPPORT.  
GET INVOLVED.**

**[www.replenished.life](http://www.replenished.life)**



## A. Is it Spiritual Abuse?

### 1. What is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. However, holding a theological position is not in itself inherently spiritually abusive, but misuse of scripture, applied theology and doctrine is often a component of spiritually abusive behaviour. (L. Oakley 2017)<sup>1</sup>

The term Spiritual Abuse can be contentious and therefore must be carefully qualified. For the sake of brevity, we will use the term “Spiritual Abuse” in place of the wider term and the meaning will include Coercive Control in a Religious Setting from this point forward.

Replenished recognise that the vast majority of faith-based organisations operate in a healthy way and that Spiritual Abuse is not present within their organisation. Faith Based organisations when operating with a healthy culture provide a vital service to their communities.

### 2. Recognising Spiritual Abuse

It is helpful to build on the definition above by exploring key characteristics of Spiritual Abuse.

#### Key Characteristics

- Use of scripture to coerce and control
- Enforced Accountability
- Manipulation and Exploitation
- Pressure to Conform
- Censorship
- Requirement for blind obedience
- Use of ‘divine calling’ to coerce
- Exclusion and Isolation
- Public Shaming and humiliation

It is important to state that these would be seen within a pattern of behaviours

### 3. How common is spiritual abuse?

This is a difficult question to answer as there have been no research studies in the UK to base an answer on around prevalence. We can therefore only answer this question from our experience of supporting those who have experienced Spiritual Abuse and the increasing media coverage.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thirtyoneeight.org/media/2191/spiritual-abuse-position-statement.pdf>

Evidence from the last 12 months of Support line calls that 100 callers have reported spiritual abuse. For each of these callers we are aware that there are others in that organisation that will also have experienced Spiritual Abuse. As awareness is raised of the Replenished support line we expect to be able to give a more accurate picture of the prevalence of Spiritual Abuse.

What is clear, is that there is an increasing awareness in the media and every week there is a media story around Spiritual Abuse.

What we can categorically say on this matter is that Spiritual Abuse is experienced in all faiths, by members of faith based organisations and at all levels of leadership. If you have experienced Spiritual Abuse then you are not on your own, there are people out there who understand and can provide support. If you need support then please ring Replenished Life Support line.

#### **4. Who can experience Spiritual Abuse?**

Research undertaken by CCPAS (now thirtyone:eight) and Bournemouth University "Understanding spiritual abuse in the Christian Community" clearly demonstrates that Spiritual Abuse can be experienced by those in positions of leadership, those in positions of parallel leadership and those in lower power positions as well as members of congregations and organisations. Spiritual Abuse can be experienced by individuals and groups.

Anyone of any faith, religion or belief, age, disability, gender (including all gender identities), sexual orientation or race can experience Spiritual Abuse. Spiritual Abuse can cause a loss of faith and therefore people of no faith can live with the impact of past spiritual abuse.

The services offered by Replenished Life are therefore open to those of any faith or of no faith. Any services will be offered equally to everyone regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (including colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origin), religion or belief, sex (gender) and sexual orientation.

Replenished does not hold a theological position on any of the above issues other than that everyone should be nurtured, valued and respected regardless of any of the above characteristics.

#### **5. Have I experienced spiritual abuse?**

If you have read the definition and the key characteristics of Spiritual Abuse and this has been a pattern of behaviour towards you then it is likely that you have experienced Spiritual Abuse and need some support.

If you are still uncertain then please phone the support line and we will be happy to discuss this further.