



Chapter Four

Listening to religious communities



1. Introduction

We listened to nineteen members of religious communities, eleven from men's congregations and eight from women's congregations. Three of the men were religious brothers and the other eight were ordained priests. Six belonged to three different monastic communities; two belonged to orders that are active in many fields of ministry. Two of the women belonged to monastic communities. At least seven were or had been in leadership roles either at provincial level or in a monastery.

The distinctive voices of religious women and men are seldom heard in the pastoral life of the local Church and still less is heard of their experience in relation to the abuse crisis. The way in which congregations and communities have had to examine their life and work varies depending on their particular form of life and their ministries. Their perspectives on abuse take in a broader range of types of abuse than the cases of clerical sexual abuse of children; they have had to acknowledge physical, emotional and spiritual abuse as well as sexual abuse. The voices presented here also explore the factors that facilitate or are conducive to abuse within different forms of religious life and the impact on communities of developing good practice in safeguarding.

The prevalence of abuse in male religious communities and ministries

The data available about sexual abuse of children in the Catholic Church in England and Wales is limited and somewhat fragile, but it does give an indication of the scale and character of what happened, including some details about the degree to which religious are involved. In Bullivant's statistical analysis covering the years from 1970 to 2015, 37 per cent of the complaints of abuse made to Catholic institutions related to religious orders, covering 390 alleged abusers.⁵¹ Just under half (49 per cent) of the male religious congregations surveyed submitted data about complaints. The numbers of complaints were in single figures each year until 1992, and then rose rapidly over the next decades, peaking in 2010. The complaints largely related to abuse in earlier years, with the highest levels of abuse reported as happening in the 1960s and 70s.⁵² New cases continue to emerge, but the data suggest a significant reduction in recent years compared with the high rates of abuse reported during the latter half of the twentieth century. In 2019, the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission reported that seventeen cases against religious priests were ongoing and twenty-eight religious priests and five other male religious had allegations made against them.

In male religious communities, sexual abuse of children is mostly associated with schools under their care. We heard comments on this area from survivors and family members and from male religious. Two of these, the former provincial leader of an order of brothers and a parent of children who attended a monastery school, identified a strong link between sexual abuse and having access to children. Running schools, particularly boarding schools, gave priests and male religious access to children and the opportunity to abuse them. We heard other



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evidence describing the cultures which allowed this to happen. A male religious told us it was common knowledge that members of the community shared beds with teenagers prior to the 1980s. A survivor of sexual abuse in a monastic boarding school spoke about the behaviour of the brother responsible for their year in school who frequently sexually assaulted boys in the showers and in the dormitories at night. Boys also had to put up with violent beatings in class. He said of his school: *'It was so prevalent; I mean it was everywhere.'* These internal cultures of abuse and secrecy created a breeding ground for transgressive behaviours in other settings. The former provincial leader of a men's religious order reflected that the fact that they did not run schools might be one reason why they had never had as many cases and allegations made against them as other male congregations had experienced.

In our interviews with religious, we heard accounts of what appear to be examples of religious congregations attempting to deny or cover-up suspected or actual incidents of abuse by their members. Some of this was seen as unintentional. Research participants told us that at the time, people were unaware of what others in their communities were doing. Others reflected that in the days before safeguarding training, they did not know or understand signs of abusive behaviour. Even if they saw it, they did not have the language to talk about it or the procedures to enable them to report their suspicions to those in authority, either internally in the community or to external church authorities. As a result, offenders were often able to hide in plain sight, enabled by the culture of secrecy that existed and continues to exist across parts of religious life.

Some of the denial and cover-up however was consciously decided. Moving 'troublesome' priests was a common response in religious congregations as it was in dioceses. The former provincial leader of a men's congregation said that his time in leadership had taught him that there were two failsafe indicators of suspected or actual abuse: missing documents and the man concerned being sent abroad, sometimes repeatedly or permanently. *'It seemed to me, that somewhere along the line, it was possibly one of the coping mechanisms, get the problem out of the way and also obliterate the evidence.'* he reflected. This was often done to try to protect the reputation of the congregation or the Church or even to protect the reputation of the individual priest or brother. A priest and former religious described a particularly disturbing incident where he tried to draw attention to the presence and behaviour of a known abuser in the congregation. The head of the order responded by saying that *'father must be protected at all costs because he is a consecrated person.'* No one was prepared to take any action against the man, and instead, the order arranged for him to go to a different country where he abused again, and then was moved on again, in a familiar pattern.



Terms to describe religious life

There are many terms used to describe the structures and roles within religious life. As noted in Chapter One, in this text, we use 'congregation' and 'order' interchangeably to refer to the larger body to which an individual belongs, and 'monastery' or 'local community' or 'religious community' to refer to the particular units in which people live. Most orders are international, but work in regional provinces, so we also talk about provincial leaders and local leaders. Province size varies and may cover the UK or may include other countries. Sometimes we do not explain whether the leader is male or female to protect anonymity. In some religious communities, the leader is termed 'the superior', and that term appears here in some material from the data.

The prevalence of abuse in female religious communities and ministries

Very few women religious have been accused of sexual abuse. The small amount of data that exists suggests that sexual abuse is less common among women religious, but there have been accusations of spiritual, physical and emotional abuse, and of neglecting those in their care.

We listened to two survivors of forms of abuse by sisters, both relating to some decades ago. One, in a school run by sisters, suffered psychological damage as a young boy. Whilst receiving medical care, he was sexually shamed when the sister providing his care brought other sisters in to look at his involuntary sexual arousal. The other survivor who also attended a convent school holds the sisters responsible for a serious sexual assault which happened as a result of their failure to ensure her safety on a school trip.

One leader of a women's congregation admitted that they had a history of incidents of abuse: *'None of our stories are sexual. They're all about things like, you know, I wet my bed, and somebody punished me by doing this and cruelty, harsh treatment; they talk about being hit over the head with a hairbrush or something. All of that nature but to such an extent that it was abusive.'* Another admitted that 'abuse' in their schools was likely to have taken the form of spiteful belittling and undermining, which might seem petty but can cause lasting damage.

The bullying and emotional abuse described by participants was experienced mostly in schools and other institutions where the women were largely accountable only to themselves. These institutions gave women access to power in a Church that has always denied it to them. The experience of having access to power and leadership in their own institutions has brought many advantages to women religious across the centuries, but it clearly also has its shadow side. A safeguarding professional said although it is recognised that abuse by women is less common, power corrupts both men and women and that abuse by women head teachers, for example, is not uncommon.

Abuse is not limited to those in the care of women religious. A former provincial leader identified that the real issue in female religious congregations is probably bullying of their own sisters. She told us of a culture of bullying that emanates from imbalances in power. In naming the issue of power, she highlights something we do not expect to hear, that like most of us, some religious sisters desire and misuse power. In her experience, when sisters are overlooked and denied power and authority, some feel themselves to be victims or survivors in some way. She expressed hope that training in safeguarding in the broadest sense might help surface these issues but feels that women religious have to face up to the desire for power within themselves.



The data that is known

Stephen Bullivant's analysis shows that 37 per cent of complaints in the period 1970-2015 related to religious; 344 complaints relating to 390 individuals.⁵³ Only 8 per cent of female congregations had complaints to report (compared with 4 per cent of male congregations). These figures only relate to sexual abuse.

National Catholic Safeguarding Commission reports from 2015 (at least) to 2019 include data covering physical and emotional abuse and online grooming as well as sexual abuse. During 2019, for example, nine allegations or concerns were raised about female religious, and 33 were raised about male religious, including religious priests. For the allegations against female religious, sexual abuse accounted for 10 per cent (one case) and physical and emotional abuse for 80 per cent. The type of abuse was unknown in one case (10 per cent).⁵⁴

2. The impact of abuse and abusers on religious communities

The shock of abuse and the challenge to community life

Religious usually live in community with other members of the same congregation, so discovering that people they have lived alongside, often for many years, have been accused and or found guilty of sexual offence is likely to have a particularly profound impact. A diocesan safeguarding officer described one such community as being ill equipped to deal with this knowledge. The shock, hurt and disbelief often developed into bereavement and grieving processes, both for the pain caused and possibly for the loss of a member. The soul-searching and questioning of each other's judgement and involvement affects the internal community dynamics and the extent to which community members can trust each other and themselves.

The nature of religious communities means that offending members cannot simply be sacked or 'excised'; they remain part of the 'family'. A monk who has seen this situation at close quarters said: '

Those who have allegations made against them have to step aside and the time it takes seems to be so long, so how to support people in that position, without becoming too partial? Because sometimes we will see the brethren in a certain way, within our own community, and we know them well and we love them.

The cases which are most difficult for communities to respond to are those which remain unproven, because the allegation is never resolved, and the member can never be fully acquitted or exonerated. The suspicion lingers, trust is broken, and relationships often cannot be healed. Actual conviction brings greater clarity; sanctions can be applied and there is a clear outcome. But where there is no clear outcome, the person's life is put on hold as they are required to live under and comply with permanent restrictions.

Collective guilt by association


A further element of harm results from entire communities and orders being condemned or treated with suspicion by outsiders. One sister spoke of her sense of solidarity with male members of her order who had been dreadfully hurt by the actions of some of their brothers. Although they themselves were innocent of any criminal behaviour, they had to share the blame and responsibility. The leader of a male congregation made a very powerful point which represents the reality now for many male congregations:

One thing that bothers me is when I hear Church leaders banging on about how ashamed the Church should be for what's happened... I don't think that's a helpful, or appropriate

The experience of living on a safeguarding plan

We listened to a member of a religious order who had been accused of sexual offences. In his case, the police had judged there to be insufficient evidence to prosecute him. He was removed from his community, a move he felt was done to protect the reputation of the school and community. He felt coerced into agreeing to a safeguarding plan which limits and regulates his movements including where and how he attends Mass. He described a complete breakdown of trust, between him, those assessing him, the safeguarding staff and his brothers and the leader of his community. He believes he would be better treated if he admitted to what he is being accused of, but maintains it is 'a pack of lies'. He is very angry, lonely and feels abandoned and shunned. Most of all he feels that what is happening to him is a grave injustice. He also believes it is unclear who ultimately made the decision to remove him from the community; his perception was that all the parties involved deny it was them: the school, the community, trustees, safeguarding staff and others.

The decisions and reasoning may be clear to others involved in this situation, who will have their own perspectives, but if it is not clear to him, then something is not working. One diocesan safeguarding officer, familiar with such a situation, observed that it is very difficult for communities to work out what to do in support of an offender after release from prison. What kind of relationship is possible or desirable, and what do they owe to the individual in practical terms? These questions apply also to individuals whose lives are restricted by safeguarding plans.



response at all. Some of us need to be ashamed for what we've done but I think it's important that we don't let the toxicity of this thing leak into places where it doesn't belong and that of course is the problem we're talking about, culture... One of the problems is [that] it can end up culpabilising people who have no real guilt to bear and that's not healthy. I don't think we should all just be going round terribly guilty and paralysed when, when most people have done absolutely nothing wrong.

Indiscriminate blaming of entire communities damages the members emotionally and psychologically. It may also make it more difficult for them to hear and believe victims and survivors because they may also feel a wrong has been done, even though it cannot be on the same level as abuse. Further, it may create resistance to safeguarding practice, because people feel defensive rather than open.

The impact on those in leadership

Several leaders of religious communities have been directly impacted by the IICSA process. In some cases it has been followed by their resignation or removal from leadership. Some took responsibility for failures in oversight and others were more explicitly implicated. Others were wounded and exhausted by their involvement in the inquiry itself. For many in leadership, and in the Conference of Religious of England and Wales (COREW), preparation for the IICSA process and then implementing the Elliott Review, particularly the establishment of the Religious Life Safeguarding Service, (RLSS) which assists religious communities to develop strong safeguarding practice, has come to dominate their term in leadership.

One of the most challenging situations for those in leadership in religious communities is the duty to support both the victim and the offender, with a thin wall of separation between the two. This is not only a source of stress to the leader but also affects the quality of the support they can offer to both victim and offender. One leader gave a very graphic example of this. The leader was invited to a memorial event for victims and survivors abused in one of the congregation's institutions. At the parish cemetery, the leader was standing facing the grave of the victim, but with the grave of one of the congregation's accused members behind: one thing happening in front, and a contradictory event behind. This leader said it felt like being torn apart *'that's kind of how it feels - steering a course between supporting the [members] and reaching out to the survivors. But it has taught the community that they've got to hold both as well.'*

Recognition of the toll this is taking on the lives of religious, particularly of those in leadership is often given hesitantly. The question of whether any individual leader should bear any guilt is very complex. The provincial leader of a men's congregation said:

We're open, possibly sometimes too open, to the idea that we've failed, and that can be quite inappropriate when what happened took place before I was born, which, I've, situations I've dealt with. So I think it's pretty crucial, to be honest, that we do find places to give that support

Another provincial leader was keen to share the experience of this burden *'so that the other side of the coin can be healing... there's a desire to use whatever little experience I have, and the congregation now has to bring a redemptive quality to the suffering.'* Both these leaders would like to find a forum where they and others in their position could share their experiences. The first was clear in that whilst he does not want to focus on leaders' own victimhood, he does want to draw attention to the need for them to support each other and learn from each other's experiences.

The impact on mission and reputation

Religious men and women acknowledge the damage that allegations and convictions of child sexual abuse has done to the reputation of the institutions involved and many now accept that this is deserved. One religious sister said: *'I can see that after the whole IICSA debacle we've lost a sense of credibility, and I think we're in no position to criticise. Things have gone so wrong...we've been so stung and saddened, hurt... by what's come out in IICSA...as a Church we've created this situation.'*

The abuse crisis has also changed the structures of life for some orders. For several monasteries, the IICSA process has compelled the legal and physical separation of monasteries and their associated schools. As most of this has happened relatively recently, communities are still coming to terms with the impact. Safeguarding compliance and procedures have become a prominent feature of daily life. One monk told us that their lives are now governed by key codes and different coloured lanyards. Another said that the assumption previously was that monks would go on to teach in the school no longer held true; that this was now highly unlikely, except in pastoral roles which are very tightly controlled and monitored. This also applies to the assumption that some religious priests would go to serve in parishes traditionally associated with particular monasteries. However, both of these changes are also being driven by falling numbers of vocations for all religious communities.

3. Aspects of religious life implicated in how abuse has happened

Cultures and power in religious community life

Any Catholic institution in which abuse has happened faces a question; have there been distinctive habits, structures or dynamics within their institutions that have been conducive to abuse taking place? Most male and female religious, whether in active or apostolic congregations or monastic communities live in community, and most are aware of this question.

Many of the cases of abuse reported in recent decades occurred when communities were larger. Several male and female religious identified elements of their cultures which enabled various forms of abuse both within the communities and in the institutions and ministries run by the



order. These included: misuse of authority and obedience; cultures of secrecy leading to a lack of openness; and the inability of community members to form and maintain mature relationships with each other.

One monk who spoke to us referred to members of his community as *'juvenile in their behaviour and arrested in their psycho-sexual development; lacking trust in one another and unable to develop their personal relationships with each other'*. He attributed some of this to the abuse of power by superiors, arguing that abuse in a system such as a religious order or congregation will lead to an inability to develop a mature understanding of obedience, one of the vows taken by religious. Earlier notions of religious obedience were based on the superior being seen as a living representative of Christ; members vowed absolute obedience to the superior's will. This can make them vulnerable to manipulation and abuse and prevent the processes of maturation and personal growth. The provincial leader of a male community suggested that his brothers actually expected certain abusive behaviours from a superior. A current leader said he believes that the tacit acceptance that religious life will be tough, at least among male religious, can lead to tolerance of abusive behaviours.

The monk referred to above stressed the need for members to develop respectful, trusting, and honest relationships with one another, both between members and with the hierarchy. Those seen to be particularly powerless in traditionally very hierarchical communities were those youngest in religious life – postulants, novices and juniors. We heard of a case of a novice monk who decided to leave under such circumstances. A priest and former religious spoke about his own experience:

I was a novice at [institution] and the superior ruled the roost with an iron fist and...was an out and out paedophile. He was in the scout hut, he was in the school, he was fiddling with older boys, and everybody just sort of laughed and said, oh that's what he's like and, when you're a novice, you are absolutely powerless. You've got to toe the line...I had no status, no voice.

The issues of power, lack of power and misuse of authority can be exacerbated by the fact that some members will have known each other and lived together for many years. Dysfunctional relationships and abusive patterns of behaviour, within a very hierarchical structure, have often been established early on, and are very hard to tackle.

Religious communities as 'families'

Religious often talk of the relationships within the congregation or community as being like families. They have known each other for lengthy periods and often have lived together. Until recently, they left their own family to 'cleave' themselves to this new set of relationships which took priority over those with their birth family. This understanding and practice has now changed, but the congregation still looks after its members in all the ways one might traditionally expect families to do.

The familiarity, close relationships and bonds of loyalty developed can make it very difficult to recognise and acknowledge an individual's inappropriate and concerning behaviours. It can also be hard to see

these behaviours from the inside. As one lay safeguarding professional said: *'If you think about a family dynamic, a lot of people don't realise until they're out of their family setting that the dynamics that they're in are abusive'*. It can also create a culture in which it is very difficult to speak out and report that behaviour. A monastery, for example, is home to the community members; it gives them all that they need and expects stability, obedience, and in cultural terms, loyalty. Therefore, challenging and questioning the behaviours of others can feel like betraying a family member. This can be hard to understand for external statutory bodies and authorities, and in contexts such as the IICSA process. It becomes particularly difficult when communities have to deal with offenders.

The members of a religious order have an unusual and complex relationship with the order and with those who represent it in leadership. Members in most congregations will have taken a vow of obedience which, even if understood in the broadest terms as listening for and discerning the will of God through the community, still sits uncomfortably alongside a more modern awareness of the individual's rights. This arises from the dual nature of the relationships; the order is both home and workplace – but members live as brothers and sisters, not contractual employers and employees. This ambiguity, so different from a conventional workplace situation, leaves members vulnerable to being badly treated by those they regard as family members. There are no complaints or disciplinary procedures in place in the same way as in a conventional workplace setting, and it is hard to admonish or remove someone for their behaviour. This vulnerability has led to calls for members to have access to someone who is independent, who can act as an advocate on their behalf, to whom they can speak in confidence, and raise concerns.

A further challenging characteristic of the culture of religious life was identified as secrecy. Relating this to the 'family-like' characteristics of religious orders, the leader of one men's order said:

We deal in secrecy an awful lot...and within a religious order, you're constantly dealing with the whole person. We're not contractual employers of our members; we're brothers and sisters and so of course therefore that requires spaces of confidentiality where privacy can be respected. But on the other hand...we're also governed by a trap of secrecy that is not healthy.

Several people described going to a community leader to express concerns about someone, and either no action being taken, or no information being made available to them about follow-up. Such cultures of secrecy often led to members of a community only finding out what their brothers or sisters had been accused of through external sources such as the media, or the IICSA report. A monk explained how, even though the cases were anonymised, he recognised the description of one member of his community whose offences were detailed in the IICSA report.



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Outdated aspects of initial formation

The religious women and men who raised concerns with us about initial formation for religious as postulants, novices and juniors, were largely those who entered religious life forty or fifty years ago, so in exploring these perspectives we note that these are very much historical perspectives and that the situation now has changed out of all recognition in many congregations. However, it is still worth exploring this issue as the situation has not changed as much as we would have hoped in all communities.

The religious who talked about initial formation described an idealised view of what happens when people enter religious life. A religious priest and an enclosed nun talked about the failure of initial formation to take into account the reality of human sinfulness as it applies to priests and religious, who are flawed human beings like everyone else. This approach to formation was based on a theological understanding of religious life as aiming for perfection and equating this with holiness. This thinking, which still sometimes pervades, encouraged individuals to see their consecration as placing them above others, as well as encouraging deference towards them from others. A younger religious priest felt that this understanding of religious life continues to leave juniors and young religious vulnerable to these distortions, leading to a fragile sense of self based on a belief in religious life as a superior state of life. Decades after the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the universal call to holiness, and Pope Francis's more recent teachings on holiness as a condition found in and attainable by all, this idea lingers.⁵⁵

They also commented on inadequate preparation for a mature, relational life which is lived in community. A priest and former religious spoke of how his former congregation had failed to prepare novices and juniors to be in relationship. The formation was, he said, *'anti-relational'* and *'too intellectual'*. He referred to the practice which was very common in religious life until the early years following the Second Vatican Council, of discouraging what were called *'particular friendships'*. One of the concerns with *'particular friendships'* was the potential for creating exclusive relationships in a community, possibly causing difficulty for the community dynamic. But this practice failed to recognise that mature, open and adult friendships can make a significant contribution to psychosexual and emotional maturity and stable behaviour.

Despite these more challenging and negative accounts of initial formation, we did hear how approaches to forming novices and junior religious have changed, particularly over the last thirty years. Two religious with significant leadership experience, one male and one female, spoke about their initial formation, which would have taken place in the late 1980s to early 1990s. Both accounts emphasised that the novice or formation directors were very open about sexuality and relationships. Psychosexual and human formation issues were addressed in terms of personal relationships, rather than as theoretical moral and ethical questions to be studied. The religious sister noted that the environment was conducive to open discussions about sexuality. The male religious said:

I think it would be hard to come out of the experience that I'd had, and say it was a culture of oppression or there was an anti-sexual element and anti-body or anything like that, and since those have been the sorts of problems that have often led to instances of abuse, I think we were very lucky.

Both are grateful for having been exposed to such rich and generative models of how to live religious life in community.

In relation to safeguarding, both these religious acknowledged that in the 1980s and 1990s religious orders were far less aware than they are now about the dangers of and possibilities for abusive relationships. They reflected that even though their initial formation was open and generative, there was no explicit coverage or awareness of the risk of abuse and no exploration of safeguarding as intrinsic to their life and mission.

Most of the changes in approaches to initial formation have come about as the result of a combination of different factors: changes in theology of religious life following the Second Vatican Council; religious orders embracing the growth of insights into psychological and emotional development over the last seventy years; the increasing average age and falling numbers of new entrants to religious life, and other factors. We encountered one example of a community whose approach to both initial and ongoing formation has changed quite radically in the light of the experience of child sexual abuse committed by their members. These changes form a significant cornerstone in the community's drive to address their own internal culture and provide better, more appropriate formation to those entering.

4. Pathways to change

Recognising the systemic abuse in cultures and structures

A crucial step in working towards change is to recognise that abuse can sometimes be systemically embedded in the culture and structures of an order. An individual religious congregation can be described as a system within itself: a set of aspects or elements which work together as parts of a larger, more complex whole. Several religious we interviewed identified both internal and external aspects of a religious order, and the connections between them as part of the whole. One example of this is where the leader of a women's community identified a link between a culture and behaviours of internal bullying of members in communities and external bullying and emotional and psychological abuse in the congregations' schools. A monk described at length a culture of what he called 'systemic abuse' in his own order which can, in turn, affect external facing aspects of religious life:

When there's abuse in one area of community life, the entire system ends up suffering abuse. The entire system ends up abusive.... where people aren't engaging in satisfying relationships, where they're seeking relationships elsewhere, where they're not dealing with their own psycho-sexual maturation, where they're unwilling to be held

accountable by anyone or to be questioned in any way. The effect is going to be, in the end, you just can't even sit down and have a pleasant conversation together.

Unless there is open and honest willingness to explore systemic issues, there is a risk that changes made will not be sufficient.

From resistance to conversion

Several religious talked about the resistance within their own communities to making the kind of changes that might bring about a healthier internal culture and relationships in community. One monk described the impact of being investigated by the IICSA on his community initially as paralysing. He felt that the community was still in denial and largely unable to speak about the abuse openly, due to fear and shame. Interestingly, this community has undergone several years of facilitated change processes and yet this monk believed that deeper change is still not seen as a priority. A contrasting outsider perspective on the same community came from another monk who has witnessed positive changes taking place, albeit in small steps, but significant in terms of how the monks are now able to relate to each other. He described how *'the quality of their communication has changed dramatically'* in recreation and generally around the monastery.

Change can also be difficult for those in leadership, when the rest of the congregation is not ready to move with them. A provincial leader received little support from the leadership team when first dealing with allegations of abuse and the ensuing criminal investigations: *'I was sending them reports and they were barely responding. So, I was a bit disillusioned by my own community and thinking if this is really true, why aren't we more concerned about it?'* As is the case with many religious orders, their generalate or international headquarters is located in Europe, in a country where the dominant culture is not yet as sensitised to issues of abuse as the UK has become. It has, in turn, been hard for leaders at international level to understand the pressures on those in leadership at province, country or regional level. This leader spoke of the loneliness of this struggle and at one point felt so disillusioned as to consider leaving religious life altogether. However, the leader conceded that this has now changed, largely due to *'kicking and screaming'*; the experience of their members in the UK has been a catalyst for that change throughout the congregation internationally.

Another religious, a former provincial leader in her congregation, described feeling as if she were banging her head against a brick wall in encouraging her sisters to understand and accept the need for compliance with safeguarding procedures. Effecting change from within has been difficult for these religious, but they have stayed committed to the task. But one priest who was a survivor of abuse as a young adult in a noviciate felt so defeated by the refusal of leaders in his congregation to accept the levels of risk he was identifying and to deal with a known offender that he decided to leave the order. He felt blamed by his brothers in the order for being a *'victim'* himself but also for trying to tell the truth and *'slander'*, as many saw it, a particular priest who was highly regarded.

Recognising specific contexts for women religious

Some sisters felt that many women religious haven't really encountered or had to engage with the issue of child sexual abuse. In England and Wales, the majority are now elderly and no longer working in the church or wider community. They may be socially isolated and largely ignorant about the issue. Until recently they have been able to regard it as someone else's problem. In the last few years, they have been realising that the issue does impact upon them and cannot be ignored.

In the past, religious may also have been disadvantaged by the model of safeguarding which is allegations-based, centred on codes of conduct, standards and compliance. Not only are women religious less often directly affected by this issue, but this weighting of the system towards allegations meant that it overlooked the broader issues such as bullying and protection of elderly members in women's religious orders. Abuse and safeguarding, particularly in women's communities, are experienced in terms of other issues such as care of their most vulnerable members, whether nursing is provided internally or where external carers are brought in. Sisters, particularly those who have lived together for many years in stable enclosed communities, can be reluctant to see their caring relationships as potential places for bullying and abuse. Safeguarding procedures such as having to be DBS checked for looking after members of your community can feel deeply intrusive.

The establishment of the Religious Life Safeguarding Service has marked a step forward in this regard. Over 200 religious communities and congregations have joined the service, which works as an independent professional team providing training, advice and support, including help with managing cases when concerns or allegations come to light. The RLSS has a different role to that of the CSSA, which is the regulatory body for all Catholic institutions including dioceses and religious orders. The CSSA's work includes audit of religious congregations however, and adapting the audit model to the specific situation of religious communities is still a challenge. It is clear from several religious women who spoke to us that a 'one size fits all' model of assessing risk and of measuring compliance with standards on such matters as training does not work for all communities. At the same time, the risks are real. Authoritarian culture can still lead to abuse and some external scrutiny is important, particularly for enclosed congregations who may not yet have grasped the enormity of the abuse crisis in the Church.

5 ■ Conclusion: Towards healthy communities

All the participants troubled by aspects of community life emphasised the role of healthy relational dynamics in combating all forms of abuse in religious life. Such dynamics are built on and help to sustain mature interpersonal relationships. They include conscious awareness of boundaries and the ability to identify and challenge secrecy and closed cultures. A priest and former religious identified the importance of good friendships as a safeguard, *'helping build and grow your humanity... the chances of you acting out, I think, are probably helped if you have good, meaningful, adult friendships.'* In contrast to this however, a young religious brother pointed out how the virtue of friendships in his community had been distorted and had led to younger brothers being vulnerable to undue influence and spiritual manipulation through the 'friendship' of older members.

Several saw the need to tackle unhealthy community dynamics as urgent. A member of an enclosed women's community agreed with this perspective:

Something like IICSA brings it home that it's actually very real and if we want a healthier congregation, healthy communities, then we've got to get on and help bring that about, start raising the issues, having the conversations, owning the mistakes.

A monk also talked about how the changes in his community had been prompted firstly by the large number of allegations and incidents of abuse reported and growing awareness of the impact on victims but also by the impact this was having on individuals in the community itself.

Ideas about what constitutes a healthy community are complemented by evidence of other leaders and communities pushing through and embracing the changes needed. One leader of a men's congregation saw the challenge for them not in tackling internal dynamics but rather in developing their outreach to victims and survivors. He described their absolute acceptance of their role and complicity and the work needed in leading his members to work beyond a threshold of compliance. This has involved contacting survivors; inviting them into conversation; supporting initiatives for and with survivors and *'not just fixating on what we need to do to comply'*. Another provincial leader spoke of the long journey that she and her community have been on, and the process, over several years, of turning around attitudes within the community and *'carrying the pain'* and learning how to live with this, facing up to and accepting what took place. Some are more able and willing to face the reality and accept the responsibility than others. The examples of real success in this area are characterised by an understanding of safeguarding having been cascaded across the congregation through relational work, inserted into reflection days and located in Gospel values and Catholic Social Teaching or connected to other social justice concerns. All of these encourage greater involvement of the whole community of religious.

Religious communities are both part of the local church and also distinctive in how they live their particular charisms in diverse ministries and contemplative and monastic spaces. Their experience of the abuse crisis shares many themes with the previous chapter: concerns about the deeper dynamics that operate in how abuse happens and how victims and survivors are treated; concerns about the structures that have operated, particularly in the past, but sometimes still continuing today; concerns about culture and relationships, and about leadership and transparency. In the religious that spoke to us, there was also a deep honesty about facing up to areas of failure and recognising the scale of change and growth needed in their own congregations. Their desire was not simply that communities could come to terms with abuse and its aftermath, but more fundamentally about their fidelity to their calling.

A commitment to those who are wounded or vulnerable or have suffered injustice lies at the heart of what it means to live a consecrated life and mission. Many religious see themselves as called to be on the side of anyone who is poor or suffering and called also to prophetic witness, to speaking out about injustice and searching for the truth when harm has been done to people. Each congregation and each community does this in a different way, depending on their experience and drawing on their charism, the specific inspiration of the Holy Spirit in which they were founded. Each could have something immensely valuable to offer to victims and survivors and the whole Church on the journey of healing and repair.

