



Survivor-Led Education for Transformation:

Ending violence against children in faith communities



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July 2026
Dialogue Brief 4, Faith & GBV Community of Practice

Background

This brief is the fourth in a series which draws on interactive learning dialogues between and feedback from adult participants on the SVRI's global course *Faith and Helping Children Thrive without Violence*. The course is coordinated by SVRI's Working Group on Faith and Violence against Children which is part of the [Faith & Gender-Based Violence Community of Practice](#). Brief 4 is co-authored by [Selina Palm](#), who is the course creator and chair of the Working Group, [Suzanne Greco](#), a course graduate, a survivor and trainee course co-facilitator, and [Tanya Wells-Brown](#), a course graduate and trainee course co-facilitator.

This virtual course brings together experienced adult practitioners from diverse country contexts and religious faiths to reflect and learn together through shared testimonies, lived experience, evidence-informed materials and co-creation of practice-based knowledge. The insights below centre structured reflections by three course co-facilitators drawing on what course participants identified as being transformative. The course emphasises the specific realities of the African continent whilst also drawing on other contexts.¹

This *Dialogue Brief* is part of a series that promotes the value of courageous conversations on these important topics. It aims to equip readers to embed transformative conversations within their own faith contexts and therefore includes eight key discussion questions that can be used by readers in small group settings.

Why this theme matters

[Educating for transformation](#) is an approach to learning that goes beyond the transmission of information to also shift patterns of thinking and feeling. It frames education as a catalytic process that unsettles inherited assumptions, helps people to recognise and rethink how they see and feel about the world, expands their sense of agency, and equips them to question harmful structures instead of simply adjusting to them. This approach and its survivor-led aspects emerged in new ways during the *Faith and Helping Children Thrive without Violence* course.

At the heart of the course was a safe container for communal engagement with oral testimonies, co-created with participants and brought to life through 34 short videos designed and delivered by diverse contributors from the Working Group. Testimonies generated by members, many of whom are survivors, shaped the development and direction of the course. Their perspectives, priorities, and lived experiences informed how the course designer structured the entire learning process. These self-directed videos deliberately invited a non-academic style where contributors offered personal stories and commitments. Participants engaged with these testimonies using Zoom-based small group interaction and online discussion forums. Collective engagement with diverse, faith-specific stories shaped a process where technical knowledge and personal formation were mutually reinforcing dimensions of learning.



The course environment supported participants to integrate their cognitive (*mind*) understanding (what do I think?) with *affective (heart) reflection* (how do I feel about this?) and *practical (hands) ethical insights* (what can I do?). This approach led to important realisations from many participants and facilitators alike that courage, resilience, and narrative agency are not merely *abstract concepts* but are *lived capacities* that shape our professional and personal identities, and our relational practices with others who are different from us.

¹ Fifty adult participants graduated from this course over 2025. They included faith leaders, doctors, lawyers, social workers, psychologists and child ministry teachers and came from multiple religious traditions and over 20 countries, primarily from the Global South. All quotations and insights in this dialogue brief are taken (with permission to use their first names) from a thematic analysis of course feedback forms. All stories shared in this brief have been checked or adapted to ensure they do not put children at further risk.



Participants reflected on the value of these peer-to-peer interactions, noting that *“one person’s story can make a difference in empowering others”*. Sharing stories helped them to make sense of the value of their own stories and to connect personally with the topics discussed. This marked a shift from engaging only with the materials as individuals, to also engaging with them in conversation with others. Participants began to recognise how their own individual stories and experiences shape their relationships with others and to take more responsibility for the wider systems in which they work. Story-based video testimonies and insights throughout the course also catalysed participant’s ongoing sharing of their own personal stories, insights and beliefs. These sit at the heart of educating for transformation: as learning that reshapes how we see ourselves, how we understand our role in relation to others, and how we act within the systems that we are part of, or seek to influence.

“This course touched places in me that most training never reaches. It wasn’t just informative; it was healing. It created a space where I felt seen, safe, and allowed to breathe. That is rare. That is why this course felt so important to me. It reminded me that stories carry truth, courage & transformation. They teach what no manual can: attitudes, empathy, and the courage to act.” (Female participant, December 2025)

This brief explores four main areas that participants identified as key for the transformative impact of the course:

- 1) Survivor testimony and witness
- 2) Co-production of the course design and knowledge
- 3) Centralising multi-sectoral diversity
- 4) Personal engagement with religious and cultural beliefs

1. Anchored in survivor testimony and witness

Bearing witness as an embodied starting point

Whilst many educators recognise the limitations of a transfer of information-only approach, participants felt that many violence prevention programmes emphasise statistics, existing policies, and identifying the ‘problem’, often framed as being ‘out there’. Survivors on this course insisted that when violence against children is spoken of as an abstract issue—something to analyse, regulate, or manage—it can betray the trust of those who look to faith communities and institutions for sanctuary and support. It creates a safe but illusory distance from the topic that can unwittingly silence truths that need to be heard. One participant noted that violence against children is not just a topic to be studied but *“a real world filled with people who need us”*. She described the course as offering her a new way of seeing this truth more clearly, which she felt can now never be ‘unseen’.

The course showed that transformative education begins with *witness*, not with information. This insight is consistent with broader prevention evidence, which shows that information and awareness-raising alone can shift knowledge and attitudes but rarely change behaviour. Participants noted that this requires deep listening—not *about* survivors, but *to survivors*. The course deliberately created a safe, interdisciplinary, survivor-centred framework where listening became an act of epistemic accountability. It asked: Whose knowledge counts? Whose pain and lived experiences shape this work?

This shift was profound for many participants on personal and professional levels. As Molebo, from Lesotho, revealed: *“the sharing of experiences by different survivors of violence has been the most significant highlight for me... It really opened my eyes and validated the notion of ‘nothing about us without us.’ I learnt that it is pointless to come up with ideas that are meant to help survivors if they are not involved. Their voices are important in shaping the interventions”* (Molebo, December 2025). Participants consistently emphasised that the videos and personal testimonies gave diverse human faces to issues of child violence that many had previously discussed only in abstract terms, making them feel more real, urgent and personal.

Survivors as torchbearers for transformative education

In the course, survivors were not presented as case studies or objects of pity but as torchbearers, illuminating painful relational and systemic realities within various faith systems through the light of their lived experience. Their



testimonies held both facilitators and participants accountable and reshaped understandings from the ground up. One male participant noted that the stories shared by survivors on the course opened his eyes to the realities of child abuse in faith communities as well as the risks of denial and cover-ups. This gave him a deeper understanding of his own role as a faith leader, including how his beliefs had distorted his view on child rights.

Featured story: Survivors as educational torchbearers

Suzie, an adult survivor of both child sexual abuse and marital violence shared her own story within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a video contributor and took an active leadership role in supporting the course to be survivor-centred in practice. She embodied the safety that enabled many other participants, who were also survivors, to speak out. Suzie is passionate about the role that survivor testimony and witness play in the task of transformative education on violence against women and children. She said of her own participant experience, “In most classrooms, the moment I say I’m a survivor the air changes. I see it and feel it. The discomfort, the doubt, the quiet dismissal. But here I spoke, and the room leaned in. No one cut me off with jargon. No one hid behind diplomacy. When I said, “this sounds noble, but harms children”, they listened because survivor testimony isn’t an add-on here. It’s the heartbeat of the work”. Suzie identified the intentional community agreements, co-created at the start of the course and consistently modelled by the joint leadership as central to the course’s transformative impact. These agreements centred personal self-reflections and created a space that supported survivor healing, helping her trust the process from the outset. As a result, she and other survivors felt able to make meaningful contributions. Suzie noted that she rarely finds this kind of deeply validating and survivor-centred experience in the other faith-based spaces and educational courses in which she speaks or participates.



Another participant, Ana, a medical doctor from Southern Africa and a survivor herself, was inspired by Suzie’s testimony, as well as by the transformation of personal history into purpose that she felt the course offered more widely: *“Suzie’s journey... reminded me that our personal histories — even those shaped by pain — do not define our limits. Instead, they can become a source of strength, empathy, and purpose... seeing how she transformed her own experiences from a place of victimhood into powerful advocacy has been a turning point for me”* (Ana, December 2025). Wanja, a Kenyan participant, was also deeply affected by the survivor stories featured on the course, pointing to the wide range of types of violence shared, including emotional, physical, psychological, and sexual. She identified multiple points of personal and professional resonance with these intersectional accounts, such as Dorcus’s account of loneliness and exclusion growing up with a disability in Zimbabwe and Jade’s reflection on witnessing domestic violence as a child in the United Kingdom.

Participants pointed out that hearing survivors speaking out with such honesty in faith and education settings encourages others to also come forward, breaking a wider culture of silence and shame. Hearing survivor-led input is an irreplaceable part of creating personal urgency to develop more relevant, trauma-informed strategies in all disciplines. Wanja, a lawyer herself, noted that *“this course, which I have loved participating in, has challenged the idea that progress happens only through laws or secular reforms. It urges us to look at how everyday practices, especially those wrapped in religious tradition or spirituality, sustain harmful power imbalances.”* Other participants concurred, calling for further research into understanding how religious rituals and practices can reinforce spiritual and patriarchal power imbalances that can then underpin violence against women and children.

Practicing presence: Violence against children is personal

By inviting both participants and facilitators to intentionally shift from positioning violence as an abstract topic to be taught, to understanding it as a relational *truth embodied in us* and among us, the course also fostered a sense of democracy within the virtual classroom. This shifted professionals, including faith leaders, away from seeing themselves as external helpers or experts towards become more humble, accountable witnesses to their own vulnerability and lives experiences, enabling them to listen differently to others. In practice, this co-created a trauma-informed educational space which survivors called a *“sanctuary”* (a sacred, holy place) where shaming survivors has no place, and where safety and healing are woven as key objectives into the fabric of learning. This also honours child and adult survivors not as passive recipients of care, but as thinkers, contributors, and agents of their own narratives. While children were not direct course contributors or participants, their voices were woven into the course through their poems and reflections. The course also intentionally centred the (often silenced) inner child within each adult participant, inviting participants to speak from that place.



“The way the course consistently centred children’s dignity and lived experiences was particularly powerful.” (Tosin, Nigeria, December 2025)

This form of survivor-led learning refuses passivity. It invites participants and facilitators inwards, to their own stories, which then added a deeper learning dimension. On the course, participants and facilitators also recognized that to heal their own communities, they must also be willing to heal their own inner child. This journey was deeply personal. Ngum, a leader within a Baptist church network in Cameroon, shared that while she initially enrolled on the course with *“a superficial objective”* to get information, her experience on the course shifted her objective, as she realised how much she needed the course at a personal level. This realisation, shared by others, may help explain the very low drop-out rates. Many described entering the course with an intellectual interest (mind) but choosing to stay and engage more deeply and personally due to its healing and transformative approach (heart).

When education is anchored in first-hand witness and lived experiences, and stories by survivors are treated as sacred, not shameful, learning goes beyond knowledge transfer to reshape not just what participants do, but who they seek to be. Participants described this as *“embodied witness”*. Learning and unlearning together were identified by participants as a *“practice of presence”* with the capacity to be healing, inclusive, and radically transformative for survivors, practitioners and the wider community. Participants explained that this was not simply about learning new skills, what to do and how to act (often a strong focus in practical training), but also how to put aside their notebooks and lean into how to *‘be’*, including making space for feelings. This invited humility, shared accountability, and courage forged in deep listening to the difficult experiences of others. It required course facilitators to be emotionally available, respectful, and attentive to participants’ experiences without rushing, extracting information, or imposing interpretations. Fola from Cameroon shared a moment of clarity: *“I realised where I had been missing out on providing care (to children), because I did not know myself what it meant to be seen, or how important it is to make children feel seen and heard”* (Fola, December 2025).

Educational psychologist and South African participant Sumeshni points out that hearing directly from survivors in the course was also extremely valuable in opening the eyes of those who may seek to deny that their faith institutions are failing to respond appropriately to survivors. She notes: *“Religious organisations and faith leaders struggle to manage violence within their communities. Hearing about what is going on directly from survivors helps faith communities better understand what survivors need and the nature and extent of the interventions required”* (Sumeshni, December 2025).

Key shift: From seeing violence against children as an abstract topic of study to understand it as a relational truth between us, shaping our formative experiences as children, and requiring personal, committed engagement.

Questions for further discussion:

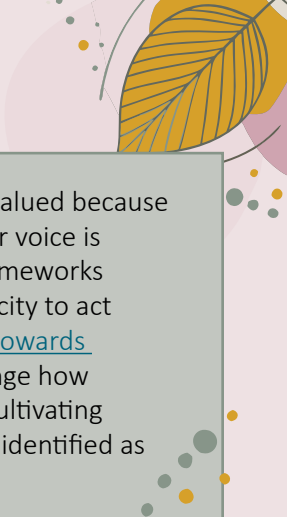
Has hearing a survivor’s story ever touched something deep in you that changed how you have seen an issue?

Do you think people feel safe to share their personal stories with you or within your faith institution and why?

2. Grounded in co-producing knowledge

Decolonising pedagogies

The course learning space was deliberately grounded in simple, accessible principles of democratic and decolonial pedagogy, and inspired by critical pedagogy educationalists such as [Paulo Freire](#) and [bell hooks](#). These learning traditions centre co-creation, dialogue, shared humanity, recognition of prior learning and the dismantling of hierarchical modes of knowledge production and sharing. These are essential principles when working at the intersection of faith and violence prevention. The course was intentionally designed so that knowledge generation and sharing flowed in multiple directions, with participants, contributors and facilitators mainly centred in the Global South shaping the learning environment together in a search for greater epistemic and testimonial justice. One faith leader highlighted: *“The shared knowledge amongst my peers across different religions and continents was of significant impact to me. Through their stories and experiences within their context, I now understand how the interconnection between faith and violence plays out in different communities”* (Felicity, December 2025).



Epistemic Injustice takes place when some people's knowledge or experiences are ignored or undervalued because of social or historical prejudices or power. This includes *testimonial injustice* (when someone's story or voice is dismissed because of who they are) and *hermeneutical injustice*: (when society lacks the words or frameworks to interpret or understand certain experiences, so they remain invisible). This denies people the capacity to act as knowledge producers, by marginalising certain forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. [Moving towards epistemic justice](#) also requires transforming learning frameworks and institutional practices to challenge how people learn, whose voices are amplified and whose knowledge counts with collective learning and cultivating personal relationships identified as crucial planks in this. [Communities of Practice](#) have recently been identified as an important mechanism for potentially embodying this type of learning approach.

A three-fold learning praxis

To enable these decolonising pedagogies to be enacted in practice, a three-fold dialogical learning praxis underpinned the course. The initial phase of course co-production invited working group participants to share their personal perspectives via short videos on key themes identified through the wider self-selection process where over 300 members had shared their own topics of concern or interest. These provided the initial scaffolding for an emerging course design which reversed a common pattern where a course structure is first designed and then people are asked to provide standardised contributions to fit into a pre-designed structure. Participants reflected that this content was experienced by them not just as information but as *"a collection of truths, stories and reflections that stay with you long after you close the screen"* (participant, July 2025). This gave many participants the confidence to also bring their own stories to share as they saw that these testimonies, when witnessed safely and first-hand by others, can become the start of something powerful.

As the course progressed, participants engaged in *interior reflection*, using the group as a mirror to recognise their own assumptions and experiences. Their oral contributions drew on both their lived experiences and diverse professional expertise, spanning personal histories, frontline realities, and practice-based knowledge from a range of faith and safeguarding contexts. They were also invited into *interpersonal encounter* from the very beginning, by being moved and challenged directly by the stories of others through short videos, oral testimonies, and the use of shared narratives: *"The contribution by a therapist and faith leader on trauma in module 3 personally helped me see those pieces of myself I had never really addressed. The trauma that came with not being seen or heard translated to me not wanting to see or hear children as an adult, recycling my own experience of being a neglected child. That sat deep with me and still does because healing is taking its course."* (Ngum, June 2025) Finally, *communal learning* emerged as the group built a safe container together, enabling them to consider how these emerging insights might translate into collective structural practice within faith spaces.

"What really stood out for me was how powerfully the course helped me to understand... whenever I listened to videos from the course contributors, those who have been survivors and also faith leaders, all this reminded me that child safeguarding is not just about policy. It's relational." (Charles, Kenya, December 2025)

This layered process was stimulated by, and deepened, the initial course co-production, ensuring that learning was not only individual but also relational and communal. This created an *epistemic space* where different ways of knowing could sit alongside one another and interact respectfully, generating a grounded and textured understanding of the issues at stake. A participant from the Global North noted that one of the most significant impacts of this class was the real-time interactions with scholars, activists, survivors, clergy and others. Some of the course contributors were also participants, further creating a sense that the contributors were fellow peers without any hierarchy, rather than distant academics or intimidating theologians. Language also played an important democratising role. Small acts of early tone-setting were viewed as key, such as people, including course leads, not being addressed by their titles (e.g. doctor, professor, reverend, imam) but by their first names.

A final aspect that emerged as crucial was the intentional use of adaptive, interactive approaches to build trust. While the programme was structured around ten Zoom-based modules and an interactive multi-media Thinkific online platform, it was not fixed. It also evolved organically with the content that emerged and was able to adapt in response to participants' insights. The various multimedia elements—written resources, videos, testimonies, visual prompts and reflective exercises—created a dynamic, responsive environment. Over time, the live sessions



became a core site of trust-building, described by participants as spaces of honesty, safety and mutual recognition. The course duration over 12 weeks felt substantive enough for participants to build the kind of shared trust needed for transformation. *“The group gave me space to think aloud with peers, and the exercises made me reflect critically rather than passively consume information”* (participant, June 2025).

Connecting learning and action

The course also functioned as an *ideas incubator* for many participants, creating supportive space to move from discussion only into developing concrete action in their local communities. Rather than remaining at the level of theoretical concepts or rhetorical commitments, the course process also supported participants to test small, practical activities in their own settings, to enter and engage with the course from the perspective of their own context-specific idea of something they wanted to do and develop, and to workshop these ideas within small feedback groups. Graduates were eligible to receive a tiny seed fund towards implementing this. For example, some participants piloted new ways of engaging caregivers in their weekly faith gatherings, while others introduced simple safeguarding practices within local faith communities.

Featured story: My voice is my power

Rachel’s post-course idea was to reach out to the most marginalised children in her Southern African community equipping them to recognise and report sexual abuse. She provided a community library with a book about a girl called Pendo who finds her voice and speaks out, educating children, parents, and faith leaders to recognise, prevent, and respond to abuse. As part of this initiative, Rachel organised an interactive arts training day. The response was overwhelming: instead of the expected 60 participants, over 180 children aged 4–12 attended. Her own deep concern for children with disabilities drove her idea and ensured practical provision, with sign interpreters and other access measures were in place, resulting in this group forming the bulk of the participants. On the day, a number of children disclosed sexual touching and were followed up and referred appropriately for support by her organisation. Moved by this response, Rachel began running weekly activities at her local church, encouraging children with disabilities to find their voices. Over time, she built a team who requested a slot to speak in the church service. Their visibility then led to another church member offering further funding. Rachel now travels to local churches to reach more children. Rachel’s incubator was a “turning point” in recognising the influence of faith communities, empowering children directly and opening pathways for improved disability inclusion in faith settings, Rachel shared that *“the project has expanded to train faith leaders and caregivers, fostering inclusion of children with disabilities in church programming and dispelling long held myths and misconceptions about disability.”* Ripple effects include faith leaders championing inclusion, caregivers finding solidarity, and congregations seeing children with disabilities as valued members of the faith community.

**(names changed to ensure safeguarding compliance)*



Forty similar idea incubators have become part of an unexpected ‘radiating outwards’ effect of the course, reinforcing a principle that education is not only about words (mind-knowledge) but also about feelings and motivation (heart knowledge) and action (hand-knowledge), developing concrete practices with people of faith that embody the values being taught as a core principle of understanding. One participant from Lesotho said: *“The course boosted my confidence to reach out to my faith community to educate Sunday School teachers (of children) about how to help children thrive without violence”* (Molebo, July 2025). Another participant from Kenya described her own strengthened commitment to create safe, accountable, and compassionate spaces for children.

Participants also reflected on the importance of not just understanding advocacy in theory but doing it in action, in home, schools and in the broader community, and the value of the course using relatable examples that they see daily in their contexts. This prompted deeper reflection on the individual and collective changes needed. One South African pastor said, *“The examples used in the course felt familiar to my rural context, which helped me reflect deeply on the changes we need to make as individuals and communities. These resources didn’t just inform me, they also empowered me. I feel more confident to speak up, educate others, and help shift the harmful attitudes and behaviours that lead to violence against children.”* (Thembelani, December 2025)



Key shift: From providing top-down information only to creating platforms for horizontal, peer-led knowledge sharing where trust building between participants, facilitators and contributors was key for the learning process.

Questions for further discussion:

Have you ever experienced a learning environment that required you to bring your own personal stories and feelings into that space? If so, how did this feel for you and if not, why do you think this is?

Do you think being a part of co-producing knowledge rather than receiving it from someone else makes a difference to learning, and if so in what ways? Do you have an example of this experience in your own life?

3. Building bridges across diversity

Connecting across differences

The course aimed to create a safe bridging container where participants could move between self-reflection, personal change, and honest dialogue with others. Participants stressed that what they valued most was not a top-down transfer of information on topics, but a shared horizontal space where people also learned to build personal bridges across differences and sectors. These bridges needed to be strong enough to enable respectful exchanges that could hold complexity, power, and lived experience. It created a safe space where participants could navigate difference without collapsing into defensiveness or reproducing hierarchies about whose perspectives mattered most.

Two practical things helped the course become this bridging platform. First, recruitment for the course was done collaboratively and carefully, emphasising group diversity, in ages, genders, professions, faiths and geographies as a priority for the embodied journey together. Individuals were not only selected on merit but also on their fit within the wider group with personal motivation being a key factor. This took people out of their professional silos and invited them to work across them. Second, some graduates who took on informal small-group support roles within Cohort One, felt empowered and motivated to continue to create safe spaces for others. They became small group facilitators for the next cohort, reflecting faith diversity and geographical breadth, as well as being an approachable connection for new participants as recent graduates themselves.

Embodying interfaith engagement

One of the distinctive strengths noted by participants was the interfaith angle of the course, which they consistently described as both stretching and grounding. Rather than remaining at a surface level with *“faith as a backdrop”*, or experiencing interfaith engagement as a limitation where no faith-specific discussions could take place, the course invited people to go deeper into how their specific beliefs, doubts, traditions, and faith practices may shape their own responses to violence and power and to feel safe to share these insights with those from other faith traditions. Participants reflected that the course actively modelled non-judgement and opened a space where different faith traditions became resources for courage, not barriers to understanding.

Facilitators were from different faith traditions and held the sessions carefully, and with spiritual depth due to being active faith practitioners. They understood that interfaith dialogue is not an academic exercise but a relational practice requiring humility, curiosity, and ethical presence. What made this especially powerful was the tone set by the facilitators where difference was not positioned as something to debate or defend against, but something to meet and engage with, with empathy, curiosity and respect. Faith leaders, in particular, stressed the value of the platform provided by the course to talk honestly with people from different religious backgrounds.



Featured story: Finding shared moral ground across faiths

Michelle is a South African social worker, a child protection officer in her local church, and a safeguarding trainer for a global Christian organisation. She had little prior exposure to anyone of other faiths. The course was eye-opening for her in this respect. *“It is more effective in breaking down prejudice to hear from people themselves than to hear what others say about them. In the course, I heard from people from different faiths directly, an opportunity I don’t get otherwise. I was encouraged to learn that we face many common challenges, so there is another community that I am part of that intersects faiths, religions and cultures.”*

Michelle’s opportunity to hear how those in other faiths also wrestled with safeguarding and including children in their traditions shifted her own tone, moving from comparison to mutual recognition, to see that inter-faith encounters can be peaceful, productive, and constructive. Michelle pointed out that despite being an experienced trainer, it was her first time experiencing first-hand a safe space for learning across different faiths. She noted that the course’s approach of welcoming everyone’s views, with non-judgementalism and respect was invaluable, opened the way for dialogue and is an excellent strategy for wider peace-making. Hearing those from other faiths share their stories helped her to also recognise and face difficult aspects of her own childhood, calling these *“light bulb moments”*. She shared that this learning experience also had a freeing effect on her in ways which are still rippling through her life and family. She has also begun to adopt some of these learning strategies experienced on the course into her wider faith-based work as a child safeguarding trainer across the African continent.



Inter-faith learning was identified by many participants as a quiet but generative space where recognition emerged around how much shared moral ground exists across different faith traditions, despite the divisions often reinforced by culture and society. This shared space offered resources and reassurance, inviting participants to see religious difference not as a barrier but a catalyst for understanding and for collective responsibility. In-depth or faith-specific engagements were not avoided due to this lens but were entered into with an awareness that those from other religions may have a different view and were also listening in to hear how it might resonate with their own traditions. For example, Muslim participants from different regions pointed to the value of listening in to contextual Christian re-readings of Bible stories, both those that included sexual assault but also those that showcased the agency and voices of children being respected by God. This exercise of re-reading sacred texts in the light of child protection was viewed as relevant for their own faith tradition.

“There is more in common between faiths than we are led to believe by our respective cultures and society. Interfaith relations are peaceful, productive and life-giving. The course gave me resources, and reminded me that I need to start small, within my own community.” (Amy, aged 19, Sunday School teacher, November 2025)

Centering Global South perspectives

The course’s Global South centre of gravity, especially its Africa-centric leadership and intentional prioritisation of course contributions from this region, disrupted current forms of epistemic injustice around whose voices are often centred. In the field of violence against children, evidence from, and focused within Northern contexts often dominates (partly due to the inequitable distribution of resources for research). Participants pointed to the value of recognising and connecting to those sharing knowledge with course examples primarily situated within Global South lived realities. A small number of participants from the Global North attended, but within a peer-to-peer environment where knowledge flowed horizontally not vertically, and orally rather than in written form.

Participants also highlighted the wide, multi-sectoral nature of course participants and noted that around the course table, an older professor sits alongside a young Sunday school teacher; a lawyer with a rural Pentecostal pastor and a medical doctor. Different ages, disciplines, and levels of prior knowledge, including survivorship, become assets for shared learning rather than obstacles. This cross-fertilisation was identified as one of the programme’s most generative features as it models the plurality and diversity of knowledges that it also teaches. One key decision made was that all participants joined the course in their personal capacity and not as organisational representatives. This enabled them to meet each other beyond formal labels and pressures. One



participant, a former director in the South African government said: *“This course inspired me to work with faith leaders and faith communities. They can use prayers, sermons, sacred texts and religious rituals to transform beliefs underpinning child maltreatment and promote the protection of children”* (Shirley, November 2025).

Building bridges of relationality

Each course cohort was designed to be context-specific and unique, shaped by the local, plural realities emerging from the participants rather than by a [single canon of universal knowledge](#). This commitment to multiple ways of knowing and the many context-specific truths that co-exist, means that no cohort receives a generic template of what has to be covered in each session. Instead, they co-create a learning environment that honours their specific histories, languages, and community dynamics. The diversity of the facilitation team is central here: whose voices are present, and how they hold the space, matters. Facilitators bring different professional, theological, and cultural perspectives, modelling the respectful plurality the programme seeks to cultivate. Participants described the course as providing a platform to bridge evidence, faith, and practice and a place where difficult conversations about violence, power, and beliefs can be safely held: *“The diverse dialogues capture a key shift: from an information-bank model to a relational model, where learning happens through the personal bridges participants build with one another. These bridges, across geography, gender, professional discipline, and faith, are what make the programme transformative rather than merely informative.”* (Tosin, December 2025)

Key shift: From educating within homogenous or professional silos for a shared starting point towards intentionally centring intersecting forms of diversity in the participants as a core part of learning together.

Questions for further discussion:

Have you ever met someone from a different discipline or profession that has taught you something important that your own discipline or profession did not enable you to see so well?

Can you share one insight that you have received from a person from a religious tradition which is not your own?

4. Creating safe spaces for change through engaging personal beliefs

Talking about beliefs

In violence prevention spaces, personal religious beliefs are often silently ignored or cordoned off as a private, fragile, or even dangerous domain. Safer, more neutral terms may be used instead—such as ‘values,’ ‘culture,’ ‘norms’—to avoid the rawness of people talking about what they believe and feel. This avoidance of engagement with people’s lived theologies where sacred texts meet a raised hand, or where beliefs around mercy can be twisted into silence can be unwise. It allows spaces where harm to children breathes to go unchallenged. Tosin shared that *“one of the most significant learnings has been the critical examination of how faith, culture, and power intersect in ways that can either perpetuate or prevent violence against children”* (Tosin, December 2025).

Many people of faith live within the paradox that their faith communities are intended to be havens of sacred trust, yet they have often become sites of profound betrayal for victims, survivors and those at risk and have also become havens for those that perpetrate or endorse such harms. Healing this rupture requires an embodied move beyond professional silos—where clinicians, clergy, and policymakers often speak past each other—to enter, as one participant described it, *“a circle of genuine encounter.”* This moves beyond academic debate alone to also speak about faith as it is lived and breathed by people in their everyday lives. It asks a terrifying, yet potentially liberating question: Does what I believe protect a child, or does it excuse the one who harms them?

Sanya from Zambia works with churches across Southern Africa. He identified the critical role that churches and other faith-based institutions can play in shaping safe and supportive environments for children: *“I was particularly struck by how the misinterpretation of scripture can sometimes contribute to harmful practices, including the abuse of children within faith-based settings. This learning has deepened my understanding of the urgent need for faith leaders to use their platforms to actively advocate for children’s rights and well-being.”* (Sanya, December 2025) In



this way, the educational transformative process became a site where institutional realities were exposed and re-examined, and where participants began to see themselves as agents capable of helping to reshape the moral and protective landscape of their communities.

“This course has been a powerful journey that has transformed my mindset on faith and child protection. I used to view violence against children primarily through a legal or social work lens only, but I now understand the deep and lasting role that faith can play in both causing harm and bringing healing. I am especially moved by the idea that faith should not only comfort but also confront injustice. This course inspired me to see faith-based spaces as key partners in preventing violence and promoting child wellbeing.” (Alice, December 2025)

Shifting from beliefs to embodied practice

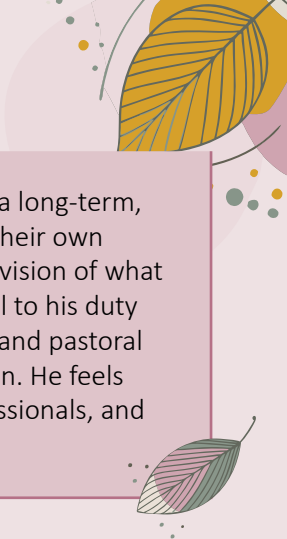
Transformation within the course took place most fundamentally when faith shifted from being viewed by participants as a set of doctrines to being part of daily, active practices of protection. This repositioned faith not simply as a static system of beliefs, but as evolving, lived practices of care, accountability and safeguarding. This can be transformational for individual and institutional identity. It transforms sermons from moral exhortation into grounded lifelines, and institutions from defensive fortresses into proactive sanctuaries. Heritage, a Nigerian pastor in the UK, named this integration of religious belief and action as becoming more real for her: *“I feel a deeper sense of responsibility... to ensure that many other faith leaders understand their duty. Even now, my approach... is more inclusive, allowing spaces for [children] to actively be involved”* (Heritage, November 2025).

Chiranthi, a Buddhist participant from Sri Lanka, also noted that the contributions from diverse contexts were transformational for her. A course contributor from Sierra Leone shared her experiences of how to work with faith leaders longer-term to become genuine first responders to children experiencing violence or abuse, and to harness their willingness to reshape internal systems. This resonated with Chiranthi’s own experiences in Sri Lanka as key for sustainable change: *“The course’s focus on spiritual capital and child participation connected strongly to my own work, helping me see how important it is to create spaces of faith where children’s voices are truly heard and valued”* (Chiranthi, November 2025).

Participants began to reinterpret their own roles as faith leaders, faith educators, and faith practitioners, better recognising child protection not as an external requirement but as central to their own spiritual and professional identity. Several described a reframing of their vocation in which safeguarding becomes an expression of faith itself: one participant spoke of learning to “place children at the centre of teaching” and discovering that addressing taboo topics *“in age-appropriate ways is actually a form of protection,”* while another reflected on a deepened pastoral responsibility that shapes how they create spaces where young people are active participants rather than passive recipients. Some articulated a shift in their theological imagination, describing a renewed engagement with faith that prioritises *“compassion, justice, and the inherent dignity of children,”* and a growing confidence to challenge harmful norms and support institutional accountability. This vocational reorientation was captured in the recognition that *“spiritual capital is essential to transform communities,”* signalling a move from more traditional understandings of religious ministry into a form of leadership that is protective, relational, and justice-seeking. These reflections show participants stepping into an expanded sense of calling with safeguarding seen as a core expression of faith, ethics, and public responsibility, and where the role of the faith leader naturally extends into advocacy, accompaniment, and creating safer environments for children.

Featured story: Reclaiming faith vocation in authentic ways

Irshad is an Imam within the Canadian Council of Muslims and a course participant. He noted that, *“a powerful thread through this course has been the insistence that faith is not neutral in the face of violence against children: it either reinforces harmful norms or becomes a transforming force for safety, dignity and non-violence”*. Engaging with contributors from different faith traditions and regions helped him realise that, despite very different contexts, faith leaders everywhere hold immense moral authority that can be mobilised for child protection, or misused in ways that silence children; and that collaboration across religions and sectors is essential for protecting children to become a visible, everyday expression of living faithfully. His key course takeaway was that “good intentions” are not enough and that faith institutions need clear safeguarding policies, trained focal persons and transparent accountability systems for imams, pastors and other leaders to truly act as first-line responders rather than



distant advisors. Irshad pointed out that course videos encouraged a shift from one-off campaigns to a long-term, faith-rooted culture of prevention and response by inviting faith leaders and practitioners to re-read their own traditions through the lens of mercy, justice and *amanah* (trustworthiness). The course reshaped his vision of what faithful Islamic leadership means in a Canadian context and he now sees child safeguarding as integral to his duty as an Imam, not as an add-on or Western imposition. Irshad is now more intentional in his preaching and pastoral care about how Islamic values actively protect children, rather than leaving space for misinterpretation. He feels institutionally empowered to support families holistically, building bridges with child protection professionals, and positioning his mosque as a trusted partner in safeguarding rather than isolated.

Holding space for sacred unravelling

The course intentionally built a safe container for critical reflection by faith actors about their personal beliefs. This included sensitively exploring belief-based biases held by people of faith who are working in other professions, for example as teachers or nurses. This created the conditions for what Grace from Kenya identified as a key shift in how she understands faith, *“not only as belief but as daily practice that either protects or harms children”*. *“I have learned to recognize how silence, misused scripture, or misplaced mercy can enable violence, and how faith can instead be reclaimed as a source of justice, healing, and dignity.”* (Grace, December 2025)

Engaging at this depth required a course platform strong enough to contain or safely hold difficult expressions of grief, anger, doubt and confusion. These emotions are often repressed or denied in faith spaces in favour of feelings of forgiveness or joy. Reclaiming these emotions, which also exist within sacred texts and traditions, was experienced as liberating by many participants. The container was co-created by facilitators from different regions and faith traditions who had themselves built relationships trust with one another. They modelled a space of respect, non-judgement and commitment to journey together, also bringing their own emotions into the room.

A number of structural elements also helped to create and sustain this course container into which new participants entered. First, *community agreements*, established before the course began, provided a foundation of confidentiality, respect for the view of others, and the courage to speak one's own truth. Applicants were expected to commit to these agreements from the outset, and their willingness to do so was part of the application process. Second, the use of *embodied formats* such as poems from children, social norms trees, and psychosocial support exercises were used from early on to decentre intellectual discussion and centre heart-level understanding. This also democratised the space by preventing those with greater 'mind' knowledge from dominating. Third, dedicated time for *structured reflection* was intentionally built into the course including personal journaling and small group discussions, as well as interactive plenary sharing. Aspects of the course could be completed in a self-directed way, allowing participants to move at their own pace through some materials and spend more time on areas most relevant for them or their context. This recognised that the journey towards integrating mind, heart, and hands starts at different places for different people, with faith leader participants especially noting that the course helped them look at themselves, their work and their beliefs in a different way.

“This course has changed my life. I was able to open up to other ideas and begin to think deeply about how I’ve been interpreting the Scripture (as a pastor) and the things I’ve been doing, and I’m glad”
(Michael, Botswana, June 2025).

All adults are faith leaders to a child

One transformation noted by many participants was a realization that safeguarding is not only the duty of ordained faith leaders. Every person of faith in a community, in how they interpret discipline, authority, and love, is a *de facto faith leader to a child*. The course empowered participants of many ages, most of whom were people of faith, to claim that role with more integrity and commitment and to ask *“Do my beliefs harm or heal?”* Building the personal and communal courage and willingness to sit with that question honestly offered a place where many survivor participants also found their own power to engage in difficult conversations with empathy and courage, to challenge violence-supporting norms that fail to support survivors, and to advocate for safer faith and educational spaces to ensure that real, durable safety is built. Participants insisted that their faith traditions can be reclaimed for child thriving, not only because an external policy demanded it, but because their faiths, in their truest forms, require it. This invited people of faith into a vocational commitment that co-creates genuine allyship. Charles from



Kenya noted: *"I was challenged to examine how my own theology and leadership practices either create safety or perpetuate silence for children. After 12 weeks, I am not just informed but inspired with a deeper sense of calling to create safer, more nurturing spaces for every child"*. (Charles, June 2025)

Key shift: Moving from silencing personal beliefs as dangerous to discuss in public to creating safe containers for intentional, sensitive self-reflective engagement with personal beliefs that can go deeper into their roots.

Questions for further discussion:

Share an example of a spiritual belief you have held in the past but that you have now rethought as a result of learning that it was harmful for someone else?

Think of a religious belief that is key for your identity and how you live. Does it shape how you treat children?

Conclusion

Across the course, stories shared by participants and contributors became catalytic learning moments, revealing how transformative education unfolds when testimony is offered safely and received with attentiveness. Personal narratives, often rooted in experiences of adversity, resilience, and reclaimed agency, disrupted familiar assumptions about limitation and vulnerability, prompting nuanced engagement with how personal histories shape, but do not determine, identity or possibility. Rather than functioning as isolated moments of inspiration, these stories opened interactive spaces for critical self-reflection and narrative re-authoring, demonstrating that *healing and leadership can coexist and that lived experience can serve as a foundation for ethical action and social change*. *"We were all children once. It starts with us,"* a faith leader from Ghana noted, grounding his work for violence prevention in his own emotional memory and shared vulnerability with others. Tanya from the UK concludes that the course views transformation as multidimensional: it changes learners' inner landscapes, strengthens the community's capacity for ethical action, and opens possibilities for structural change. For her, educating for transformation is not only a pedagogical technique, but a wider commitment to form people who think critically, act responsibly, and engage the world with clarity, courage, and relational integrity.

Opening platforms for peer-led dialogues across differences and co-producing knowledge in ways that amplify survivor voices and experiences can only be transformational when bridges are built that can hold up these encounters safely. This offers an opportunity to go beyond professional silos and languages to find one another, build commonalities and acknowledge differences in productive ways. Encounters across specific differences, of faith, geography, race, education, age, experiences and profession can create relational intimacy. The course invites formative aspects of our identities, beliefs and values to come through the door of conversations about faith and violence against children, to be given a place at the table and engaged respectfully, with curiosity and in the light of a shared commitment towards a world where all children can thrive without violence.

"The course opened room for learning, but also for processing. It made me realise that silence, distance and indifference are not an option. The world needs people who care, show up, listen, protect, restore dignity. That means we have to act now. I carry a sense of responsibility, but also hope. Because I've seen, through the course stories, that one person who decides to act can change the trajectory of someone else's life...we all have a role, no matter how small it feels." (Ana, participant from Mozambique, December 2025)



Key messages

- ☀️ **It's personal:** Shift from seeing VAC as an abstract topic outside us to understand it as a relational truth between us, forming us as children and requiring our personal engagement, witness and deep listening.
- ☀️ **Build nets of peer learning:** Shift from vertical methods of teaching information towards horizontal knowledge sharing where trust-building between participants, facilitators and contributors is prioritised.
- ☀️ **Celebrate diversity:** Shift from educating within homogenous silos of people like us towards holding space for intersecting forms of diversity within the group as vital for unlearning stereotypes together.
- ☀️ **Talk about spiritual beliefs:** Shift from silencing personal spiritual beliefs as too dangerous to discuss in public to creating safe containers for intentional self-reflective engagement with beliefs and values.

Additional resources

Teacher's Institute. (2025). Paulo Freire's pedagogy: [Education as a practice of freedom](#). Website.

Kombo, B. (2024). [From survivor-centred to survivor-led: Lessons from promising survivor-led gender-based violence accountability initiatives](#). Irish Aid.

Palm, S. (2025). [How to engage faith actors in survivor-led ways: Learning from and with survivors of child violence](#). [Webinar]. Sexual Violence Research Initiative.

Cummings, S., Munthali, N., & Sittoni, T. (2025). [Epistemic Justice as a "new normal?" Interrogating the contributions of communities of practice to decolonization of knowledge](#). *Sustainable Development*, 33(3), 3228-3245.

Suggested Citation: Palm, S. Greco, S., & Wells-Brown, T. (2026). *Survivor-led education for transformation: Ending violence against children in faith communities*. Sexual Violence Research Initiative.

Acknowledgements: We would like to acknowledge the important contributions from all our course participants, our reviewers and the other working group members that made this dialogue brief possible.



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