

WHEN YOUR FAITH (IN THE CHURCH, OR ITS LEADERS) IS SHAKEN ...

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Recent years have found most of us feeling pretty shaken. The world has felt unpredictable, challenging and chaotic. But the last 6-12 months feel like a new level of challenge for so many who are invested in the church. Media and social media has brought reports and comment on so many situations which lead us to question - not the world, but something we perhaps had even more hope invested in: the church and its leaders.

This article is written in response to the considerable distress and bewilderment being shared following media reports relating to the current investigation into safeguarding concerns related to Mike Pilavachi, but many people are reeling from what has felt like a barrage of exposes and allegations about leaders from all kinds of contexts and traditions. Recent debates and disagreements in the Anglican church have shocked many, and triggered further conflict and upset. As questions are raised at the highest level about the structure or culture of some of our most significant networks, how do we manage when what we are reading leads us, or those we are leading, to question something so crucial?

It is important firstly to understand why it is natural to find this hard. Your mind builds itself on certain key foundations. Think of it like a Jenga tower: some people, circumstances and beliefs are supporting blocks your life is built around. Just like in Jenga, as we journey through life, some of these blocks may be nudged or moved. Gradual changes as life evolves may feel like a challenge, but are manageable. But sometimes life shifts something much more significant. When something foundational, supportive and central to our life, our self and our story are questioned, moved, or plain pulled out from under us, suddenly the whole tower can feel unsteady.

In these situations, your brain needs to literally rebuild its foundations: reframing how it understands the world. Emotions like anxiety are triggered and retriggered, to direct the focus of our attention and processing on what has happened. In early days and the worst times this can feel relentless and exhausting, like you cannot switch your mind off. Later it may develop to a pattern of intrusive thoughts or flashbacks, when your mind unexpectedly moves back to things you would rather not think about.

As a person of faith it is highly likely that aspects of your faith will be central to your life. Therefore situations that challenge respected or trusted leaders, or the church communities in which we worship, inevitably trigger a lot of emotion. This is even more the case where situations, organisations or people have been significant in formative years or moments of our life. And for some, stories and situations in the present reawaken traumatic things from their past making the emotional load triggered even more profound and difficult.

So what do you do when it feels like something significant has been challenged or lost? How do you manage when your faith and world has been shaken, or your mind feels traumatised and paralysed by your emotional reaction? Here are five important practical steps to take:

1 - Recognise the impact on you

This is important. Sometimes we don't realise at first how thrown we are by something, or wanting it NOT to have affected us, we try to suppress our feelings, and breeze past it. But you are human. It is ok to say: this is hard, and it hurts. If you are fighting the way your mind is trying to bring something to the front of your focus, it is likely things feel exhausting and overwhelming. It's important to find a safe secure space where you can pause, validate what you are feeling and take a moment to care for yourself in your reaction.

In the early stages of shock or distress, your analytical, thinking mind may shut down - in part due to the magnitude of emotions, but it also as a protective response, so you are not overwhelmed by exhaustion, and do take care of yourself. Follow this instinct and time out, away from pressures or demands to rest if you can.

Sometimes people describe feeling confused or not understanding why something has had so big an emotional impact. If you are not sure why you are finding something so painful, but it is dominating your thinking, try not to become frustrated or critical of yourself. Understanding why the impact has been what it has may need to come later. The priority at first must be accepting and validating what you are feeling and caring for yourself.





2 - Find somewhere safe you can share

When we are impacted by something painful we are inescapably vulnerable. Keeping yourself safe is very important, particularly if emotions are powerful.

Think about two main risks: firstly that in the initial need to withdraw and rest, you become caught in isolation and then do not talk when you need to. Keeping things in your own head makes them harder to process, and can magnify difficult emotions and leave you floundering in what you are feeling instead of finding a space to work it through.

The second risk, however, is that you might feel under pressure to talk too soon, too much, to the wrong people or in the wrong places. Emotions like anxiety and anger can push us to be impulsive, speaking when we shouldn't, or being drawn into debate and conflict that helps no one. Well-meaning people can push us to share before we are ready, or with their own motivation that will not move us forwards. Pause, and ask yourself: where is a good place to share about this? Who would it be wise to talk to? Look for three things: good boundaries (the conversation will stay where you have it and not be spread or shared), good trust (the person you share will hold this well and appropriately) and good safety (the person knows you, loves you, and will respond with compassion).

Sometimes we all need a therapeutic, neutral space to share. If you are struggling, particularly if the magnitude of what you are feeling is leading you to feel overwhelmed, desperate or experiencing suicidal thoughts it is absolutely essential that you find somewhere to reach out. If you do not know who you can talk to, please go straight to the list of anonymous, safe spaces at the end of this article.

3 - Limit your exposure

Once you have worked out WHERE is good to share, it's good to draw some helpful boundaries around WHEN your mind reflects on things. This makes sure your mind knows you ARE thinking about it and giving it headspace, but also that you can sometimes get AWAY from thinking about it.

Be particularly careful about the anxious urge to overthink. Sometimes our minds become caught in what is called hypervigilance: when anxiety and alarm lead us to constantly scan information or read posts on social media that then prove unhelpful, magnifying distress and triggering more anxiety.

If this is particularly hard for you, think about how you can manage when and what you read. Consider a break from social media, or limiting the times of day when you go on. Find someone who can read social media with you, or will keep you accountable when you have made plans to limit when you access it.

Remember also to find balance: hypervigilance means we notice the negative MUCH more than usual - and overlook GOOD things that are happening, stories that might remind us all is not lost. Take Paul's advice from Philippians 4:8 and think about how you can intentionally remind yourself of good things. Is there a book or podcast or conversation or social space you can join that will draw you back into something that is about love and light and hope

4 - Avoid self criticism

When something has blown apart how you see the world, especially if it has had negative or difficult consequences for you or those you love, it's easy to look back with hindsight and wish you had done things differently, beating yourself ourselves up for things you have or haven't done, or wish you could change. Go easy on yourself. No one is perfect, and it is a lot easier to look back than it is to see things coming.

Instead of pulling apart your past think about what you want to change and build in your future. As times move on, can you begin to think about positive things you have learned? Are there things you value more now, or think differently about in a good way? Can you explore this more and intentionally make headspace to reflect on it, to balance the inevitable time your mind might go to the less helpful pondering?

If you are really struggling with this, finding a therapeutic space to help you explore and make sense of what has happened may help.

5 - Build your ultimate foundation on God

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul writes with some sound advice about what it looks like to lay good foundations as wise or skilled builders (v10-15). We're urged to be careful what we build on, because life will test our foundations and so often these moments in the fire and flare of challenge and shock reveal the frailty of the human things we've so often leaned on.

Paul mentions three things that we often build on that will let us down. Firstly (in reverse order!) is worldly wisdom. Our media and culture tells us so many things are important: our success, our appearance, or status or following. But these things are really flimsy, and futile. Time will reveal their weakness, and the more we are trying to rely on them the more we'll struggle (v19-20). Secondly, Paul warns us that sometimes human leaders will fall and fail (v5, 21). These are 'mere' humans but we come to hope or believe they are more: celebrities, super humans., people raised above the more ordinary. The Bible is full of the same dissonance: spiritual leaders who nonetheless demonstrate bad behaviour, moral failing and often let God and the people they lead down. Then and now, when reality strikes and mistakes or dark deeds are revealed, it hits hard. Thirdly Paul warns us not to trust our own cleverness or perfection (v3). The passion translation warns us of the signs of 'lives centred on yourselves' - arrogance and conflict as we become so convinced we are right and infallible we refuse to be challenged or consider other perspectives. We are all only human, and we will get things wrong.

So what is Paul's solution? The only reliable foundation, he teaches, is a life build on Jesus Christ. His is the only good, secure foundation, the only thing we can rely on and trust in a world of constantly shifting sands and perma-crisis. Paul wants us to ponder - not the bad news and disappointments of life, but something so easily forgotten: our frail human bodies are the place God's spirit dwells: temples inhabited by the holy spirit. This is an amazing, mind blowing truth. When we feel thrown and shaken or torn apart by bad news, difficult stories, rejection or failings of people or places we previously trusted in, we have something much bigger than our own energy to draw on. There is a source of hope and light within us we can find our strength in as we rebuild.



Of course the reality of how we live this is tricky. Paul says it himself in 2 Corinthians 9 when he talks about the frailty he feels as a human (v7). But, with our ultimate foundation in God, his experience has been that although troubles and situations caused by human powers have left him feeling shaken they have not destroyed him. He feels the pressure but is not crushed. We might find things emotionally tough, but with our hope in the Lord there is a way to steady ourselves so we are not pushed into despair (v8-9).

It is so easy to muddle in our minds God and the all too human church. I have a good friend who teaches pilates classes. She often says in class, if you're feeling wobbly focus on something that is not moving. This is good advice. In the times when it feels like your world is spinning and everything human might fall down, take time to remind yourself those things are not God. Intentionally, quietly and defiantly return your focus to the Lord, and to Jesus, 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Heb 12:2).

It is my prayer that far from finding yourself pushed away from God we might all find in him the things we so need right now: comfort, a safe space to lament, an anchor that holds our soul steady in life's strongest storms (Heb 6:19). And that we can learn to lean on the one foundation we absolutely CAN trust in, depend upon and build our lives on.

Organisations for those needing support:

If you have concerns, need advice or to share information relating to an ongoing investigation, or about any leader or church contact independent safeguarding organisation thirty one:eight. You can call their helpline on 0303 003 1111 or read [this recent article](#) with advice.

[The Samaritans](#) is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Call 116 123, or email jo@samaritans.org.

[Premier Lifeline](#) is available by phone on 0300 111 0101 - 9am to 5pm Monday-Friday (excluding public holidays).

If you are finding your thoughts and feelings overwhelming, text SHOUT to 85258 in the UK, to text with a trained volunteer at <https://giveusashout.org>.

[Safe Spaces](#) is a free and independent support service, providing a confidential, personal and safe space for anyone who has been abused by someone in the Church or as a result of their relationship with the Church of England, the Catholic Church in England and Wales or the Church in Wales. You do not have to have told the police or the church authorities in order to receive their support. Contact them at 0300 303 1056 (09:00-21:00 Monday to Friday) or email safespaces@firstlight.org.uk

[NAPAC](#) (The National Association for People Abused in Childhood) offers support to those recovering from childhood abuse. Call 0808 801 0331 (Mon-Thurs 10am-9pm; Friday 10am-6pm or email support@napac.org.uk

