

## Caring for Complainants

My name is Suzie Duffy. I come from the small town of Convoy in Co. Donegal. I attended the local primary school where my mother taught me for most of my primary school life as it was at the time a three teacher school and she taught many classes. I then attended Loreto secondary school in Letterkenny and in leaving cert year I felt attracted to the life and ministry that I experienced there so I joined Loreto and that was 35 years ago. I spent the first ten years of my Loreto life in various communities in Dublin. During that time, I studied to become a Home Economics teacher in Sion Hill College, Blackrock after which I taught home economics and religion in Loreto, Balbriggan.

In 1994, I was sent by my provincial to Cavan, where I taught for another few years the same subjects in our secondary school there. I got involved in youth ministry in the parish and liked the work so much that I started working full time at youth ministry in the diocese of Kilmore. That was the official start of my ministry in safeguarding children. After twelve years in youth ministry, Bishop Leo O'Reilly appointed me as coordinator of child safeguarding in 2006. I became an accredited trainer with the National Board that same year. In 2011, I became the DLP. I also completed the diploma in Spiritual Direction in Manresa and learned many skills that helps me in my role of DLP. In 2014, adult safeguarding was added. My hobbies are doing crosswords, cycling and enjoying the company of my family especially my nieces & nephews and grandnieces & grandnephews.

Since June 2016 we have and are following the revised Standards & Guidance of the National Board, the third standard being 'care and support of the complainant'. Although I do not have the 'official' title of support person, being the DLP has on certain occasions drawn me into a supportive role to complainants and I would like to share my experience about this with you for a few minutes.

I can think of three such situations where being the DLP and the one who received the complaint in the first place, then became the person who continued to offer support to the complainant. In two cases it has worked well. In one of these cases the person continued to make and wanted contact during the canonical process and asked if I would be their support and be present during their interview. We met a few times following the outcome of the process and now that person is happy that they do not need my support anymore. In the other of these two cases I still meet, email and have phone conversations on a very regular basis since I first received this complaint in early 2013. In the third case I was a support for a very short time and as a result of certain circumstances to do with the investigation of the case it was no longer possible to continue to support this person and to my sadness and pain I had to let go of trying and accept that it was not possible for me in this case to be a support. To this day I still wish it could have been different, but I know in my head that it couldn't have been. I learned an important lesson in accepting my own limitation in being able to reach out and be compassionate to someone who isn't ready in themselves to accept it.

Every now and then I get anxious especially when I hear that the role of the DLP should be separate from the role of the support person and wonder if I am 'doing it wrong'. As I reflect on that, I have to remind myself that it is the need of the complainant that I am answering and not my own need. My experience in receiving a complaint is that the person is wounded and has already gone through hell to come to the stage where they want to make a report. It has taken them a lot of courage to come to me, in telling their story they already start to form a relationship of trust. After I have received their story I do explain the process and offer them Towards Healing counselling and counselling from the National Counselling Services and also offer them a diocesan support person. I explain my role and the role of the support person but many times they will say that they would rather just continue with me and I do not have the heart to tell them that they cannot. I am mindful that they have been abused and hurt by the very same church that I represent, and I will not do anything intentionally that will traumatise them again. I am reminded of the words of Isaiah '*He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle (Isaiah 42:3)*'. The offer of Towards Peace may come after a considerable time of healing and it very much depends on the circumstances and needs of the individual person.

It is important that I believe what the person is telling me, so I must convey as best I can that I do believe them as they may have huge fear of the opposite. Deep down, some people have a bad image of themselves, they are convinced that nobody will believe them because in their own mind the abuser still has control over them. I must convey to them that they matter, no matter what.

It helps me when I am really open minded and free about what I am about to hear. If I have fears that this person is here to vent their anger, to sue the diocese or manipulate me or the situation, then I have already made judgements and I am starting from a position of not being able to really listen to their story or truly enter into their suffering. If I do this, I feel that I would be delaying the start of their healing process.

I try to make them see that how they feel is perfectly normal for anyone in their situation. It may take months or years for them to accept the abuse really happened to them. Remember that they have been suppressing their feelings for a very long time. They may tell you one incident today which may lift the lid on many other incidents. They may not be able to tell you all in one sitting. It is important to tell the person that it is not their fault. They may have been too frightened to fight off an abuser but to comply with an aggressor does not make them an accomplice. The golden rule is that the seriousness of abuse is not determined by the facts but by the effects.

Sometimes someone talks about their abuse and I may feel that it is told without very much emotion, but I must remember that that doesn't mean it didn't happen nor does it mean that they are coping with their lives. Emotions become frozen as a way of coping.

The meetings with the person I talked about earlier often takes the form of chatting over a cup of coffee. Sometimes they may have a special request. For example, they may want to meet with Bishop Leo, so I would arrange it for them. Sometimes I have a special request of them. For example, in 2017 when Pope Francis asked that every diocese would have prayer for

those abused by the church, I asked if they would like to be involved in helping us prepare the event which was prayer around the cross on Good Friday night of that year. They were delighted to have been asked and became very involved in an anonymous way. We met many times to look at materials, choose readings, music and poems and afterwards they said that it really helped in their healing. In more recent times I had another request which they were again very happy to be involved in and that was to take part in our recent diocesan review of safeguarding practice by the National Board.

Sometimes they want to talk about life in general, other times they may be struggling or upset. An example of this is the recent coverage by the media around the World Meeting of Families and Pope Francis' visit. This really upset the person I am accompanying and triggered again the hurt of their abuse.

I could not do this ministry without having support myself. I am a member of a DLP support group network and I make it a priority to attend our meetings which we hold four times a year. This support group is very important as I consider it to be peer supervision. We talk about scenarios anonymously and discuss different ways of journeying with people. We also discuss and work through the guidance of the NB and if we have suggestions or ideas we inform Teresa Devlin and Niall Moore.

My second support is my own spiritual direction which I attend once a month. This helps me reflect on the past month, reflect on how my ministry is affecting my life, my feeling, how I react (for better or worse) to situations and helps me see where God is calling me to go or journey in the future. I try to stay in touch with Ecclesiastes where it says:

‘there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.

a time to weep and a time to laugh,

a time to mourn and a time to dance,

a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,

a time to search and a time to give up,

a time to keep and a time to throw away,

a time to tear and a time to mend,

a time to be silent and a time to speak’.

I am very grateful for this passage of scripture as it has on a number of occasions stopped me ‘jumping in’ and getting in the way of God’s work. I remember a time when I know if I had continued with ‘my agenda’ I would have added to the hurt the person is carrying.

My third support and like good wine I leave it last to mention but that is because it is so important to me and I just couldn’t do the ministry without it and that is the support that I receive from my bishop, Leo O’Reilly. He is a pillar of strength for me. When I became the DLP and was only in the role about a month when I received my first complaint, followed very quickly by the second, I was fairly shaken but the support and encouragement that I received from him made me believe in myself and gave me the confidence to keep going. From him I have learned how to be compassionate and fair and yet remain focused on the

task in hand. We meet regularly to discuss cases, what has been done and what needs to be done. We decide who will do what and then inform the other of the outcome. I can ask any question and always get a full and honest answer. The support I receive runs right through my other roles as trainer and coordinator. I feel respected, trusted and valued and it is this support from Bishop Leo that makes my ministry easy.

Lastly, I want to share that it is a privilege to accompany a person who has been abused. They place so much trust in me and share very personal details about their life and family. If I can show the compassionate face of the church, then I am happy and willing to do so.

It is important to look after my own well - being. It is important to be in touch with how I feel. Am I open to meeting a person and listening to their story of abuse or do I dread receiving a phone call from someone wanting to meet. It is important to know my limitations and it is important to know when to let go.

My closing thoughts are around the theme of the conference 'be not afraid'.

Be not afraid to listen to the story of someone's abuse.

Be not afraid to sit with the discomfort.

Be not afraid to say 'it is not your fault'.

Be not afraid to say 'I am sorry for what happened to you'.

Be not afraid to be a link in the chain of healing.

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