



Trauma-informed care and sexual violence response within faith-based settings in Lusaka, Zambia



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What this learning brief is about and why it matters

Faith leaders are often among the first people approached when survivors of sexual violence seek support. However, many church leaders receive little preparation to respond in ways that prioritise survivor safety, trauma-informed care, and appropriate referral. This learning brief shares practice-based knowledge from trauma-informed care and sexual violence response training delivered to 60 church leaders from multiple Christian denominations in three communities in Lusaka, Zambia. The training formed part of a World Health Organization-funded co-design process to inform the development of a trauma-informed intervention for adolescent girls with a history of sexual abuse.

Rather than focusing solely on knowledge acquisition, the training created opportunities for church leaders to critically examine long-held beliefs and pastoral practices related to confidentiality, forgiveness, reconciliation, safeguarding, and survivor support. Through reflection, discussion, and experiential learning, participants recognised that trust in faith institutions does not automatically translate into safe responses and that church leaders themselves may require support to address unresolved trauma before effectively supporting others.

Key messages

- ☀️ **Trusted does not always mean safe.** Faith leaders require safeguarding knowledge and practical referral skills to respond safely to disclosures of sexual violence.
- ☀️ **Trauma-informed care challenges traditional pastoral responses.** Survivor safety should take precedence when navigating forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice.
- ☀️ **Sexual violence exists within faith communities.** Creating safe spaces for honest reflection helps church leaders acknowledge and respond to abuse within their own congregations.
- ☀️ **Church leaders need support too.** Addressing leaders' own experiences of trauma can strengthen their ability to provide survivor-centred care.
- ☀️ **Lasting change requires more than training.** Ongoing mentorship, reflection, and institutional safeguarding are essential for building safer faith-based responses to sexual violence.

1. Background

"I never thought that asking a survivor to sit with the perpetrator could cause further harm. We believed we were helping people reconcile." – Pastor participant

This reflection emerged during a trauma-informed care training with church leaders in Lusaka, Zambia. It captured a tension at the heart of faith-based responses to sexual violence: practices that are well-intentioned and rooted in pastoral care do not always align with survivor safety, healing, or justice.

A Place Called Home Ikhaya (Ikhaya) is a women-led Zambian non-governmental organisation focused on the awareness, prevention, and response to sexual violence against women and children. Through its work with communities, churches, schools, and other stakeholders, Ikhaya has observed that faith leaders are often among the first people approached when individuals and families are facing crisis, including experiences of sexual violence.

The learning presented in this brief emerged from the church leader component of the project, "Feasibility and Acceptability of a Trauma-Informed Multi-Component Intervention for Adolescent Girls (10–14) with a History of Sexual Abuse in Lusaka, Zambia." Churches were identified during the co-design process as important and trusted spaces for social, relational and pastoral support. However, concerns were raised about how sexual violence disclosures were handled within these spaces. Community members, adolescents, caregivers and other



stakeholders identified gaps in confidentiality, safeguarding and referral pathways, as well as concerns about whether survivors' safety and wellbeing were being adequately prioritised. These concerns highlighted the need to strengthen the capacity of church leaders to respond to sexual violence in ways that protect survivors, avoid further harm and connect them with appropriate support.

In response, Ikhaya designed and implemented trauma-informed care and sexual violence response training with 60 pastors and church leaders from multiple denominations across three densely populated, low-income urban communities in Lusaka.

This practice-based knowledge (PBK) brief reflects on the lessons that emerged through that process and the conversations that challenged both participants and facilitators to think differently about the role of churches in responding to sexual violence.

2. Preparing church leaders to respond

A total of 60 church leaders participated across the three workshops, representing multiple Christian denominations. The training was delivered through three separate one-day workshops, with one workshop conducted in each participating community. One one-day reflection meeting per community was also conducted three months after the training workshop. These follow-up meetings provided an opportunity for church leaders to reflect on how they had applied the learning within their churches, discuss challenges they had encountered, and identify areas where additional support was needed.

The workshops were facilitated by Ikhaya staff with experience in trauma-informed care, gender-based violence prevention and response, safeguarding, and community-based programming. The training covered the topics of trauma, sexual violence, safeguarding, confidentiality, referral pathways, and the relationship between forgiveness, justice, and healing. Learning activities included group discussions, case scenarios, individual and group reflection exercises, and the Bridge to Freedom audio. The [Bridge to Freedom: River Cross audio resource](#), developed by RiverCross Global, was used as a trauma-informed storytelling and reflection resource during the workshops. RiverCross develops Christ-centred, trauma-informed resources and training to equip caregivers, teachers and church leaders to support children experiencing trauma, abuse and exploitation. The resource provided a shared starting point for participants to reflect on trauma, vulnerability, safety, resilience and healing, and to connect these themes with their own experiences of supporting children and survivors within their communities.

Rather than simply delivering information, the workshops created space for church leaders to critically reflect on their own beliefs, assumptions, and pastoral practices. Participants were encouraged to examine how traditional responses to sexual violence aligned with trauma-informed, survivor-centred approaches and to consider practical ways of strengthening support for survivors within their faith communities.

The church leader training generated rich discussions that extended beyond the original objectives of the workshops. Participants openly reflected on their experiences of responding to sexual violence, questioned long-held assumptions about forgiveness, reconciliation, confidentiality, and safeguarding, and shared challenges they had encountered in supporting survivors within their churches.

Realising that they have learnt a lot through the process of implementing these training workshops, Ikhaya decided to capture this practice-based knowledge by being part of a pilot cohort in the SVRI Faith & GBV PBK Practice Lab. Through this Practice Lab, a small group of members of the SVRI Faith & GBV Community of Practice engaged in a structured, supported process to reflect on the lessons emerging from their organisations' work on faith and GBV, and to translate these into a practical knowledge product to inform future programming and share with others working in similar contexts.

The practice-based knowledge presented in this brief emerged through reflection across the training process rather than from a single source of data. Insights from the workshops were drawn primarily from participants' reflections, group discussions, case scenarios, and conversations about their experiences of responding to sexual violence within their churches. Facilitators also documented observations of participants' responses, questions, emotional reactions, and areas of uncertainty that emerged during the sessions. The review and reflection meetings held



approximately three months after the workshops provided an additional opportunity for church leaders to reflect on how they had applied the learning, the challenges they encountered, and areas where they felt they needed further support.

Ikhaya brought these different reflections and observations together to identify recurring themes, tensions, and practical lessons that form the basis of the practice-based knowledge presented in this brief.

3.1. Key Learning 1: Trusted doesn't automatically mean safe

Churches are trusted institutions, but trust does not automatically translate into safe responses. Participants in the workshop consistently agreed that churches are often among the first places people turn to when facing personal, relational, or family crises. As one pastor reflected, *"The church is where people bring their problems."*

During the training workshops, as participants got to know and trust each other, conversations became more honest. Several pastors spoke openly about situations where they had been unsure how to respond or where, looking back, they felt a survivor may not have received the support they needed. Confidentiality emerged as a major concern. Some pastors admitted sharing information because they felt uncertain about how to help or feared being blamed if a situation became worse. One pastor reflected on a previous situation in which they had encouraged a survivor to forgive and remain silent, believing this was the most appropriate pastoral response. After the training and discussions on trauma, safeguarding, and referral pathways, the pastor recognised that the survivor had needed specialised support and that the church should have helped connect them to appropriate services. This reflection illustrated how good intentions, without the necessary knowledge and skills, can unintentionally leave survivors without the support they need. As one pastor remarked, *"We need more skills beyond church training,"* while another shared, *"I did not realise that some of the signs I saw were responses to trauma."*

What became clear was that, even though they are trusted, church leaders are not automatically equipped and able to provide the responses and support that survivors need. Communities may trust churches, but many church leaders need to be provided with practical skills, safeguarding procedures, and referral options so as to be worthy of that trust.

3.2 Key Learning 2: Trauma-informed care challenges traditional approaches

The training with church leaders revealed that the principles of trauma-informed care challenge traditional approaches to forgiveness and reconciliation. Before the training, many participants viewed reconciliation as a positive way of resolving conflict and restoring relationships. Bringing people together to talk, pray, forgive one another, and seek restoration was often understood as a necessary, or even the most important, part of healing. Challenging these traditional approaches required skilled, sensitive facilitation. Rather than presenting participants with a list of 'wrong' practices, facilitators used questions, scenarios and individual reflection to invite church leaders to examine situations they had encountered in their own pastoral practice, and to explore what trauma-informed care would look like in that situation.

For example, with one experiential exercise, the church leaders were asked to reflect individually on what happens when a child survivor is asked to sit in the same room as the person who harmed them. Each time this exercise was implemented, the room became quiet as pastors reflected on situations they had previously handled in this way. The question created space for participants to reach their own conclusions about what might have been harmful, rather than being told that they had responded incorrectly.

The exercise was introduced as an opportunity to learn and reflect together, recognising that many previous responses had been motivated by a desire to help, restore relationships or support forgiveness. Several participants acknowledged that, in the past, they had encouraged survivors and perpetrators to meet in the hope of restoring relationships, without recognising that this could expose survivors to further fear, distress, or harm. The exercise was introduced as an opportunity to learn and reflect together, and the approach appeared to reduce defensiveness and allowed participants to acknowledge difficult experiences, question long-held assumptions and consider alternative ways of responding. The experience suggested that trauma-informed facilitation requires not only technical knowledge, but also careful attention to psychological safety, tone, pacing and the facilitator's ability



to hold difficult conversations without shame or blame.

The workshop experience highlighted that trauma-informed care principles may challenge church leaders' traditional ways of responding to sexual violence. It also demonstrated the importance of using experiential learning processes that enable church leaders to critically reflect on long-held beliefs and practices and recognise where these may unintentionally cause harm to survivors. Rather than relying solely on teaching, creating opportunities for reflection and discussion helped participants reconsider how forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice can be approached while ensuring that survivor safety and wellbeing remain the priority.

3.3 Key Learning 3: Sexual violence is hidden in church communities

The discussions facilitated during the training workshops revealed that sexual violence is present within church communities, but often remains unseen and unspoken about.

At the beginning of the training, many church leaders spoke about sexual violence as something happening in the wider community “out there”, but not within the church community. As the training progressed and more honest and challenging discussions were facilitated, participants began recognising and acknowledging that the same community members experiencing or perpetrating violence were also members of their churches.

Several leaders disclosed having dealt with cases of sexual violence within their congregations. Group conversations became particularly difficult when participants considered situations where the alleged perpetrator was a respected church member or leader. A recurring theme was the tension between protecting survivors and protecting the reputation of the church. For example, one pastor described the challenge of responding to a disclosure involving a well-respected member of the congregation, admitting that there was uncertainty about how to protect the survivor while also managing pressure from others who were concerned about the reputation of the church.

This example prompted wider discussion among participants, many of whom recognised that protecting the reputation of the church can unintentionally take precedence over supporting survivors. The discussions highlighted the need for clear safeguarding procedures and survivor-centred responses that prioritise safety, accountability, and access to appropriate support, regardless of the status or position of the alleged perpetrator.

The workshop experience has highlighted that church leaders are often hesitant to acknowledge the sexual violence happening to or perpetrated by church members – especially if church leaders are involved. Careful facilitation was essential. Facilitators used non-judgemental questions, individual reflection, real-life scenarios and group discussion to create a safe space for participants to speak openly about difficult experiences without feeling blamed or shamed. For example, when discussing a disclosure involving a respected church member, participants were guided to explore the tension between protecting the survivor and protecting the reputation of the church.

The experience also showed the need for intentional interventions that create structured opportunities to break the silence around sexual violence, including facilitated reflection on real cases, safeguarding discussions, and opportunities for church leaders to examine practices that may unintentionally harm survivors.

3.4 Key Learning 4: Church leaders need to recognise and address their own trauma

For some church leaders, the workshops prompted reflection on their own experiences of trauma and how these experiences may influence the way they support survivors. One of the most unexpected insights from the training was the extent to which church leaders themselves were carrying unresolved trauma. During discussions about trauma and while listening to the [River Cross audio resource](#), participants began reflecting on their own experiences of bereavement, family difficulties, and challenges encountered through ministry. Several participants became visibly emotional. One shared:

“I feel like I have been granted permission to face my own trauma and deal with it instead of saying the past is behind me.” Another reflected, “What blocked my healing is people saying, ‘move on, it happens.’ I found myself using this as the basis on which I deal with people’s cases.”



These workshop conversations highlighted that supporting others often begins with understanding and addressing one's own experiences. A key piece of practice-based knowledge that emerged is that faith leaders cannot be assumed to be unaffected by the same forms of trauma, loss, and adversity experienced within their communities. While interventions often focus on equipping church leaders with knowledge and skills to support survivors, this experience demonstrated that leaders may first need opportunities to recognise, process, and heal from their own trauma. Creating safe spaces for self-reflection and healing therefore appears to be an important precursor to strengthening survivor-centred support within faith communities. This suggests that trauma-informed approaches for faith leaders should not only build their capacity to support others, but should also intentionally address their own wellbeing and healing as a foundation for effective ministry and pastoral care.

4. Challenges, tensions, and unanswered questions

The training surfaced complex tensions that church leaders continue to navigate in responding to gender-based violence. One of the most significant areas of discussion concerned the relationship between forgiveness, justice, accountability, and pastoral care. Participants grappled with questions such as, "How do I encourage forgiveness without causing harm?" These conversations revealed that applying theological principles in situations involving abuse is rarely straightforward, particularly when power imbalances and survivor safety are at stake. Many participants also expressed uncertainty about how to support survivors through reporting and referral processes while remaining within the boundaries of their pastoral role. Questions arose about when to offer spiritual support, when to encourage formal reporting, and how to balance confidentiality with safeguarding responsibilities.

A further tension that was revealed during the training workshops was that church leaders are expected to provide both spiritual guidance and practical support to survivors, yet these roles can sometimes appear to be in conflict. The workshop demonstrated that responding to sexual violence is not simply about increasing knowledge of trauma-informed care, but about helping church leaders navigate complex ethical, theological, and practical decisions where there may be no simple or immediate answers. This highlights the need for ongoing reflection, mentoring, and opportunities for church leaders to continue strengthening their capacity to respond in ways that prioritise survivor safety while remaining faithful to their pastoral calling.

5. Implications for practice

The three-month reflection meetings highlighted changes that church leaders were beginning to make in practice. Some leaders reported making referrals and said they felt more confident providing counselling and support. Others described using the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and how these shaped their responses to others. One pastor shared that she had gained a better understanding of her personal triggers and recognised how unresolved childhood trauma had affected her. She subsequently spoke with her mother as part of seeking greater understanding and closure. These reflections reinforced the importance of creating continued opportunities for church leaders to reflect on both their practice and their own wellbeing beyond the initial training.

Very importantly, future training should create space for participants to explore their own experiences of trauma before focusing on how to support others. Facilitators should also be prepared for emotional disclosures and should consider using practical resources such as the [River Cross audio resource](#), which helped participants connect the learning to real-life situations.

6. Conclusion

The experience of working with church leaders demonstrated that meaningful change often begins with reflection rather than instruction alone. While participants gained knowledge about trauma, sexual violence, safeguarding, and referral pathways, some of the most significant shifts occurred when they began examining their own experiences, assumptions, and responses to harm.

The training created opportunities for leaders to recognise the limitations of some traditional approaches, reconsider how they support survivors, and reflect on the responsibilities that accompany the trust placed in churches by communities. Strengthening faith-based responses to sexual violence requires not only building knowledge and skills but also creating spaces where church leaders can critically engage with their beliefs, experiences, and practices as they work towards becoming safer and more responsive sources of support.

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