A Liturgical Resource for Addressing Experiences of Abuse in the Church

Background
Stories of abuse claim more publicity by the day. The Church has had its own part in them, and this is hard to face. Yet not to face our involvement paralyses us. The Anglican Church's Tikanga Pakeha Liturgical Working Group regularly reviews issues that preoccupy ministry units nationally. This resource arises from that review process. It is intended for use by communities of faith. It is not intended to replace existing liturgies for individuals suffering abuse. We do not assume that those participating in this liturgy need to have been directly involved in the original circumstances of the abuse. Abuse - physical, intellectual, emotional, sexual, spiritual - particularly by men or women, where power is used coercively, affects not only the victim and the perpetrator, but also their families, friends and communities. Thereby the whole church is affected. The damage done needs to be named, owned and worked through, before the church and all those affected can move on to a future based on reconciliation, healing and new life. This resource is an invitation to the Church at diocesan, regional or local level to address abusive experiences within its life. As a Tikanga Pakeha Church, we have claimed much for the partnership of women and men, both lay and ordained. Yet we find that partnership has often been subject to abuse. To minimise such stories and generalise about them is unhelpful. Below we set out a series of steps on which to build a liturgy. Invitations to take part need to be carefully worded and distributed and a full text of the liturgy in printed form should be distributed to all those participating.
Using This Resource
This liturgy needs to be developed for use as often as required. We acknowledge that it may take several efforts with different groups over a period of time to find the way ahead. Not all affected by the abuse may be able to attend the event immediately, but this should not prevent the liturgical process getting under way.

It is not helpful to try to address several forms of abuse within the same liturgy. We hope that this liturgy may be considered a paradigm for addressing many different forms of abuse within the church, in particular child abuse and paedophilia, abuse of the elderly, discrimination & abuse in employment relationships and ministry opportunities.

This resource acknowledges the ongoing and unfinished nature of the process. We are not assuming that all will come to a place of healing or resolution in this liturgy.

Liturgical Steps
Negotiating ownership. We begin by saying why we are here. A brief summary of the story that brings us together should be well prepared before hand, if possible sent out as part of the invitation to the liturgy, and read clearly and simply without elaboration at the beginning. We acknowledge that this is the church gathering, and acknowledge all those who have been affected by the abuse.
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Lament

The goal of this section is to help us towards a God-directed perspective, and to express our emotions before God. It is expressing to God our lack of faith that gives rise to our involvement in broken relationships, people, bodies, our inability to protect. We are including some resources in the Appendix e.g. poetry, Psalms. This section may involve the expression of guilt, shame, the confession of the church's complicity.

This Lament is written in the spirit of the biblical laments – of the men and women in scriptures who have trusted God enough to complain, to rail against the circumstances of their lives, and who have dared to express unremitting grief. A lament is not a confession but a liturgical dialogue with God. As such it is ultimately a declaration of faith and may become a source of community healing and growth.

Open our lips O God
And our mouths will proclaim your praise

It is difficult to praise you God when we are faced with the realities of hurt and conflict and all the division they bring within us within the community within our hearts

We gather in your name but it is hard to say holy when so much that is unholy has taken place; some were left wondering and some are left wondering still where were you then?

a time of silent reflection
Yet we trust that you are with us now
and say let our cry come to you

Let our cry come to you
Perhaps we did not cry loud enough
Some of us did not know that it was time to cry
and some of us lacked the courage
to let our cries come to you
and some cry still ‘my God why have you forsaken me?’

a time for silent reflection

Yet we know that you are with us
That you are our God,

You are God, our Emmanuel, God with us

Into your presence we have come
In your presence we trust
and ask for open hearts
    hearts that will acknowledge suffering
    hurt, lack of care, lost faith,
and hearts that will live humbly
    in the love which you give to us still
    in your peace which you leave with us still
    in your hope that restores and strengthens
all who put their trust in you

a time of silent reflection

You are our God

We hold before you the doubts and the conflicts

You are our God

We give you the disbeliefs and the confusions

You are our God

We ask you to hear the anger and the loss of heart
You are our God
We offer our frail faith and our deepest longings
You are our God
We look to you
You are our God
lead us to life
lead us to life

Symbolic Action
We keep a time of silence for personal reflection. A symbolic action may follow, which may be explained verbally or in the service sheet. People may be invited to make use of symbols, such as stones, candles, water, flowers, greenery, fire, words. In silence or with music.

Intercession
We pray for the church: that it may be honest and compassionate, that we may act justly and protect those who are vulnerable. We offer prayer for all those involved. We pray for the healing of the church, the world, creation, and for ourselves. See Appendix for examples.

Acknowledging God's Grace
Here our focus is on being open to the transformation of grace, and the possibility of moving on. This may involve a quiet time of music, silence, reading(s), some comforting Scripture and the Gospel message of hope.

The liturgy ends with a blessing of peace said together. The liturgy should end in an open-ended fashion, with opportunity for those who wish to linger to do so, and people are free to leave when they are ready.
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Afterword
It is important that at the end of the service sheet, further steps that people could take following this service are named - e.g. availability of people to talk with in confidence, the NZ Prayer Book service of reconciliation, opportunities for spiritual direction, a repeat or variation of the liturgy.

Appendix
Here are some models of prayers and resources, all of which need to be adapted, but may give you a starting point.

- Prayer from United Church of Canada - prayer for 1st nations;
- suitably adapted prayers from Liturgy for Survivors of Abuse;
- Prayer of St Francis;