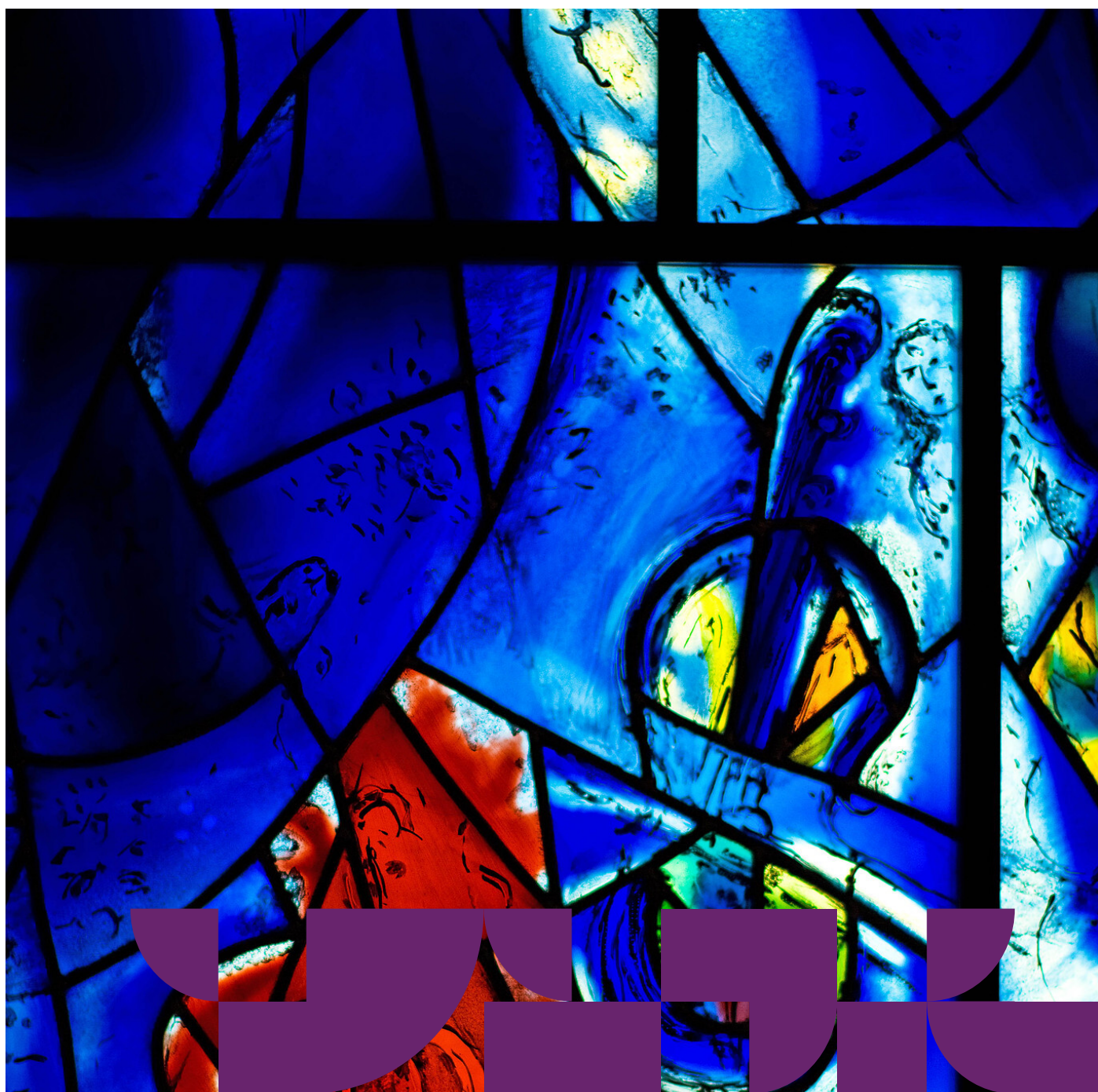


Resetting the balance

Listening to testimonies of harm in the Mike Pilavachi case

A report by Nina Kurlberg, Jonas Kurlberg and Mike Higon



We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all who contributed to this report. Thank you to those who spoke with us, whether informally or through the interview process – we recognise that such engagement can be costly and we are deeply grateful to you. Thank you also to Pat Jones, Natalie Collins, Megan Cornwell, Andrew Graystone and Rachel Clark, whose support has been invaluable to the research process. Thank you to Dionne Hamil and Ulli Klaerig-Jackson for all their help with the publication of the report. Any shortcomings remain our own.

Please note that we share personal testimonies concerning experiences of harm in this report, which some may find difficult to read.

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Executive Summary

On 2 April 2023, a joint statement was released by the Church of England's National Safeguarding Team, St Albans Diocese, and the trustees of Soul Survivor Watford, reporting that safeguarding concerns had been raised concerning Mike Pilavachi, Associate Pastor of Soul Survivor Watford, and that these were being investigated by the Church.[1]

On 6 September 2023, the Church of England's internal investigation into these allegations concluded, substantiating the concerns raised. Pilavachi had engaged in 'an abuse of power relating to his ministry'. He had 'used his spiritual authority to control people and [...] his coercive and controlling behaviour led to inappropriate relationships, the physical wrestling of youths and massaging of young male interns.'[2]

While various processes were set in motion by the Church of England and Soul Survivor Watford following the investigation's conclusion, none of these centred the voices and perspectives of those harmed. The purpose of this research was to address this omission by focusing on listening to those who experienced harm in this case, and in light of this, to unpack some of the key lessons for the church. Throughout the research process we have sought to honour the testimonies given to us by adopting a participant-centred approach.

The report has two distinct sections. The first recounts the experiences of participants and their own reflections on these. The second brings our own reflections as researchers to bear on these experiences. The material at the end of the report on lessons to be learnt is intended as a contribution to the ongoing discussion of abuse within the church, and spans four main areas: power, intimacy, discernment and testimonies.

The key points can be summarised as follows:

1. The church needs to be pursuing and disseminating a deeper literacy in relation to good and bad power, the dynamics of spiritual and religious authority, and the structures that are needed to keep power safe. The more powerful somebody's ministry seems to be (which also means the more powerfully God seems to be working through them), the more attention to their exercises of power is needed.
2. The church needs to be pursuing and disseminating a deeper literacy in relation both to vulnerability within the specific context of church communities, and to the harmful ways in which power and vulnerability factors can intersect within such communities.
3. The church needs to inculcate a culture where the identification of God's activity is most fundamentally a shared endeavour in which everyone's voice matters, and at its deepest a slow endeavour, in which the tracing of the fruit that emerges over time – the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control – is the most important test.
4. Those in positions of responsibility within the church need greater awareness and understanding of the ways their responses to abuse can either compound the harm already suffered or bring healing. Whenever abuse comes to light, responsibility needs to be taken for the ways in which people and organisations have contributed to the enabling of that abuse, whether consciously or not.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and scope

For more than a quarter of a century, the Soul Survivor phenomenon shaped the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people across the UK and beyond. At its heart was the Soul Survivor summer festival, launched in 1993, which grew until it was drawing in more than 30,000 people each year, and which gave rise to sister festivals all around the world.[3] It was linked with Soul Survivor Watford, a church founded in the same year.[4] The whole movement – the UK festivals, the international outreach, and the church in Watford – was closely associated with its co-founder and most visible leader, Mike Pilavachi.

On 2 April 2023, a joint statement was released by the Church of England's National Safeguarding Team, St Albans Diocese, and the trustees of Soul Survivor Watford, reporting that safeguarding concerns had been raised about Pilavachi, and that they were currently being investigated by the Church.[5] On 6 September 2023, the Church of England's internal investigation into allegations against Pilavachi concluded, substantiating the concerns raised. Specifically, the investigation concluded that Pilavachi had engaged in 'an abuse of power relating to his ministry', and that 'he used his spiritual authority to control people and that his coercive and controlling behaviour led to inappropriate relationships, the physical wrestling of youths and massaging of young male interns.'[6]

Following this, various processes were set in motion, including the bringing of several complaints under the Clergy Discipline Measure (CDM) by the Church of England, and Soul Survivor Watford's commissioning from Fiona Scolding KC and Ben Fullbrook of a review of 'the culture and practices of Soul Survivor as they relate to the allegations made concerning Mike Pilavachi'.[7] Nevertheless, none of the processes initiated to date have centred the voices and perspectives of those who experienced harm in this case.

When, for instance, a working group provided the Church of England's General Synod with a response to the Scolding Review in January 2025, it noted 'the imbalance towards the voice of [Pilavachi] and support for him over those with lived experience who have not felt that they were properly consulted', and recommended that any future work 'contains meaningful consultation with those with lived experience to inform the work and make the outcomes robust'.[8]

The purpose of our research was to address this omission by listening to victims-survivors and making recommendations to Soul Survivor Watford, the Church of England and the broader church on this basis. We believe that the voices and perspectives of victims-survivors have not received sufficient attention thus far. Our aim was neither to re-investigate the allegations already substantiated against Pilavachi, since this work has already been carried out by the Church of England's safeguarding teams and the review commissioned by Soul Survivor Watford, nor was it to uncover new allegations. Instead, our primary aim was to provide a space for people to share their testimonies with us, and to pay close attention to these, preserving the distinctive nature of each person's experience in our retelling. In so doing, however, patterns of experience have surfaced that go beyond these individual stories – something that only becomes apparent when they are seen together. Our secondary aim was to identify such patterns, and in the light of that analysis to unpack some key lessons that we believe the church needs to learn.

1.2 Method and approach

The testimonies given by victims and survivors of abuse are not just evidence to be used in substantiating allegations, or information to be used in shaping recommendations. In sharing such a testimony, a person is normally sharing something intimate about themselves; they are making themselves vulnerable again in an area where they have already suffered harm. Any such testimony therefore needs handling with extraordinary care, as one might handle a fragile gift: with gratitude for its production, acknowledgment of the harm it describes, recognition of the cost involved in producing it, real and visible care about what is and is not done with it, and a visible commitment to learn from it and respond to it. Simply in the way that people's testimonies are handled it is so easy for response to a situation of abuse itself to be abusive, compounding the harm done.

Throughout the research process we have sought to honour the testimonies given to us by adopting a participant-centred approach. For some, having a platform from which to speak can be a means of regaining power lost during abusive and coercive relationships; the project was set up to provide one such platform.[9] For others, however, participation in a project such as this is not at all cathartic – it is difficult, and painful, and engaged in for the sake of protecting others from abuse. In light of differing experiences and motivations such as these, it was imperative for us that participation in the project should, as far as possible, be meaningful for those providing testimony in regard to Pilavachi.

We have therefore endeavoured to respect the agency of those participating. After initial contact, participants were invited to submit a pre-interview form. The responses from these informed the interview questions and the topics we have focused on. Further, we have understood consent as something dynamic. That is, the granting of consent by our participants has entailed more than simply their filling in of a consent form: it was understood as an ongoing process. We have as such given participants access to their interview transcripts with the possibility of adding to, cutting or changing them. Once a draft of the report was completed, participants were given the opportunity to review how we had used their words. They have also had the possibility of withdrawing their consent at any stage until the publication of the report.

We are aware that the testimonies that we have gathered are deeply significant to our participants and have as such sought to hold these, not just as research data, but as something precious and needing to be handled with care and respect.

That has been true of the practicalities of the project (the interview transcripts, for instance, have been stored on a password-protected university server, to which only the researchers have access), but it has also been true of the approach we have taken to writing.

As part of our victim-survivor-centred approach, we have cited extensively from our participants to give them as much voice as possible. In the main section of the report, our focus has been on giving space for them to tell their own stories by quoting, paraphrasing and summarising their words and keeping our own commentary fairly minimal. We have kept our own more substantive reflections upon the testimonies that we have heard to a later part of the report, so as not to confuse our own commentary with the testimonies given by participants.

Over the course of the research, we were in contact with sixteen people who report that they were directly harmed. We came in touch with them through social media, word of mouth, and through mutual contacts. Of these, we interviewed eight people. Some were supportive of the research but felt unable to participate due to the impact that talking about their experiences of Pilavachi still has on them. Others initially agreed to interviews but did not engage further. One person formally withdrew from the process before the interview stage, and another withdrew before publication of the report. We are deeply thankful for each and every interaction we had, whether people felt able to participate in the interview and publication process or not. We recognise that such interactions can be costly.

The interviewees represent a breadth of perspectives, including someone who was heavily involved in Soul Survivor as a worship leader, someone who was part of the discipleship programme as an attendee and then leader, an intern, some who turned down offers of internships, the girlfriend of an intern, and a festival goer.

Two of the researchers – Jonas Kurlberg and Nina Kurlberg – have engaged in the project both as researchers and participants. Their experiences with Pilavachi occurred on different occasions and do not overlap. We are deeply grateful to Pat Jones for conducting interviews with them and for sharing insights from her research on abuse within the Catholic Church.[10]

We have complemented the testimonies that we have heard with testimonies existing in the public domain, using them to corroborate those of our participants. We have particularly drawn upon the testimonies of participants on Megan Cornwell and Kelly Valencia's *Soul Survivors* podcast, Beth and Matt Redman's documentary *Let There Be Light*, and Chris Bullivant's blogpost 'When the music fades'.^[11] Wherever possible, we have asked for consent from these persons for the use we have made of their words. We received consent from Beki, Chris Bullivant, Beth Redman and Matt Redman to draw upon their testimonies in this research.

Drawing on all that we have heard both from our interviewees and from those who have previously spoken publicly about their experiences, the report recounts encounters with Pilavachi that span a period from the 1980s to as late as 2022.

We have anonymised participants by providing them with pseudonyms and removing any identifiable details where possible. Our participants had different attitudes to anonymity, and we have in each case sought to respect that. Where there has been potentially identifiable information we have discussed it with the relevant participant. Whilst pseudonyms have been used for the people we interviewed, we have used the first names of those who have already offered public testimonies, and these have been indicated with an asterisk.

Unavoidably, allegations of shortcomings from some other persons within the orbit of Pilavachi have been mentioned in the interviews. We have chosen to name only those whose actions are already clearly documented in other public reports and reviews whilst anonymising others.

Finally, the project adheres to the research ethics policy of Durham University. Prior to commencing the interview process we obtained research ethics approval from the University. We have also consulted the university's legal team who have reviewed a draft of the report.

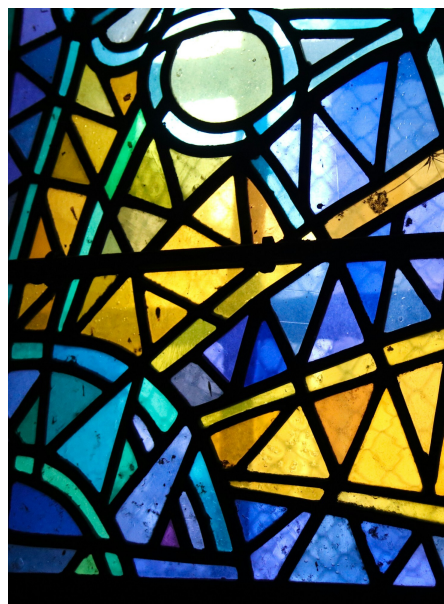


1.3 Structure of the report

Participants' responses to the pre-interview questions helped us to determine the topics that were explored in the interviews. These in turn are reflected in the overall structure of the report. There are two distinct sections. The first seeks to recount the experiences of participants and their own reflections on these.

As researchers we have then in the second section brought our own reflections as well as the research literature to bear on these experiences. The material at the end of the report on lessons to be learnt is intended as a contribution to the ongoing discussion of abuse within the church. We hope that this will lead to further conversations.

Photo credit: Marie Bellando Mitjans, Église Saint-Maximin , Metz, France



2. What happened?

In this section, we bring together the various testimonies that we have heard, tracing people's narratives from their very first encounters with Soul Survivor and Pilavachi, right through to the harmful experiences they describe. We have sought to use people's own words as far as possible, in recognition of their value and the need to respect and pay close attention to each individual's experience. At the same time, we have threaded these words together with some light-touch commentary so that we can draw readers' attention to some of the similarities and patterns that we have noticed.

2.1 First encounters with Soul Survivor and Mike Pilavachi

One aspect that has struck us relates to the backdrop to people's arrivals at Soul Survivor. It is notable that, for many, their first encounters with Soul Survivor and Pilavachi can be traced back to their childhood. They had attended conferences, local church events and summer festivals at which Pilavachi was on stage. These encounters often became connected with deeply personal and formative faith experiences. Adam was just eleven years old when he first came across Pilavachi, who was running the youth event at the New Wine conference. Adam described his first impressions of Pilavachi to us in this way:

He was doing what Mike does. He was hosting, he was speaking, he was joking [...] at that point I don't think I'd ever seen this combination of someone who was so funny and engaging, and treated teenagers like real people. [...] our spirituality was taken seriously [...] and I found that really compelling.

Adam

For Steve, Pilavachi was a 'hugely formative figure' in his religious experience as a teenager. Steve referred to his church youth group's annual trip to the Soul Survivor festival as a 'pilgrimage' and explained how it was the 'high point' and 'main religious experience' of any given year for the group. It is critical to understand childhood experiences and impressions such as these, because when young people joined the discipleship programme or Soul Survivor Ministries, or became interns or members of the church community in Watford, they were often carrying these with them. As Steve explained to us:

it's this festival experience, it's thousands of people, it's atmospheric, it's famous worship leaders, it's incredibly – just the whole experience – very emotive. And so, you know, that's the sort of the pinnacle each year [...] it's that every summer, every summer, every summer, every summer. And then suddenly, I'm there, I'm part of the church, I'm on this course, I'm with Mike.

Steve

Many of the young people who came to Watford were in a transitional stage of life, leaving home for the first time and perhaps uncertain about what to do with their lives. When Eric's time at school was coming to end, he was unsure of what to do afterwards. He spoke to us of his desperation to be close to God and to do God's will. He had heard of Soul Survivor's festivals and felt as though God was telling him to attend, so on the spur of the moment he booked tickets. He had an 'amazing' experience:

It felt very genuine, it felt very powerful, it was very attractive. [...] and so it was a little bit of a wow experience. And during that week they announced that they had what they called then a discipleship training course, like a gap year, starting in October. And I immediately thought, okay, this is it, this is what I'm supposed to do, this is what I'm supposed to do next.

Eric

Beki*, who shared her testimony on the podcast *Soul Survivors*, similarly enrolled on the discipleship programme after a powerful and transformative experience of God's presence during the summer festival:

I'd finished my A-levels, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and this seemed perfect, I'd just recommitted my life to Jesus, and I didn't want [...] for that to fade, and so I wanted to really invest in that.

Beki*[12]

Experiences and impressions such as these form part of the backdrop against which people arrived in Watford, and their personal encounters with Soul Survivor and Pilavachi took place.

2.2 Perceptions of Mike Pilavachi

Before exploring the relationships Pilavachi initiated and developed with young people, it is important to discuss their perceptions of him. Again, these perceptions provide critical context. The first point to note here concerns Pilavachi's 'celebrity' status within and outside of Soul Survivor. The majority of those coming to Soul Survivor would have seen Pilavachi on stage. As Steve said, 'meeting him in the flesh, it comes with that history.' Pilavachi also came across as being in high demand – difficult to find time to book meetings with and often away, travelling to speak at events. He was well known within Christian circles more broadly too; although teenage brothers Mark and John had never been to Soul Survivor, when they first spoke with Pilavachi at a church weekend away that he had been invited to speak at, John noted that it 'felt quite special,' because someone took a photo of the three of them talking together. John said 'he was quite well-known to the church. And I remember just sitting there thinking like this is kind of surreal in some ways.' Similarly, Mark said that his response was, 'that's Mike Pilavachi. That's crazy that he's, you know, prayed over me and my brother and wanted to get to know us and encourage us and stuff.'

Alongside Pilavachi's 'celebrity' status, it was clear to us that people had found his persona endearing. John told us that when he and Mark first interacted with Pilavachi they 'had a few giggles, had a few laughs, like you do with Mike.' Steve saw Pilavachi as having 'this sort of charisma to fill a room and you know, banter and crack a joke.' He said that when Pilavachi wanted to be, he was very much the same in person as he was on stage. Chris* described himself in a blogpost as 'becoming strangely unhinged by childish delight' as Pilavachi joked and laughed with him when they first met.[13]

For Eric, while Pilavachi was 'funny' and 'very charismatic', he also came across as 'someone who was humble and wise and thoughtful.' Part of what made Pilavachi's personality so endearing was that at the same time as he had immense charisma and charm, he also came across as being vulnerable, broken and very down to earth. In Adam's words, 'there was a human being there as well.' Pilavachi was open about some of the struggles he faced and often made jokes about these in public.

Yet despite Pilavachi's ostensible vulnerability and brokenness, the power that he held was tangible in every conversation we had, whether explicitly or implicitly. Sarah, for instance, mentioned Pilavachi's high-powered connections. Adam spoke about how 'Mike was the only one who could give you [...] opportunities.' Eric referred to Pilavachi as 'someone who could enable you to fulfil your calling or not,' and said, 'he could platform you in ways that no one else could.' In spite of the emphasis Pilavachi placed on the importance of serving God in 'the unseen' in his teaching, Eric said that the 'hidden curriculum [...] screamed "stage is what matters"', a stage over which Pilavachi appeared to have sole power.

Pilavachi's power also had spiritual dynamics. Many believed that he was anointed and, as such, had privileged access to God. While Sarah spoke of the interrelatedness between Pilavachi and God in her mind, Eric described him as 'God's best friend.' He said that Pilavachi seemed to have a 'special gift', and explained that his prophetic words were

always clouded in the language of, well, you know, 'I might get this wrong', you know, 'you need to test this'. But the reality is that if, I don't know, my friend said that, I might test it, but Mike says it, it carries a different weight.

Eric

Similarly, John saw Pilavachi as a 'prophet', so when Pilavachi spoke insightfully about his character and personality these words were assumed to be 'words of knowledge' even when they were not explicitly clothed as such.

I knew that he'd given people a lot of prophecy. I knew the type of person he was. So I just thought anything he said was... you know what I mean? I just thought everything he said would have been a prophecy. I was only eighteen, so it was like, that's the way I took it, you know.

John

John's words here further illustrate the sense of expectancy there was around Pilavachi, since he was understood to have a privileged channel of communication with God.

Also important is the 'success' that gave weight to Pilavachi's voice, something that Eric drew our attention to. He spoke of how he had been in 'big meetings' that Pilavachi was leading 'where people seemed to have had very strong encounters':

He was invoking the Holy Spirit to come, and there were physical manifestations that happened in ways that didn't happen for most people, right? So, someone else could have invoked the same kinds of words and language, and prayers, and people would stand around and look at each other, but when Mike spoke there were these manifestations.

Eric

Steve referred to Pilavachi as the 'high priest of that part of religious culture that I was a part of,' which led to 'a sense of awe' around Pilavachi, and him being revered:

I guess the main thing is the sort of, the reverence people had for him, that, if he turned and spoke to you in a group of, in a room, that was amazing. That was as if a halo was shining on the two of you.

Steve

All these things gave Pilavachi spiritual authority, and as Steve noted, the reverence this engendered made him 'untouchable'.

Finally, in addition to having spiritual authority, Pilavachi was perceived as being eccentric, and Steve spoke of how phrases such as 'it's just Mike' or 'Mike will be Mike' were often used in relation to various aspects of his behaviour. He experienced it in relation to trivial things, for example: 'Oh, my goodness, why is Mike wearing that crazy tie-dye shirt? Oh, it's just Mike.' Yet others received a similar response on raising more serious matters. As Steve reflected,

It reminds me of, you know [...] the phrase, 'boys will be boys', which historically has been used to excuse inappropriate male behaviour. [...] but there's something that really shuts down the conversation there, because you can't argue with it. [...] We can't say, well, [...] that's not Mike, because it is, but within it is the implicit, well, we can't challenge it or stop it or do anything about it, because it's Mike Pilavachi.

Steve



2.3 How Mike Pilavachi developed relationships with young people

Something that has stood out to us from listening to people talk about their experiences concerns the way in which Pilavachi developed relationships with young people. Importantly, no one we have spoken with came to Soul Survivor seeking a relationship with Pilavachi, although this may have been the case for others; rather, they arrived with a genuine desire to grow in their faith, develop their gifts, and discern their next steps. During their time at the church, however, they caught Pilavachi's attention, and he not only paid special attention to them in public settings, but also began to personally invest time in them:

Mike, I would say, took a special interest in me, maybe one or two other guys on the course. And that included things like making jokes about me from the stage, and so you're like, you're being picked out in the crowd. But also inviting me around to his flat for meals a couple of times.

Eric

Eric's comments highlight a pattern that appears in several people's testimonies, where Pilavachi first publicly singled them out, and then personally invested in them. As Steve reflected on how he had interpreted the attention he was receiving from Pilavachi, who took him out for meals and invited him to his flat, he said: 'I thought, oh, Mike wants to spend time with me, Mike wants to hang out.' Eric told us that: '[Mike] had the ability to make you feel seen; it made you feel special.' This resonates with Chris's* words: 'Mike had a way of making you feel spell-bindingly special.' [14] Sarah, the girlfriend of one of Pilavachi's interns, commented that this intern – who was nineteen at the time – had told her that he and Pilavachi were 'best friends'.

All of these comments resonate with John and Mark's experience. They met Pilavachi during a leadership conference organised by the church where they were interns. Mark recalled how Pilavachi initiated contact with the brothers during a break, joking about 'two naughty interns' with whom the church was not happy. During a later session, they were sitting behind him. John told us that Pilavachi turned around to speak with them and said, 'I felt like God wanted me to actually really talk to you. [...] Do you want to go and sit on the bench over there?' Before they parted ways, John explained that:

He got our number down, and was like, 'I really feel like God wants to...' I don't know, I can't remember the exact words he used, but it was just like 'I want to invest in you.' That was kind of the vibe of it. 'I just want to invest in you, I want to help you guys. You know, you're young, and I want to, yeah, just see if you guys need any help with anything, or, whatever it is.' And it was very friendly, it was really great. [...] Then he said, 'I'll give you a phone call if you want at some point, give you a FaceTime with both of you and get to know you a little bit more.' And it was kind of in that organic... sort of vibe, of trying to be our friend.

John

Speaking of the calls he and John had with Pilavachi over the following months, Mark said:

We'd just FaceTime and catch up and he'd pray for us and kind of ask how our year's going and kind of be intentional, and kind really. [...] I always came away from those phone calls being very, very encouraged to be honest. [...] that's just how you feel if a big leader's kind of called you. [...] I remember at the time thinking, it's Mike Pilavachi calling me. I'm not going to say no. He's always been encouraging. He's always been nice. And he's only going to have nice things to say. Kind of like, cool.

Mark

Like others, Adam told us that when he started getting involved with Soul Survivor, Pilavachi 'really took an interest in me personally, would, you know, take me out for lunch and coffee and, would have me over to the warehouse in Watford [...] and we would hang out.' Adam's first in-person meeting with Pilavachi, however, had been when Pilavachi came with another leader to visit Adam's youth group to prophesy over it. Each child in Adam's youth group took a turn sitting in the middle of the group, who all closed their eyes and prayed, asking God what God wanted to say to that person. After this, the two leaders shared what they felt God wanted to say to that child and then invited other members of the group to share as well.

I remember when I was prayed for, Mike having like words about how special I was, and how I was going to do great things for God, and you know, calling on my life, and [...] to hear someone who I perceived as being charismatic and important saying that I am special and important, was very potent, very powerful, for me personally. And so that was like kind of the beginning of my relationship with Mike, was being told I was special.

Adam

Adam's experience highlights another important aspect of the relationships Pilavachi developed with young people, which is that they involved the provision and promise of opportunities. After asking for Mark and John's contact details, Pilavachi set up a group chat for the three of them. John told us that after a few messages went back and forth, Pilavachi wanted to call them because he had a question to ask them, and he said that it was 'something exciting'. When they spoke with him, Pilavachi offered them a trip to the US. They had never flown before, so this felt like an incredible opportunity.

We were like, whoa, that's amazing. Like that's sick [...] He said, 'You know, I'm going to America in February. Would you like to come along? I've got some other interns, [...] who are, yeah, who I'm looking after at the minute [...] Do you want to just come along? And I'll pay for it all.'

John

John went on to explain that he and Mark took ‘a good week or so, maybe, to respond’, but decided to accept the invitation. Pilavachi also spoke with their parents a few times before the trip, ‘explaining who he is, his background, that kind of stuff, just kind of clearing the water saying this is okay, sort of thing,’ as Mark said, and their parents felt encouraged by the conversations. Before the trip, Pilavachi invited the brothers to stay in a hotel in Watford for two nights, and during this time he took them to another hotel:

We went to a hotel, sort of like a posh hotel that was in the middle of the countryside, which he drove us to. And then we, just me, Mark and him, and we just got coffee together in this hotel, and he just started chatting to us a bit more in another, you know, in a deep way, in a trying to help us kind of way, whilst we were there. [...] It felt like he was treating us really. It was quite nice.

John

Pilavachi not only singled certain young people out from their peers, then, but he also personally invested in them, and made them feel seen and important. He provided opportunities for them that aligned with their gifts and hopes – examples here include opportunities to speak, lead worship and travel – but he also promised them further opportunities.

For many of those we spoke with, however, these further opportunities did not come to fruition. Sometimes they were significantly scaled down. Eric, for instance, had always had an inkling that he would end up in church ministry, and while he was on the discipleship programme Pilavachi took him aside and asked him whether he would be interested in going abroad to plant a Soul Survivor church. Eric thought this sounded incredibly exciting and when the programme finished, he went home, expecting a call from Pilavachi regarding the church plant. He reported turning down several other opportunities while he waited for Pilavachi to follow up on this with him. One of these opportunities seemed to be a good thing, but he still turned it down:

Then the following day [...] Mike called me and said, look, would you be interested to come back and help, work with the gap year, SoulTime as the assistant course leader. And so I took that kind of as a confirmation that I had heard God's voice, and I'd turned these other opportunities down and it felt like this was what I was supposed to do.

Eric

The original opportunity that Pilavachi had promised Eric remained unfulfilled. In Eric's case, however, when Pilavachi called Eric to invite him back to Soul Survivor, he came straight away, still believing that he had heard God's voice.

Sometimes, however, promised opportunities simply evaporated. Such was Steve's experience on finishing the discipleship programme:

He was saying, oh, yeah, you know we should write a book together. Your, you know, your writing skills are really great. We're going to write a book. And various other ministry related things were sort of implied from that.

Steve

Pilavachi subsequently invited Steve to visit him and stay overnight at his flat in Chorleywood, a visit that Steve remembers being framed as ‘social yet had a slight sort of purpose to it.’ They were going to hang out but also chat about what they were going to do together. But ultimately, it all led to nothing.

Chris*, who was employed by Soul Survivor for several years, reported that he, too, was promised opportunities by Pilavachi that never materialised, such as international trips and the possibility of working remotely from California for six months each year.[15]



2.4 Harmful emotional and psychological behaviours

Another important aspect of people's testimonies relates to the harmful emotional and psychological behaviours they report experiencing from Pilavachi. It is here that we reach the 'abuse of power' found by the Church of England's initial investigation into Pilavachi – an abuse that involved 'coercive and controlling behaviour'.^[16]

One thing that struck us when listening to people's testimonies is that the way in which Pilavachi disciplined young people appears to have enabled these experiences. This is something that Adam first drew our attention to. Adam said he felt that he was 'conditioned' by Pilavachi to accept certain behaviours, telling us that he perceived this conditioning as intentional on Pilavachi's part: 'I don't think that this was like a passive thing that he did, I think it was actually quite intentional. His conditioning of young people.' Whether it was intentional or not, there appear to have been recurrent patterns to Pilavachi's behaviour that had the effect, over time, of creating relationships of control on his side and dependence and deference on the side of the young people around him. The specific incidents that make up these patterns may often, individually, seem quite small-scale, but the cumulative effect appears to be deep and long-lasting.

2.4.1 Expecting humility and deference

One aspect of Pilavachi's disciplining of young people was the emphasis he placed on humility and being humble. For those who arrived at Soul Survivor, it quickly became apparent that whether people were afforded opportunities or not was down to Pilavachi. In Adam's words, 'Mike was in charge, Mike was in control'. Beki* made a similar point in relation to the worship at the church:

I picked up straight away Mike controlled the worship. That was his thing. That was something he was extremely protective about. And you only got to be on the team if you were seen to be humble. And you had to have that quality otherwise you didn't get to go on stage.

Beki*

Eric also highlighted the importance of humility with regard to being given opportunities:

I learnt quite soon that in order to be picked by Mike, one couldn't put oneself forward. Instead, we tried our best to become worthy in his eyes by outdoing one another in holiness, in servitude and humility.

Eric

According to Adam, Pilavachi's mocking of worship leaders from the stage was underpinned by this discourse of humility as well. He describes Pilavachi

calling me ugly on stage, you know, like mocking like [...] what you're doing or your ability, you know. I think because I was so young, I was like younger than everyone else, like mocking my age a little bit, too, I remember. And it was all done in this kind of jokey way, and it was always done in this, kind of like, keep them humble way.

Adam

Yet Adam found this humiliating. He said: 'at the time, you know, it's this complex, emotions of I feel chosen and humiliated at the same time.' Adam's reflections echoed Beki* and Eric's comments regarding humility and the need to appear humble. Adam said: '[Mike] talked to me a lot about being humble, being, having character, making myself less. All on the basis of making Jesus more.' He told us that different stories and characters from the Bible were used to emphasise this, examples being Saul, Samson and David:

Examples of people who were chosen and anointed by God, and then fucked up. [...] So those stories, and those characters, and various Bible verses, God opposes the proud and embraces the humble, John the Baptist, saying, you know, I become less so you become greater, that, those kind of things were used to create this deferent, immensely deferent culture towards Mike in particular, under the guise of, it's Jesus. [...] Really, in every practical, actual way it was deference to Mike.

Adam

That Pilavachi expected deference from those around him was a theme in most of the conversations we had, and it was clear that he used theological language and mechanisms to support this. In hindsight, the emphasis Pilavachi placed on humility and being humble appears to have enabled him to control young people. Of relevance here are Eric's words regarding the phrase 'audience of one,' which was often used to encourage young people to be faithful in the 'little things' for the audience of one; that is, for God. As Eric reflected to us, however,

It's almost like the audience of one was not God, it was Mike.

Eric

This reflection resonates with the hidden messaging in a story Pilavachi often told from the stage regarding the beginning of Matt Redman's journey of becoming a worship leader. Pilavachi would explain that he saw Redman at the back of the church, worshipping God with all his heart as though only God were present. It was this posture of worshipping for the audience of one that Pilavachi emphasised was at the root of Redman's accomplishments as a worship leader. Yet the message implicit within this story is not that God saw Redman, but rather that Pilavachi saw him.

2.4.2 Ghosting and withdrawal

Another aspect of the dynamics of control apparently at play was ghosting.

In Mark and John's testimony, the withdrawal of Pilavachi's attention was quite subtle. Their experience differs from others we talked to, since they did not attend Soul Survivor and were not based in Watford, and therefore their communication was predominantly via their group chat. A short while after they had returned from the US, Pilavachi invited the brothers to travel to South Africa with him over the summer. They were unable to accept the invitation since they already had commitments; however, he then called them several months later and invited them to become his interns later that year. They were taken aback by Pilavachi's offer, and as John said, 'everyone was like, yeah, that's amazing. That's an amazing offer. Like it's Mike, you've got to do it. That's a once in a lifetime thing.' Nevertheless, they turned down the internship since 'it just didn't quite sit right':

It felt like it was just more of a Hollywood thing. Like a bit of a, it was kind of a film, a movie thing where you were just invited to travel the world with a superstar. And it's just going to be a load of fun. And you're going to travel the world six times in a year. And you're going to follow me around. And we're going to go to all of these places. To the Grand Canyon, was another place he mentioned. South Africa. Yeah, all over. And that was kind of the way it was painted to us. There wasn't really anything about the church.
John

John and Mark were not ghosted by Pilavachi, but they both told us that their relationship with him slowed down after they turned down the internship, although they did not notice this at first. As Mark said, 'it just felt like, oh, Mike's busy and there's not another trip we can go on.'

In other testimonies that we heard, however, the withdrawal of attention was more obvious. When Eric finished his fixed-term contract as assistant course leader of SoulTime, Soul Survivor's discipleship training programme, Pilavachi approached him. He suggested that Eric shadow him, like an intern. Pilavachi told Eric that he would travel with him and learn from him, and learn how things were done at the church. Eric was keen to accept this offer but sought advice from another leader at the church before doing so. This person advised Eric to be mindful that Pilavachi tended to promise more than he delivered, and said that the role might end up being more of an office-based admin role. Considering what we have heard from others, this advice seems to have been based on experiences had by other interns. In light of the advice he had received, Eric asked Pilavachi if he could go to South Africa to volunteer for three months and then come back to spend three months as an intern with him.

Eric continued:

And he agreed with that, at least as far as I was concerned. He'd offered me a small stipend as well. And I went to South Africa, came back, made it known to him that I was back, and then a couple of weeks went by and I bump into Mike. And I said, Mike, look, I thought I was gonna be working with you, you know, I haven't heard anything from you, what am I supposed to be doing? And I can't remember the right, exact words, but he, kind of his answer was evasive. And that was the last time I actually meaningfully spoke to Mike.

Eric

Eric described ending up helping in the office for the next three months. He had to ask about the stipend that he had been promised, and as a result Liz Biddulph, co-Chief Executive of Soul Survivor Ministries at the time, gave him the money in cash – more than £600. Eric attended the church for another three years, but said that Pilavachi never acknowledged him again, apart from on one occasion:

I remember this because I was still keen to be seen by Mike. He walked past and as I caught his eyes I got a quiet 'hi mate', with a body language that indicated that no further conversation was desirable.

Eric

Eric's experience parallels that of others we spoke with, and he told us that he, too, was aware of people who had similar experiences. Many have described this as a pattern of 'ghosting' – that is, of someone abruptly shutting down contact in the context of a previously close relationship. Eric said that the ghosting he witnessed and heard about seemed to be on account of very small things. This echoes testimonies that are in the public domain and again suggests Pilavachi's need to be in control, and his expectation of deference. For example, Chris* wrote that he received 'silent treatment' from Pilavachi for four months because 'I had expressed my concern at Tim Hughes' debut album cover'.^[17] In Matt and Beth Redman's documentary *Let There Be Light*, Matt* shared that:

If you upset him in any way, if you offended him, it could be the smallest thing, honestly sometimes you didn't even know what it was. For me, one time it was because I added an extra song onto the worship list that I hadn't checked with him. And he didn't speak to me for three weeks after that.

Matt*^[18]

Pilavachi did speak to Matt* again, but it is clear from the documentary that this relationship was characterised by a push-pull dynamic, something that Adam also described experiencing. While he was at Soul Survivor, Adam would regularly spend time together with Pilavachi. As Adam recalled, 'that's when I began to experience Mike's tendency to be all in on someone and very excited about me, and then just disappear, withdraw.' Sometimes this would be because Pilavachi was away; however, this 'push-pull' dynamic characterised their relationship more broadly:

The previous week [...] he was telling you you're the best thing in the world, and, you know, like seemed to be very personally invested in you [...] and then you'd see him at an event, and he would barely acknowledge you. [...] I would say eight years of my relationship with Mike was like that, and going through various points of him not speaking to me for months, and then like out of the blue being like, we want you to lead worship at the events this summer. And, you know, it was so push and pull.

Adam

Adam said to us, 'ultimately I feel like it should have been, for a sixteen-, seventeen-year-old, young creative mind, it should have been a nurturing environment, not a punishing one.' Yet Adam found that Pilavachi's behaviour made it a punishing environment:

My fidelity to Mike was right there because [...] I wanted to, really to write and to make music. And, you know, and so, not only did he practically have those, you know, keys, he also psychologically did over us, too. He kind of really kept it like at any moment you could mess up and lose it all.

Adam

Adam eventually left Soul Survivor but returned with his wife after several years to run one of the children's venues at the summer festival for a week. He told us that they were in a leaders' meeting each day with Pilavachi, but he did not acknowledge them once during that time.

We were like literally sitting next to him, and he wouldn't even like say hello. Very, very weird and we were heavily involved in Soul Survivor for years, and we were there volunteering at his event, you know.

Adam

Although Adam had been away from Soul Survivor and Pilavachi for several years, he said that: 'even at that point, like, when I'm in that meeting, getting rejected by Mike, like, I'm 28 years old at that point, you know, like it still hurt, like it hurt when I was sixteen.' Adam commented to us that as he reflected on his experiences he was struck by 'how as a teenager I was expected not to be naive and to have flawless character but how Mike was allowed to default to naivety any time his egregious behaviours were challenged'.

Beth* also described having experienced Pilavachi's push and pull behaviour while working at Soul Survivor. Pilavachi's behaviour left her feeling so unwell that she went to see her GP, and at that point, she realised that she needed to speak to Pilavachi. She described feeling as though she could no longer remain in the job and situation, and said to him:

You've not been talking to me, I don't know what I've done wrong, I'm so sorry if I've done something. And he just said to me, in just a very dismissive, like the meeting's over kind of way, 'I'm Greek'. And that was it.

Beth*

Others spoke to us about situations they knew of where people had been completely cut off, like Eric. It appears to have been common knowledge at Soul Survivor that this would happen. Steve told us that: 'if anyone disagreed with him they ended up being kind of frozen out. But in a quite subtle way.' Beki's* experience of challenging Pilavachi ended in a similar way. She noted that he was very generous and warm at first: 'he was like, oh mate, I'm so sorry! I'm gutted; I'm gutted you feel like that. I see you as one of my good friends, my closest friends.' However, she then explained:

I was never asked to lead worship again. And he didn't speak to me again till 2005. I got ghosted, I got well and truly ghosted. He would see me after church, I would go to smile and say hi, and he would just turn away or he'd look through me.

Beki*

2.4.3 Reacting to other close relationships

Another dynamic that we have noticed in people's testimonies is that Pilavachi appeared to react when the young men he had formed relationships with developed romantic relationships with others. Steve, for example, said that Pilavachi stopped being in touch with him when he started dating someone: 'it could be a, the causality-correlation fallacy, but I remember it being around that time.' He continued:

And then I remember I saw him at a festival, and I was like, oh, hey, I haven't seen you, spoken to you in ages, and he was like, oh, yeah, yeah, sorry I've been really busy, and then made an excuse and left, and so it was sort of, semi gradual, but a ghosting.

Steve

In *Let There Be Light*, Beth* explained that when she and Matt got engaged:

That was another massive trigger, and the silent treatment went on for months and months and months, right up until the night before our wedding he was still not speaking to us.

Beth*

Although not a romantic relationship, brothers Mark and John also described experiencing some unhealthy dynamics in their relationship with Pilavachi, where he began to differentiate between them, identifying one as more confident and 'above' the other:

He said to both of us in a group, 'Mark, you feel more confident than John, and John you lack confidence.' And he made that, like, levelling quite clear. [...] And that really hit my heart, because he said, you know, 'John, you struggle with confidence.' And I'd never thought about it before, but it kind of clocked like, 'wow, yeah, I do.' Like, how did you know that? That's weird. You've told me something about my life that's actually really true. And that's really hard for me to hear.

John

John went on to explain that Pilavachi took Mark to one side and spoke to him directly, 'and then he came back and he didn't chat with me. And I found that a little bit weird.' However, his assumption at the time was that Pilavachi had just forgotten: 'I kind of just felt like he forgot. I kind of felt like, oh, he's just forgotten. He'll chat to me eventually.' John later told us, however, that early on in their relationship, Pilavachi assigned different roles to each of them:

Mark was probably put more in the headlights of stuff and was played as this more kind of like God's got a big thing for you. [...] It was like, God's got a massive thing for you, Mark, and he's going to use you in amazing ways. And he sort of used words like you're going to be a big preacher, you're going to do well with worship. Just, yeah, things like that. And then he kind of played me down like I had a lot of catching up to do. Like I had to catch up to Mark, or I had to catch up to what God's even calling me to do. And I kind of felt left behind within conversations of what Mike was saying to Mark compared to what he was saying to me, and that left me feeling like I need to look up to Mark, I need to be more like Mark, or, yeah, I need to catch up basically because I'm behind and that made me feel, yeah, a little bit strange I think at the time.

John

Mark, too, spoke about how Pilavachi treated each brother differently, and said that in his interactions with them Pilavachi was 'hero-ing himself':

He was actually, somehow separating me and my brother, putting me above John and saying you're much stronger, you're much, you know, more confident, I'm going to help you with this and then kind of doing the opposite with John. [...] I see that as a negative, definitely, of kind of putting me above my brother and kind of saying, I can... kind of hero-ing himself in a sense, as if, that he can kind of fulfill that leadership desire for me, if that makes sense. And then the same with John, but in different ways.

Mark

Mark said that he had not thought that Pilavachi's treatment of them was unusual at first. However, when he and John returned from their trip to the US, they had a debrief with their internship mentor, who described Pilavachi's behaviour as 'a red flag': 'he basically said, ignore that, don't listen to what Mike said, that's like not a good thing'.

2.4.4 Manipulation

Although Sarah's interactions with Pilavachi differ from those discussed so far, she had a similar initial experience to others. As the girlfriend of one of Pilavachi's interns, when Sarah attended a service at Soul Survivor Watford for the first time, she reported her encounter with Pilavachi being not what she expected:

Mike ignored me [...] I remember going thinking that he was going to come and say hi to me because my boyfriend had said he and Mike were 'best friends', but actually he just walked right past me and blanked me. [...] [Mike] wasn't happy about the fact that he had gotten a girlfriend, and I knew that at the time but still expected him to come over, because of how close I thought [they] were.

Sarah

Sarah never had a conversation with Pilavachi while she was in a relationship with his intern, and the harmful behaviour that she experienced was of quite a different nature to the experiences of others. Although Pilavachi and other older leaders at the church were made aware that the relationship ended with Sarah alleging that she had been raped and sexually assaulted by the intern, Pilavachi did not contact her. In 2016, however, she had an unexpected interaction with Pilavachi during which he asked her to send him an email to his personal account outlining the abuse she had experienced. According to Sarah, Pilavachi manipulated her into doing this:

He noted that the timing of our meeting was incredible, he spoke of threats and abuse that had been directed towards him and others at Soul Survivor, he said that he had believed me [...] regarding the initial abuse, and that he was sorry that I had not realised that at the time. He then told me that a bishop was keeping a file of incidents related to the person behind the threats and abuse, in case it was needed in the future. He asked me to send an email to his personal account outlining the abuse I had experienced, promising that nothing would be used without my permission. I emailed him that evening. Since my interpretation of our conversation was that the email was being sent to the bishop to file for any eventual police investigation, I included extremely personal and sensitive information. I thought I should include as much information as I could so that if the police were informed, I would not have to go through the process of recalling the details all over again.

Sarah

It later appeared that Pilavachi had asked Sarah for the email to discredit his former intern, who was alleging that Pilavachi had massaged and inappropriately touched him. It seemed to Sarah that Pilavachi's intention was not to use the email to protect others, as she had thought, but rather to protect his own interests.[19] Pilavachi kept the email until June 2023, despite Sarah emailing him in March of that year asking him to delete it.

Although Sarah had not had a positive impression of Pilavachi when she first encountered him, she said that she responded to his request in 2016 because 'there was something spiritual there that meant [...] I suppose I saw him as someone that I should listen to and do as they say.' She also said that Pilavachi's mention of the bishop played a role:

I remember this really clearly, there was something around him dropping in the, I didn't know who the bishop was, I didn't know that he was Chair of Trustees at Soul Survivor Ministries [...] And so for me that was something also really official. So I was thinking, oh if an official person high up in the Church of England [is involved] [...] it must be above board. I think that was definitely part of it as well.

Sarah



2.5 Harmful physical behaviours

The original Church of England investigation reported that Pilavachi's coercive and controlling behaviour was also linked to the physical wrestling and massages that he engaged in with young people. Several people spoke to us about their experience of such behaviour, and it is important to emphasise that this physical contact always seems to have been initiated by Pilavachi:

It's not like he would ever ask you, either, he would just start wrestling you, he would just, you know, grab you and throw you, and like, let's wrestle and I certainly had very conflicted emotions about it at the time, again none of this was expressed [...] it was all internalised.

Adam

Many noted that it went on for a long time. Eric, for example, told us that he recently returned to some of his diaries from the time, and found one particular entry in which he mentioned wrestling with Pilavachi for 45 minutes. When describing the wrestling, Eric also said,

I do remember after it he was in his living room, and he was on the floor, and we were, me and the other, this other guy, we were looking at each other, thinking, have we killed him because he was just so exhausted.

Eric

Eric went on to explain that he did not feel violated, but he referred to the sense of intimacy that the physical contact instilled because of who Pilavachi was:

I didn't have that sense that I feel violated through this. Obviously I look back on it now, and I think it was inappropriate, but at the time it was just, oh, it almost kind of reinforced the sense of, you know, the closeness of experience and relationship and intimacy, and again, kind of reinforces kind of the sense that you're being, you, you're getting close to this man of God.

Eric

Another notable aspect relates to the degree to which Pilavachi apparently exerted himself when he wrestled with young people. Eric said to us: 'we were a bit, maybe taken aback at maybe how exhausted he seemed to be at the end, and a bit worried about whether he was going to have a heart attack.' This comment resonates with comments we have heard from others and that are in the public domain; for example, Alex* on the *Soul Survivors* podcast. Along with his brother Nick*, Alex* was 'ostracised' by Pilavachi without any explanation.[20] He had been in Pilavachi's youth group at St Andrew's in the 80s, having joined at the age of 16. Pilavachi was 29 at the time, and Alex* spoke about how the two of them would regularly play squash, and that 'at times he would start [the wrestling].' He said:

It would go on quite a long time, and it would get sweaty, and, you know, and I remember that, and I remember that in a way not being very pleasant, you know. [...] I do remember thinking, OK, I've had enough now, and you know, it would be like trying to get you in a lock and then like hold it for a long time and things like that.

Alex*[21]

Adam told us that the wrestling had started once he was in the 'slightly more inner circle' at Soul Survivor and that he had mixed emotions about it at the time:

[I was] delighted that he would consider wrestling me, as like I was a, you know, 'in' enough, liked enough, appreciated enough to have, to be a person who was wrestled. You know, it's that feeling of inclusion and belonging, and that feeling of chosenness which I really longed for.

Adam

Yet along with his delight at being chosen and included, Adam said that he had not felt good about being wrestled by Pilavachi:

Having my own like kind of body insecurities, sexual insecurities, physical, you know, insecurities, like him being a much, much bigger man than me [...] And, you know, just being physically dominated, and that and so it did not feel good, right, like, so it didn't feel good, did feel a little weird, but the chosenness aspect of it, you know, you would just, you know, I certainly I kind of pushed down any kind of negative thoughts or feelings because of this sense of chosenness.

Adam

In *Let There Be Light*, Matt* also spoke about the wrestling, which often took place after Pilavachi had counselled him about the sexual abuse he had experienced, and after they had spoken about the details of that abuse:

It didn't feel good at the time. I didn't really like physical touch that much because of what had happened to me. I thought maybe this is a youth leader trying to break the tension, it's what youth leaders do. Sometimes it could go on for 20 minutes, it was like full on wrestling. But obviously this is a youth leader, this is an adult, this is hidden away from everyone. Looking back I really don't feel good about it.

Matt*

Matt* had assumed at the time that this was 'what youth leaders do', and Alex* noted on *Soul Survivors* that 'I suppose in your mind, you would sort of put it down to, he's a big kid, he's just playfighting, you know'. Yet Matt* went on to note in the documentary that the Church of England's investigation helped him to see how serious this behaviour was. As already mentioned, it often took place in the context of Matt* speaking about the abuse he had experienced.

At the time it was just utter relief that I got to tell this youth leader what had been happening to me [...] But now as I look into it, and some of the patterns. You know, he would counsel me about that abuse, and he'd want to know all the different details of what had happened, but then he would wrestle me afterwards. And in the moment that felt uncomfortable, now it feels way more than that, it's very very troubling. And actually, when I spoke to the investigation about that they actually advised me to speak to the police on that. So I realised oh okay this is a very serious thing, you know, even more serious than I had realised.

Matt*

When Steve spoke about his experience of wrestling with Pilavachi, although he said that it felt like 'banter', he also commented that Pilavachi got annoyed when he beat him, and that it seemed to him as though 'dominance' was an aspect of the wrestling:

He'd normally always beat people at wrestling because he was a large guy, [...] and, yeah, looking back on that, [...]

at the time just felt like banter, and again, it was this lens of, oh, wow, I'm wrestling with Mike Pilavachi! It was, you know. Looking back at that now it's, there was definitely something about dominance there.

Steve

Ben*, who joined the discipleship course in 2011, shared on the *Soul Survivors* podcast his memories of the wrestling sessions he witnessed. Ben* noted that being wrestled with felt like a 'sign of acceptance' at the time, since it was often those he considered to be in the 'in' group and closer to Pilavachi who were wrestled with. He remembered that the wrestling involved 'rolling around on the floor', and Pilavachi winning and 'having the person pinned'. He spoke of the length of time it took Pilavachi to get off someone once he had them pinned to the floor, and remembered thinking that 'they often went on for a bit too long,' and there being a 'sense of intensity around it.' All this aligns with the experiences shared by others:

I have a very clear memory of thinking that he took absolutely ages to get off once he'd won. I remember feeling puzzled a little bit. Like, oh, but you're like three times that guy's size and you've won. Are you not gonna get off? But then weirdly in my head because of all the roughhousing and stuff that was going on, for me it was a sign of being accepted that Mike was wrestling with that person. And there was a weird sense of like... oh, he's not close enough to me to wrestle with me sort of thing.

Ben*[22]

What is apparent, then, is that the wrestling sessions were always initiated by Pilavachi, they were reportedly intense, they went on for a long time, and for the most part, the young people involved felt unable to voice their discomfort or physically stop Pilavachi. It is also apparent that this wrestling played a part in Pilavachi's maintenance of an 'in' group who had his approval and acceptance, and who felt chosen by him.

In a similar vein, it has been consistently reported that the massages were also initiated by Pilavachi. Adam recounted how Pilavachi first mentioned massage during a long car journey they took together when he was sixteen. His view after hearing about the experiences of others, was that his initial experience was 'the same as everybody else's. It seems to be a grooming pattern'. He said,

I remember, because it was weird. You know, him talking about, you know, oh, I need a massage. I, you know, like I love them, have you ever had a massage? No, you should, you should get one, and so forth. I just thought it was weird. You know, and I'm like sixteen, and like, kind of got a lot of bodily insecurities at that point, and just uncomfortable in my body in general at that age, and, so changed the subject, didn't respond. You know, like cool Mike, you know, like whatever!

Adam

Steve also told us that it was Pilavachi who initiated the introduction of massage to their time together:

I remember him saying, oh, yeah, I've been getting really into massage etc., we're gonna go for a massage, I've booked it for you. So he went for a massage and I went for a massage at some health club or something.

Steve

As a nineteen-year-old, it was the first time that Steve had received a professional massage. He went on to explain that:

It was kind of a sort of a weird, intimate experience. It was this sort of, you know, young woman giving me a massage and I think she sort of massaged sort of to the top of my thigh, I think completely professional, not inappropriate. But he said afterwards, oh how was it, I was like, oh, yeah, it was nice, it's a bit weird when they put their hand up your thigh, don't you think? Just, I think that was again more my, not naivety, but it was just, oh, it was a new, that was, that's strange, I've never had, you know, someone I don't know do that. And he got quite defensive, and was like, oh, that's very normal duh duh duh duh! And then after he said, yeah, so I've been practicing massage, oh I'll give you one so you've had two massages, and I remember thinking, oh, yeah, cool, cool. And so, yeah, I was topless, and he just massaged my back.

Steve

Reflecting on the nature of the massage he had received from Pilavachi, which had taken place on his bed or sofa, and had gone on 'for quite some time', Steve noted:

I remember it being quite – 'sensual' might be too strong a word, but it was definitely a very kind of ... so it definitely wasn't ... you know, if you [...] go to see a masseuse and they take you to town and they work on the knots [...] It wasn't that, it was very much the kind of airy fairy, and fingers down the spine, and that type of massage. [...] it wasn't that kind of thorough physio sports therapist, it was an experience, and [...] he used oil.

Steve

It is notable that Steve reported that the professional massage was instigated and booked by Pilavachi, without Steve's consent, and that it was Pilavachi who then initiated the massage at his flat later that day. From what we have heard, those who were massaged by Pilavachi were used to wrestling with him, and there appears to have been a pattern of behaviour from Pilavachi introducing massage in conversation, to initiating professional massages, to initiating personal massages. Also significant here is a session on touch that Steve remembered Pilavachi giving to those on the discipleship programme:

I do also remember he did, so he'd do various sort of teaching/training sessions with those on SoulTime, SoulTimers. And I remember he did this one session where he talked about touch and the importance of touch and human connection, and saying, we're in such a sexualized society that if you just put your hand on someone's shoulder that could be seen as the wrong way. And at the time, I remember listening to it and going, oh, yeah, you know, and again, you know, nineteen-year-old Christian hippie going, yeah, man, touch, love. And... but looking back now, looking back through the lens, with hindsight, it's kind of like, yeah, I draw the obvious conclusions.

Steve

We also heard about other, related behaviours that raised some of our participants' concerns. John spoke about how he and Mark were aware of some 'orange flags' in their interactions with Pilavachi, for instance, with one of these being Pilavachi's invitation to them to come and relax in his jacuzzi during the day they were going to be in Watford before flying to the US:

And then he said, you can bring your swimming trunks if you want, and I've got a jacuzzi and you're welcome to [...] chill out at mine in the jacuzzi if you want to. [...] We both said, oh it's fine, don't worry, [...] but it was an orange flag to both of us. And we're quite aware of stuff like that, I think. We just were. I think the way we were brought up is we were quite aware of weird stuff that could be going on with older men. So we just said, oh it's fine, don't worry, we can do something else, we're happy to sit in the hotel, like, we'll be tired or whatnot. We just gave an excuse.

John

Again, as with the wrestling, the massages and related behaviours seem to have been part of Pilavachi's establishing and maintenance of intimate relationships with the young people who he had singled out for his favour, and for a close discipling relationship. More than with the wrestling, however, the massage seems to have been something he worked to introduce into each relationship by stages.

2.6 Cultural dynamics that enabled Mike Pilavachi's behaviour

Through our conversations with people, it became clear that we needed to broaden our focus beyond Pilavachi's behaviour to the cultural dynamics at Soul Survivor; more specifically, those that appear to have enabled his behaviour.

Several people told us that they had found Soul Survivor an exciting environment to be part of. As Eric said, for SoulTimers there was the added sense that they were at the 'centre' of all that was happening. For Adam, this excitement was connected to the rapid growth of the church:

Every week more people were there, like so every time we would go back there'd be more people there. It was burgeoning.

Adam

Adam also spoke about how it was an 'incredibly exciting time' for him at a personal level as well: 'at that point I'd really kind of made my faith my own [...] and Soul Survivor was the way in which I learned and engaged.' Yet there were also several dynamics of control within the environment, some of which were explicit and some that were operating under the surface.



2.6.1 People and relationships

There was a focus on status within the environment – on who was ‘in’ and who was ‘out’ at any one time – and this appears to have been measured by proximity to Pilavachi. Whilst none of those we spoke with had come to Soul Survivor seeking Pilavachi’s attention, once there, the cultural dynamics were such that proximity to him seemed to be essential. Reflecting on the culture at the church, Eric referred to the ‘inner circle around Mike,’ and noted that ‘there was a little bit of that looking sideways, as well, you know, like who’s there and who’s not.’ Chris* used the image of a spider’s web to describe these dynamics:

A colleague once relayed to me an insight she said a Soul Survivor trustee had told her, in order for her to understand the dynamics at Soul Survivor. Some leaders lead, the trustee apparently said, by being the big hairy spider straddling the middle of a spider’s web. The leader is surrounded by concentric rings of web. They feel all the small tremblings beneath their feet as every piece of information about what is happening in their web is relayed to them. Everyone else is ordered by favor around the spider in those concentric rings. As a trick of perspective, those on the inner most ring closest to the spider always think that the other person next to them is closer to the spider than they are. But in fact everyone is kept at the same distance and no-one is truly close to the big fat hairy spider in the middle.

Chris*

The politics around being ‘in’ or ‘out’ that were in operation within the environment meant that some were reticent about being fully open with their peers regarding the nature of their relationship with Pilavachi:

Being on SoulTime, it’s an interesting space whereby you’ve got lots of young people, and they’re on this kind of gap year thing with Soul Survivor, and it’s seen as quite prestigious, and I, the fact that I was sort of attached to Mike as an intern, there’s a bit of, almost, politics there if that makes sense, because there’s people coming to Soul Survivor and thinking, is this my en route to be sort of involved in significant Christian ministry. So, I didn’t massively overshare about it just because of that sort of sensitivity.

Steve

Eric drew our attention to the connection between being ‘in’ or ‘out’ and identity. He spoke about the dynamics within the environment of ‘wanting to be close to Mike,’ and how those who were closest to him were perceived as ‘the holy ones,’ and ‘more spiritually mature.’ On account of this, whether you were considered ‘in’ or ‘out’ almost became a question of

whether you’re worthy or not, whether you’re holy or not, it goes much deeper into fundamental identity.

Eric

One of the reasons why a person’s status was measured by their proximity to Pilavachi appears to have been because he was the primary decision-maker within the church. We have already discussed the fact that Pilavachi was in control, but our focus here is on the ways in which his control operated within the Soul Survivor culture. According to Steve, ‘the culture was Mike’:

The culture of Soul Survivor church, and to a large degree the festival, was Mike. And he was revered and as a result, kind of untouchable. I mean, stuff I know now about the kind of governance and the trustees, and how he appointed the trustees, and rather than being an independent oversight, they were actually more of a kind of his mates, there’s real concerns there. But the culture was Mike, and Mike was the celebrity, and whatever Mike said happened and whatever Mike’s vision was, was what the vision of the church was.

Steve

Eric made a similar observation when speaking about the ‘inner circle’ at the church:

I’ve spoken to some people who felt that actually, probably very few people felt like they were part of the inner circle. [...] And then you realize you didn’t quite know where the decisions were made, whether there was a kind of, this group that was meeting and making decisions. And I’m thinking more and more, it was pretty much down to Mike.

Eric

Adam told us about how this dynamic of control would play out at a practical level in the life of Soul Survivor. He said that it was Pilavachi ‘who decided who got to play, certainly, who got to play at the events, and whose songs got to be sung, and who kind of like would get opportunities to make albums’. Consequently, there was an ‘immensely deferent culture towards Mike’.

2.6.2 Governance and accountability

In relation to the governance structure of the church, it seems as though there was no one to whom Pilavachi was accountable, something highlighted by Steve:

I mean looking back on it it's how there was obviously no one able to step in and say, Mike, you shouldn't be wrestling with teenagers, having that kind of contact, you know. You can't be making promises to all these people and breaking their hearts to different degrees, you can't be taking young men who are impressionable and who are, because of the power imbalance, are vulnerable, you can't be taking them back to your flat and massaging them. And there's an element of, how much did people know about that, and it seems now that the massages, people were aware at the time, so the point is no one was seemingly successfully able to question him, to challenge him, or to really get him to change his behaviour.

Steve

That Pilavachi's control extended through the leadership of Soul Survivor was mentioned by others too. Not only was it reported that no one had any sway over Pilavachi, but the older leaders played a key role, whether consciously or simply by their presence, in legitimising and normalising Pilavachi's behaviour, and the young people at the church placed a great deal of trust in them. According to Adam, these older leaders also enabled Pilavachi by 'picking up the pieces' after him. Adam explained that Bob and Ruth Yule would do this emotionally with those in Watford, and Liz Biddulph would do this administratively within the festivals:[23]

When Bob and Ruth joined Soul Survivor, they were kind of brought in as pastors, because it was like Mike's such a terrible pastor, you know, which is true. And so we need these pastoral people to come, and you know, be good pastors here. [...] And then Bob and Ruth would basically pick up pieces, like they would find the people Mike had hurt, love them, encourage them. And, you know, and in a way that was like very sweet and genuine, and, like, caring. But what it did was perpetuate the abuse over a long period of time.

Adam

Eric and Sarah's experiences resonate with this in relation to Bob and Ruth Yule, and Liz Biddulph. After having a conversation with one of the assistant pastors at the church regarding her allegations, Sarah described being told that:

A couple, Bob and Ruth Yule, who were basically leaders and overseers of the church, they wanted to meet with me, I think Ruth Yule, the woman, and I said I'd really like that. But I never heard anything back.

Sarah

Eric reported that, after being ghosted by Pilavachi, he had to ask Liz Biddulph about the stipend he had been promised. He said that she gave him cash in response:

It was at Shepton Mallet, and I'd expressed that Mike had promised me a stipend, and I hadn't seen anything, so I made some noise, and she turned up with, it wasn't much, it was like 6-700 pounds.

Eric

We also came across other reported examples of the informal way in which Pilavachi operated and the apparent lack of scrutiny of his behaviour from other senior leaders and trustees. To return to Mark and John's testimony, Soul Survivor Watford paid for their trip to Watford and the US. The brothers said that the church in the US had been told that they were part of Pilavachi's ministry team, but neither of them knew about this until it was announced from the stage:

They said that, you know, in front of everyone, probably 2,000 people, that we were his ministry team, four of us. Bearing in mind, he'd never spoken to me about doing prayer for people. He'd never spoken to me about, OK, can you, how are you praying for people? Could you do this? Like, is that OK? And it was kind of then shared in front of everyone that, like all of a sudden, we're his ministry team, which is the first I've heard of it.

John

John went on to explain that because this was something that he found difficult, he and Mark sat down and 'just sort of hid away a little bit when that was going on, when the ministry stuff was happening, when Mike was doing some of his prophetic stuff with people'.

2.6.3 Theologies in operation

The dynamics of control within Soul Survivor were supported by several of the theologies that were in operation within the church. We are going to say more about this in our own reflections later in this report, but we wanted here to note ways in which our participants talked quite directly about some of the theologies in play.

One of these was around 'calling', as noted above. Eric spoke about how this theology underpinned his relationship with Pilavachi. He said that he came to Soul Survivor 'with this deep longing, I would say, to take my faith seriously, to follow God. And that took on a particular expression.' He went on to explain: 'part of that, I think, and I think this is partly why Mike had power, is the evangelical emphasis on individual calling. That God has a specific plan for you.' Eric told us that this theology of 'calling' was central to the spirituality at Soul Survivor, and was one of the reasons why he did not question the interest and attention he was receiving from Pilavachi:

I'd already been in charismatic circles where, you know, there was prophetic words, there was prophetic words about God's future for me, and it involved, I mean, quite vague terms, you know, something amazing that God was going to do through me. So I was kind of walking into this with a sense of God having a special calling upon my life. And so it kind of fitted the narrative, and that's my, that's the lens through which I kind of engage also in Soul Survivor. And so then when Mike is affirming you, and seeing you in that way, it kind of already fits with where you've come from and my own internal expectations of how my life would work out.

Eric

In other words, the attention Eric was receiving from Pilavachi fitted the narrative around calling that he had assumed, as it would have for others.

What is also notable in Eric's reflections is how the theologies of calling were entangled with 'words of prophecy', which often served to strengthen the sense of individual chosenness. As we have seen in the experiences of Adam, John and Mark, Pilavachi used such words to foretell God's unique calling upon their lives, and in the process made them feel seen, valued and chosen. The perception of Pilavachi as a powerful prophet strengthened the correlation between Pilavachi, God and calling. More broadly, as Eric suggested, 'prophetic words' were part of the culture of Soul Survivor. He said, 'there was always, as part of the liturgy [at Soul Survivor Watford], there was this invitation to listen to God's voice, and to speak out if God had some message to people'. This ended up, however, serving as another mechanism of control because of Pilavachi's apparent gifting in this area and the way in which he controlled the microphone on-stage.

Alongside this emphasis on calling and prophetic words, we heard about other ways in which the Soul Survivor environment was shaped by expectations about what God would do. We heard from Adam, for instance, that there was a growing emphasis on evangelism. He witnessed a shift in mission during the years that he was part of Soul Survivor toward an exclusive focus on 'winning souls', and away from a focus on creating a nurturing spiritual environment:

It's really interesting how it changed over the years, like it, when I first went to Soul Survivor, you know, almost every kind of call forward was like a call forward for ministry, like, if you want to receive something from God, come forward and receive something. And then, by the time I left in like 2003, like every call forward, was like, do you want to become a Christian? And like, that's what Soul Survivor kind of festivals had become. It was not this kind of like nurturing spiritual environment, it was like winning souls for the good guys environment.

Adam

Sophie also commented on the altar calls at Soul Survivor festivals, and the relative lack of interest in ongoing support. She had attended a seminar with Pilavachi during which she asked him a question about these:

I said to him, you've got all these hundreds of people coming forward every evening, wanting to give their lives to the Lord. Realistically, after two or three days with all these hundreds of people, how many of them are going to go back home and continue their journey of faith? And he said, oh, well, you know, it doesn't really matter, does it? [...] because they've heard the Word of God, and some of them will continue. And I thought, yeah, okay, that's a bit like me going in to do assemblies or running the toddler group. You know, if you just get the one sheep that's lost, then it's a good thing, and God doesn't waste anything. However, at Soul Survivor, in that environment, there was also harm being done.

Sophie

Sophie shared several examples of harm that she reported having witnessed in the context of these altar calls, and the expectation that God would act in dramatic ways. One of these had been during the summer festivals in 2013:

There was an American speaker who called up a girl with a broken collarbone or a broken arm, she'd got it in a sling, and there was this call for healing, and they got this young girl on the stage, and they got her to take her sling off and raise her arm and raise it up and raise it up, and everybody pray and come Holy Spirit.

Sophie

Sophie said that the next day Pilavachi made 'a bit of a statement about, yeah, backtracking a little bit.' However, she also personally witnessed the harm that the ministry times during the festivals could do:

As my daughter describes, there's this expectation that you will keel over with the Holy Spirit, you will shake, you will speak in tongues, and my daughter sat there saying, well what if we don't? Are we doing it wrong? And because of her autism, she internalised that really negatively [...] My eldest daughter [...] came back and said, oh this is just a load of bollocks. Whereas my one with autism internalised it as, I'm a really bad person, and she did believe, but because she wasn't speaking in tongues or crying, she was doing it wrong, so God didn't love her, and she was a bad person.

Sophie

Sophie also spoke of the imitation of such practices and altar calls in local churches and the impact of that, which had a damaging effect on her own family. She commented that: 'I think with Soul Survivor, there's this sense of urgency that if it's not happening now and in this minute, then, yeah...'



2.6.4 Spiritual abuse

In the original September 2023 press release reporting on the substantiating of the allegations about Pilavachi, his actions are described both as ‘an abuse of power’ and as a form of ‘spiritual abuse’. The press release draws on a widely used definition to explain that the latter is ‘a form of emotional and psychological abuse characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context’.[24]

As we sought to understand the overall nature of our participants’ experiences of harm in the Soul Survivor context, we asked for their thoughts on the use of the terms ‘spiritual abuse’ and ‘religious coercive control’ to describe their experiences.[25] It quickly became apparent that people understood these terms in a range of ways and had differing opinions regarding their value. Many, however, spoke about their experiences as relating to abuse of authority (whether spiritual or religious) and abuse of their trust in that authority. They also spoke about the enabling role of cultural dynamics. Others spoke about the abuse of their loyalty to God and of their desire to be seen by God. In this section, we introduce individual responses to this question, drawing out some of the common threads between them.

Adam told us that he understood spiritual abuse as relating to situations where other forms of abuse have been perpetrated, but spiritual language and practices are used to inflict them. Sophie had a similar understanding, viewing it as a term used to describe situations where people have been manipulated, but with spiritual means. However, while Sophie found the term helpful – it ‘put a name and language to what I’d experienced’ – Adam did not. He said:

I actually think it's more helpful to be more specific, and to be like, this was emotional abuse, and this was psychological abuse, and this was physical abuse. [...] I think the specificity is helpful.

Adam

Although Adam was clear about his need for specificity, he also acknowledged that there was something about the spiritual dynamics of the abuse he had experienced at Soul Survivor that meant its impact was different to abuse that is solely emotional or psychological in nature. When asked whether a term such as ‘religious coercive control’ might be helpful for understanding his experiences, Adam’s response was that he had witnessed two aspects of religious coercive control in operation at Soul Survivor. The first of these was a culture of, ‘in order to be accepted within our group, our church, our community, you have to act and behave in certain ways’.

Sarah’s reflection on religious coercive control in relation to Soul Survivor was similar: ‘there’s something in that culture that is coercive, that is, sort of, forcing you almost to behave in a certain way’. Adam went on to explain that while this is ‘kind of normal for any group, not even religious’, it becomes dangerous in relation to how power dynamics operate in relation to leaders, and this is the second aspect of religious coercive control that he had witnessed:

It's not just like this person is a leader and so therefore you have to do what they say like it would be in any kind of club or organisation or business, it's like, here are the Bible verses that justify that. So [...] they don't appeal to simply structure and authority, they appeal to your very sense of worship, obedience to God [...] [which], certainly for me, and I think for many people in the church, was the most important way I viewed myself, was through the lens of how God views me, and how am I doing before God. Because he's God. And so, [...] it's really to use that, when organisations use your fidelity to God in order to create fidelity to them.

Adam

For Adam, then, religious coercive control is an abuse of people’s loyalty to God, whether on the part of individual leaders or organisations. He noted that the language of anointing and chosenness that was in operation within Soul Survivor added an extra layer to this dynamic:

On the other side of that is, in Soul Survivor particularly, the way that the charismatic gifts were used, and how we would talk about anointing, chosenness, [...] about what God was doing at any given point. And so, it would be, God's raising up this person, God's doing this, we're going in this direction, God's doing that, and so everything is with this justification and veneer of spiritual-ness, and of God's choosing and anointing, and so forth, and so that it adds that layer to the power dynamic of, you are not just criticising or having issues with a religious leader, you are having issues with God's chosen. And you are putting your chosenness at risk by doing so.

Adam

There are two aspects to draw out from Adam's reflections here, since they resonate with the comments of others. The first relates to his observation that everything had 'this justification and veneer of spiritual-ness.' In her reflections on the term 'spiritual abuse', Sarah noted, like Adam, that specificity in terms of labelling what she had experienced was important for her to be able to process and come to terms with it. She said that the concept was so broad that she had not found it very helpful in this respect:

When I think about spiritual abuse [...] I don't know that just putting everything under that category is helpful, because it doesn't help me to understand my actions. And so, there's something about understanding a bit more clearly what is it that Mike was doing, why is it that I went along with it.

Sarah

Important here is Sarah's need to understand her own behaviour and response to Pilavachi in order to process what had happened. As Sarah spoke about the inappropriate request from Pilavachi that she had responded to immediately, it was clear that the aspect she was struggling with was why she had not questioned Pilavachi's request in spite of the fact that he had not 'given her the time of day' in the past: 'I don't understand what it was about those, sort of, religious, cultural dynamics that made me do that, [...] or led me, not made me, led me to do it.' She went on to say that it was most likely because she had thought, 'he's a leader and God, he has this communication with God.' Sarah drew attention to the assumptions in operation within the context because of the religious dynamics, which she believed had impacted her interactions with Pilavachi. She said, 'what was happening was being interpreted and seen in a certain light,' and certain assumptions were made on this basis. Here, she was referring to interpretations regarding God's presence and actions, and how she had assumed that Mike 'had this sort of divine blessing [...] or a divine stamp of approval.' On account of this, she had interpreted the situation as being one in which 'God was using Mike,' and therefore she had not questioned Pilavachi's request. She said:

When you're in that context of everything has a spiritual meaning, there was some element of me subconsciously maybe trying to make [all the pieces] fit [together], and then that whole event became this really important, significant thing, and I felt that God had orchestrated that meeting, and because Mike came over and said oh the timing is incredible.

Sarah

The second aspect to highlight relates to Adam's reflections regarding the way charismatic gifts were used. This chimes with Mark and John's initial interactions with Pilavachi, during which he used phrases such as, 'I really feel like God wants me to do...' Eric reflected that Pilavachi was spiritually abusive in the way he used prophetic words because he took advantage of people's desire to be seen by God:

We were desperate to be given a word by him. Because somehow, he seemed to have had a direct line [to God]. And he was able to play on young men's, Christian men's deep desire to not only be seen, but be seen by God, and to do that which God has called us to do.

Eric

Eric found the term 'spiritual abuse' helpful, but spoke about it in relation to Pilavachi using his spiritual authority to manipulate people and situations for his own purposes: 'Mike was using his spiritual authority, not least in his kind of his word giving, prophecy, to move things in certain ways and manipulate things in certain ways. And seemingly for his own gain.' Eric also said:

I remember a story that Mike told about Kevin Prosch,[26] and how he had used prophetic words to get to women, right. And this is Mike telling this story, right? And so in the context of that, I'm now thinking, yes, you know, you obviously, you've seen a pattern there. So that's how I think I reflect on the words that Mike had given to me. I reflect back on that in the same way; you were actually just manipulating the situation.

Eric

Eric's comments regarding Pilavachi's spiritual authority resonate with the comments and experiences of others. One of the reasons why Pilavachi had this authority, was because 'the culture was Mike,' as Steve said. While Steve was referring to Soul Survivor, this was arguably the case for other contexts in which Pilavachi was platformed. Speaking about the event she attended at her church, Sarah's observation was that

it was all about Mike. [...] He was the centre of attention, he was on the stage, he was speaking, he was preaching, and God was doing something through him. So there was this, definitely this religious authority that he had.

Sarah

As Sarah reflected on her experience of Pilavachi, she came to the following conclusion: 'what was actually being abused... probably my trust in his character because of his religious authority.' She trusted him, and he took advantage of that trust by manipulating the situation for his own purposes.

Steve spoke about how the sense of awe he had towards Pilavachi and spiritually significant experiences he had had as a teenager enabled Pilavachi to develop a relationship with him, 'like that', without raising any questions or concerns. He clicked his fingers as he said these words, to illustrate the ease with which Pilavachi was able to cultivate a relationship with him. He said:

*Because it's, it was Mike. It was, you know, **the** Mike Pilavachi. And at the time it's almost that was all that mattered.*

Steve

While Steve's focus was more on Pilavachi's spiritual celebrity, this is another type of spiritual authority that Pilavachi was arguably abusing.



2.7 Victim-survivor perceptions of additional enabling factors

In addition to the enabling factors that have already been discussed, participants mentioned other factors during our conversations that may have played a role in enabling Pilavachi's behaviour to go without serious challenge for so many decades. Importantly, by speaking of 'enabling factors', we are by no means shifting the blame from Pilavachi to victims-survivors. Instead, we are sharing their own reflections on what might have prevented them from recognising Pilavachi's behaviour for what it was.

One factor relates to Pilavachi's status, on account of which people had few expectations regarding his time and attention. They therefore accepted aspects of his behaviour that they would not have accepted from others. Sarah, whose email contact with Pilavachi stopped a few days after she sent him the email he had requested, said that:

I think he should have responded [further]. So I think I should have, already in 2016, realised that the response was inadequate, the silence, and not [...] him not responding any more... I think. Yet I, because he's up there, I didn't, you don't expect anything from him, I didn't expect any response because he's busy and he's travelling.
Sarah

Adam had a similar reflection in relation to Pilavachi's periodic withdrawal from him: 'I certainly justified it on his behalf, as being he's busy and powerful and, you know, isn't it amazing that he even spends any time with me, you know.' Yet although young people did not expect to receive Pilavachi's time or attention, because of his status these things meant a great deal to them. As Steve commented:

I think, whether knowingly or unknowingly, everyone craves that. [...] And whether he purposely cultivated that or that was just the outcome of, everything together, that just added this, that's added this layer to him being untouchable, unquestionable, unchallengeable. [...] I remember then, once he took me and another person on SoulTime, he took us out for a curry one evening, and that was just like the most wow, incredible, you know.
Steve

Attention from Pilavachi meant so much to people that it seems to have overshadowed any negative thoughts or niggling feelings they had regarding his behaviour:

The fact that he just blanked me or ignored me, that, why did I think that was okay? [...] why was I so ready to accept his interpretation of events when they didn't quite add up?
Sarah

These comments also show Sarah taking personal responsibility for Pilavachi's behaviour, and this is another factor that we came across several times in our conversations. Later in her interview, Sarah said, 'I don't understand why I did what I did, I really don't understand.' Here, she was speaking about why she had sent Pilavachi the email he requested. We heard similar sentiments from others, too. Regarding the ghosting, for example, Eric said: 'My immediate approach was to think that I'd done something wrong. Mike has got this direct line to God, so obviously, God is telling him something about me, or something like that.' Likewise, Adam reflected that:

I would feel like it was my fault that Mike was withdrawing, and he would kind of make you feel that way, you know, because like you would see him at an event, and he would barely acknowledge you or not acknowledge you at all. [...] And, you know, I would feel like, oh I'd done something wrong [...] I'd maybe like wanted his attention too much, or I had, you know, like, I just always felt like it was my fault. [...] But I internalised all that, I never told a soul, because I just thought I was failing.
Adam

Beth's* comments on *Let There Be Light* resonate with our participants' reflections. She said:

I felt embarrassed, and I felt confused. And I would try harder, and it would make it worse, and then I would just try and stay on the down low, and that didn't make it better. I felt like a failure, because something's happened that I've caused.
Beth*

Not only did young people often take personal responsibility for Pilavachi's behaviour towards them, but within several interviews there was evidence that people felt guilty when challenging or not complying with him. When Sarah decided that she wanted to ask Pilavachi to delete the email she had sent him, for example, she felt uncomfortable about doing so. She said:

You sort of feel like you're... not making a big deal out of nothing, but overreacting, to sort of say oh delete that. Because there's that relationship there, and [...] it's something relational you're doing when you're saying to someone delete that, I don't want you to have it, [...] which creates some sort of friction or tension, do you know what I mean, and you're sort of hesitant to create that tension.
Sarah

In a similar vein, John spoke about an occasion where he had felt guilty for withdrawing from Pilavachi. When he and Mark were in the US, Pilavachi suggested that he had one-on-one chats with each brother:

Mike said to us during the week like, 'Oh, it would be great to just have a one-on-one chat, you know, just to pray and be close to each other,' like you would with someone that's, you know, trying to disciple you in that sense. So, yeah, we sat down, had a chat, and he was like asking me about my faith, about how I got to know God. Sort of talked about my testimony a little bit and my upbringing, about what my relationship's like with my brother, which was good.

John

During their conversation, John mentioned that he felt anxious when he prayed, and Pilavachi probed him as to why this might be the case: 'Is it that I'm hiding something from God? Is it that I'm trying to repent of something that I can't repent of?' John explained that Pilavachi then asked if he would like to share this with him:

And I just said, 'I don't think I want to say. I don't think I want to share that.' And he was like, 'That's fine'. He was quite polite, I think. But it did leave me feeling a little bit distant from him after that. It made me feel like, oh, I haven't shared something with him. And, is that bad? Or is that a bad thing that I wasn't fully open with him? But I hadn't known him for a long time. I'd only known him for three or four months, and only really spent time with him there. So... it was also quite strange that he was very open, very quickly. There was no relational build-up, if that makes sense. It was more just like, I'm, you know, I'm Mike and I could do this, I could just ask you.

John

Added to the feelings of guilt for non-compliance, is the fact that there was an element of ambiguity that always seemed to surround Pilavachi's behaviour. Adam spoke about this in terms of 'plausible deniability':

I think Mike was incredibly good at plausible deniability. So everything bad that happened at Soul Survivor and everything, you know, pretty much until he started having massages in the room on his own with people, has this side of it where it's like, maybe he's just naïve, maybe he's just, you know, trying to do good things, and he just, you know, is messing up. Maybe he's, you know, very busy, maybe he's just, you know, under a lot of pressure, maybe all these boys do just want to be famous pop stars, and, you know, they are just all, like there's just so much like kind of like plausible deniability that kind of kept it away from being explicitly abusive [...] like you could justify it, you know, and people did. And so, and nobody really picked up on the patterns, certainly nobody with any kind of authority [...] to keep him accountable.

Adam

As Eric put it, 'because of those unclarities and ambiguities and grey zones, Mike could always say, I'm sorry, mate, I didn't know. We see this, that's his most common language.' Sarah gave an example of this, too. She had spoken with a church leader about her early experience of Pilavachi, and told this leader that she was considering confronting Pilavachi about what had happened:

One option was that I go and speak to Mike about it, and he said oh I'm worried about you doing that because I know from, I've heard from other people that if you talk to Mike and say this is, you know I'm unhappy with this, you've done this wrong, he'll say, 'Oh mate, I had no idea,' that would sort of be, everyone knew. So what was really interesting is that [...] there was this sort of narrative that oh, if you challenge [Mike] on something he'll just say 'Oh mate, I'm so sorry, I had no idea.'

Sarah

Lastly, several participants reflected on their age and inexperience as enabling factors. For example, most of those we spoke with had been very young when they were connected with Soul Survivor, and commented that they did not have the conceptual frameworks and language to realise that Pilavachi's behaviour was inappropriate. Adam said:

Obviously I had no language for that at that age like, to speak about [it], and there was some kind of wider understanding and acknowledgement that this is just what Mike was like, but never to the point of any accountability, like, so it was never taken like seriously, it was more like, this is just how Mike is.

Adam

Speaking on the *Soul Survivors* podcast, Beki* attributed the trust she placed in Pilavachi to her age at the time:

I went in completely naïve, like all of us did, we were all so young. I was eighteen, I was a teenager. I didn't know anything about life. I didn't even understand my own emotions or mental health, let alone looking at how the world works. And so you trust this person who, you know, is promising all these amazing things and seems to have this direct line to God. And so you just stay in it, and you stay in it.

Beki*

Eric said that it took time for him to process what had happened, but that he then started hearing about others who had had similar experiences. Even then, he did not realise that Pilavachi's behaviour had been harmful:

I'd always been thinking more like, oh, Mike has, Mike obviously can't, is not very good at mentoring guys, and I'm like, why does he keep doing that then? Like, if he's not good at it, why does he have to keep doing it? You know, he's good at so many other things, but yeah, so that's kind of my, that was kind of my reflection on it. So it was more, maybe thinking, okay, there's kind of a, you know, something that he's not very good at.

Eric

Additionally, any concerns raised by young people regarding Pilavachi's behaviour do not appear to have been taken seriously. According to Adam, one of the factors underlying this was that from the outside, it seemed as though everything was going very well at Soul Survivor: 'because literally thousands of people were becoming Christians at these events, you know, like they all just thought it was going great.' In his opinion, this led to the blame being placed on victims-survivors when they raised concerns: 'God's anointing it, God's in it, you know, young people are going to get upset, you know, like it was always [...] young emotional people are going to get upset.' Adam and his peers therefore felt as though there was no one to whom they could turn for help regarding Pilavachi's behaviour:

The feeling amongst us was like, yeah, there's things that aren't good about Mike, there's definitely a trail of damage, you know, he definitely hurts people, we definitely, you know, even the stuff that, like, I know was very shocking for, that Matt and Beth Redman revealed in their video, about him not speaking to Matt for, but that wasn't like a secret, like that was, you know, we kind of knew that that was happening, like it, but within our kind of peer group that, you know, nobody in our peer group had any sway over Mike. Like if Matt didn't have any sway over Mike, nobody did [...] So within our peer group there was like not much you could do, and you were kind of just like managing the situation the whole time.

Adam



3. Impact

Pilavachi caused significant and long-lasting harm to young people, many of whom are still affected today. [27] In this section, we share personal reflections from those we spoke with about the impact Pilavachi's behaviour has had on them – both at a general level, and in relation to their faith.

3.1 General impact

Eric spoke about his experience very much in relation to the experiences of others he knew personally, who he felt had suffered more harm than he had. However, Eric said that even though he considered his experience to be 'quite mild' in comparison to the experiences of others, it had still had 'quite a fundamental impact' on him.

the focus is so much on, oh, was there sexual abuse, especially with Mike. And it's really hard in this case for me to say either or, but I'm conscious that even if it wasn't sexual abuse, it can still be very damaging. And that's what I think is important here, is that, you know [...] we're so obsessed with this one form of abuse. But, you know, we now, we are encountering, we're hearing, reading media, we're encountering personally people who are, twenty years on, you know, their lives are still [...] like they're not, they haven't, you know, recovered.

Eric

Sarah told us that she carried a sense of shame because of all that had happened. She also spoke of feeling 'betrayed' and 'conned'. In relation to the email she had sent Mike, she explained, 'I was describing probably the worst things that had happened to me'. She said:

It's so personal, and I don't willingly share it, but I would never share it if someone wasn't going to treat it in the right way. And so, what I've struggled with [...] is that actually, you have a group of trustees [...] you've got them, at that point sitting around a table, talking about rapes and sexual assaults and all of this, and not thinking about the person behind those, not thinking oh we should, not just, is this an allegation we take seriously or not, but actually there's someone here who's been harmed. What is it about a culture, and maybe this also ties into the spiritual, what is it about that context and that culture that means that they're not able to actually take that step back and say, how's the victim doing, is there anything we can do?

Sarah

Sarah described feeling as though she had been 'treated like an object not a human being,' and told us that:

It makes me feel [...] that I had absolutely no worth or value, which I know sounds really dramatic, but not in my own right. In my own right I was not of any value to them.

Sarah

Steve differentiated between the impact Pilavachi's behaviour had on him at the time, and its more recent impact. At the time, the impact was predominantly relational, 'as well as the sort of dreams and hopes impact, of thinking, oh, I thought this guy was like, kind of my friend, but now he's not.' Regarding the more recent impact of Pilavachi's behaviour, however, Steve said:

I sort of processed the reality of, of kind of what had gone on, but I wasn't aware of it at the time, but came to realization of like, no, there's some really serious things there that aren't okay and, elements of feeling used and not properly taken care of. And so, it's just been quite weird processing that twenty years, twenty plus years later, and sort of how that's made me feel.

Steve

Steve told us that he had found it difficult to process what had happened so many years after the incidents had taken place. He had not seen Pilavachi's behaviour as a problem at the time because he had not been aware of the power imbalance between them. Now, however, he explained that:

There's an element of feeling used, an element of maybe feeling a bit dirty, and there's a not knowing, like, what did he want? What did he mean? What did he take from it? Was it sexual? Was it? Was he just naive and well meaning? And there's an element of, there's questions unanswered because he's, you know, he's gone, he's in South Africa or Cyprus, or, I don't know. Because of, you know, how long, and this is a lot of the case of the, you know, you look at the other cases of abuses, John Smyth etc., it's like, he's gone, can't answer it. And so there is, I think if things are challenged and addressed at the time, it's a lot easier for those who have experienced it to sort of process it, and to sort of come to understanding, and it's been a difficult and hard experience to process it twenty years later.

Steve

Adam had mixed emotions in some ways, because through his engagement with Soul Survivor he had been able to meet 'incredible people' and was given 'incredible opportunities'; nevertheless, he described Pilavachi's behaviour having a 'deep and profound emotional and psychological impact' on him. He told us that because he was 'conditioned' to accept abusive behaviour when he was at Soul Survivor, he had found himself accepting it from others after he left:

I think it really made me very pliable to be used and abused, certainly in terms of my own, self, like, so the, constantly feeling like I'm not good enough, constantly feeling like I'm not humble enough. Paranoid, absolutely paranoid about kind of putting myself out there, like in terms of, particularly creatively. It took me 25 years to get over that, and it feels like I wasted 25 years creatively. So [...], I'm a writer now, and I, you know, I'm very fortunate the last few years have been very successful for me. But I do feel like I lost 25 years of my creative journey, or it was incredibly stunted because of the psychological damage I experienced from Mike when 16, 17, 18 and into my 20s.

Adam

Pilavachi's behaviour towards Adam also impacted his relationships, and this was primarily in two ways. First, because Adam left Soul Survivor, he felt that Pilavachi then controlled the narrative about him in relation to those who were still there:

There's something about leaving which then, you know, Mike then controls the narrative about you and, you know, like I definitely, my, I had relationships that suffered because of not doing what Mike wanted me to do, and not being who Mike wanted me to be, [I] certainly suffered, particularly back then, relationally a lot, over the years, yeah, lost friends and so forth, yeah. I lost a lot.

Adam

Second, Adam found himself 'trying to please Mike' in all his relationships, something he was still addressing when we spoke:

There's a sense when, in every relationship I'm in, I'm still trying to please Mike. You know, it had that deep an impact on me and again took 25 years before I really began to like work at it, and undo some of that, and understand it and how it operates in my life.

Adam

Similarly, John told us that he was still impacted by Pilavachi's assessment of him:

I've always battled it and been like, no, I'm not like that, that is not me. But it has cropped up quite a lot [...] it has come to a point where sometimes it can feel, hold on, like, Mike said this, and now I'm like this.

John



3.2 Impact on relationships with God, the church, and its leaders

The main impact on the faith of victims-survivors appears to have been on people's relationships with the church and its leaders. Strong words were used in this regard, such as 'scepticism', 'wariness' and 'disgust', and we noticed a move within the faith journeys of some away from charismatic expressions of faith and towards more contemplative and reflective expressions.

As already noted, Sarah felt as though she had been instrumentalised by Pilavachi and Soul Survivor. In terms of the impact this has had on her faith with regards to the church, she explained that this relationship 'has really struggled,' and said, 'I feel like there's no room for me within that faith'. She went on to explain that:

It's, you know, everything we're seeing in the news about the way that those who are harmed are being treated. [...] I can't take the church as genuine when they're not able to... care. I can't take anything, I can't, yeah, I'm really struggling, and I, to the point where I don't know why I go to church. Well, I know why I go, I go to church, because, at this church these leaders have, they actually took the complaint forward. They believed me straight away, they, when I said I wanted action they went straight to the bishop. [...] And they've been amazing. So, I'm able to go because of them [...] I think church is important, but I'm only able to go because I trust them and I know it's a safe place.

Sarah

Nevertheless, despite her struggle with the church, Sarah described her faith in God as 'strong':

I've held onto that sort of contemplative, yeah... that for me has been, is actually what's been, I would say, again I don't want to be dramatic, but it's kept me alive, and kept me going each year, it's that time. So that faith in God has not been shaken.

Sarah

Likewise, Sophie's reflection was that 'I can honestly say it's never made me question my faith.' She went on to say, 'if anything, it's made my faith stronger.' This sentiment was echoed by Adam, who said that his experience did not ruin his faith, but 'kind of did the opposite.' While he noted that his relationship with Pilavachi had made him 'very pliable to be abused in other church situations' and to accept 'narcissistic' and 'incredibly dysfunctional' behaviour from other leaders, he also said,

My love for Jesus and my kind of fidelity to God, particularly at that point in my life was just very genuine, and, you know, very sweet and very real, and so, I don't know, I kind of felt like [...] there were other things out there, there were other ways of like following God [...] I've always been a curious person, and so, you know, from that point I then went to learn more about the mystics, and [...] just found other ways of expressing faith. That were more in line with what I saw and read in the Bible [...] my faith was there before Soul Survivor and has existed long after it.

Adam

In terms of how Adam's experience impacted his understanding of the church, he told us that it had led him to become 'pretty anti-institutional' in the way he views faith and community:

I much rather lean to things with low power structures, or, you know, non-hierarchical power structures, I certainly lean towards smaller environments, home church style settings. I, have a disgust now, I would say, of the bigger corporate environments. I know we're meant to say, oh, yeah, good things happen at them, but I kind of think they do far more damage than good.

Adam

Similarly, Steve's faith did not appear to have been impacted by his experience, although he did note that his faith is now 'very different' from what it was when he was connected to Soul Survivor:

When I was a teenager that whole charismatic, the charismatic experience, the singing, the praying, the kind of physicality of what was going on, that was to me the kind of the pinnacle, like this is the most important thing, I now look back on that and recognize it as possibly more its own type of liturgy. And a behaviour that group of people engaged in. So yeah, [I'm] in a much more kind of open, liberal, reflective space. So as a result of that, the celebrity of Mike, of Soul Survivor as part of that, as that sort of charismatic sort of worship driven space, sort of, the impact of that is very diluted because it's not really where I am spiritually or theologically.

Steve

Steve went on to speak about the dichotomy within the conservative, evangelical, charismatic world that he had grown up in, between on the one hand, the teaching he had received about the need to 'stand up for the weak, for the vulnerable and all of this,' and on the other, the 'quite right-wing, conservative, family value stuff' that he had witnessed. He said,

After a while I was kind of saying, well, hang on, isn't this stomping on weak and vulnerable people? So I had this whole journey out of that. And so, as such, I kind of distanced myself from the culture and the theology and the type of church that I grew up in. So in some ways, you could almost counterintuitively flip it on its head [...] I could say well that's almost affirmative of my decision.

Steve

Eric acknowledged the difficulty of 'untangling' the impact of Pilavachi's behaviour on his faith from the impact of other aspects of his life at the time, but after a short pause for reflection said: 'I think it's affected my relationship with God, or my faith, in that [...] I've lost that sense of intuitive trust in God. At least in some areas.' Eric also said that as a result of his experience, he 'grew sceptical of charismatic Christianity. What seemed to be very authentic came to be seen as very fake,' and that his experience had made him 'distrustful of leadership. Or big leaders at least.' In a similar vein, Mark also spoke about being 'wary of leaders.' While Eric was aware of the danger of attributing causation in place of correlation, he spoke about how he had always thought he would be in church ministry, but that his relationship with the church had changed. Although he still believes in the importance of being part of a local church community, he has tended to remain 'a little bit on the outskirts, the edges, not quite wanting to fully go in.' He said: 'on a spirituality level, it was the discovery of more contemplative forms of Christianity, that on a, on a personal spiritual level that saw me through,' and that:

I can't 100% say with certainty whether that, those two are linked. But certainly, it's, I'm very sceptical of any church leadership and authority. And again, that's maybe not all unhealthy or, you know, unjustified! And it might, I might have arrived at that same conclusion anyway.

Eric



4. Response

Here, we share participants' perceptions on the response to the allegations against Pilavachi since April 2023, exploring what has happened, what has been missing, and what needs to happen next.

4.1 What has happened?

Victims-survivors had mixed feelings about Soul Survivor Watford's response (that is, the response of the church at the heart of the Soul Survivor movement, at which Pilavachi was a minister until 2023). Some had strong words to say about what they saw as a lack of introspection displayed by the church, but others were more sympathetic. Adam, for example, said that:

In terms of Soul Survivor's response, I think it was slow and weak at first, but I think they've come around and done right, eventually. And you could say, well, it should have been better [...] but I think people who say that really don't understand the dynamic of Mike and the control he had. [...] You remove Mike from the situation and you're dealing with this aftermath of Mike, of course it's going to be slow, like, literally, you've not got anyone there who knows how to make like big decisions! Because Mike's made them for 30 years, like it's, you know... No, I have a lot of sympathy for Soul Survivor Watford and how Soul Survivor Watford have dealt with it.

Adam

The vast majority of the frustration we encountered was directed towards those who had been in leadership positions at the time, such as senior staff members and former trustees, as well as organisations and leaders in the wider church. While Adam was sympathetic towards Soul Survivor Watford, he described New Wine's response as 'terrible', since:

They tried to distance themselves from Mike, which was hilarious. If it wasn't so ridiculous. You know, they've been like, Mike hasn't been on staff here for fifteen years, like as if Mike wasn't one of the most influential people in that organisation.

Adam

Adam spoke about the message communicated by the response of those in the wider church:

In terms of silence and a culture of abuse, it says nothing more than, if you are powerful, we have got your back. If you are powerful, we will not fry you in public. If you are powerful, and you are our friend, and you are good to us, you know, we will make sure that you get out of things scot-free.

Adam

As Beth* pointed out in the documentary, 'The fact that there is, over a year later, still so much silence is also the reason this was allowed to go on for so long.' [28] Chris*, too, highlighted the silence in his blogpost, pointing out the various responses he personally had received from those previously connected to Soul Survivor when he first heard about the allegations against Pilavachi:

Perplexed by the silence, I WhatsApped a couple of vicars and former colleagues who had all come through Soul Survivor to find out what was going on. One said the story was of no interest to anyone, the trustees hadn't done their job, but it was nothing to do with them. Another said they were having a great time and didn't concern themselves with the sad chat online. A third said he would stay silent to protect his family. Another said he didn't want to hear any more on the subject. The responses ranged from denial to fear.

Chris*

As part of Soul Survivor's response, the Scolding Review was also viewed as unsatisfactory as the final investigatory piece of work on what happened, for a range of reasons. [29] Adam was struck by the way in which the authors had been 'just utterly taken in by Mike's charm.' He said:

I mean, there are parts of the Scolding report that end up victim blaming, there are parts of the Scolding report that end up doing the work of justifying Mike's behaviour, even, and for somebody who suffered some of these abuses, to read the report, making excuses for Mike, and some of them are ridiculous, it was infuriating. Because this is all we're going to get. [...] The system is done with it, and we got the Scolding report, the Scolding report said that there was abuse, blah blah blah, poor Mike, oh, we can't actually do anything because he's quit. That's it. And so, for that to be kind of like the last major say on it, makes it feel like, for me like lessons won't be learned. Culture will not change.

Adam

Sarah spoke about how difficult she had found it to engage with the Scolding Review:

Because it feels as though it was orchestrated to protect the institution, right, so... and when there's that sort of skew or bias towards those in power, and the institution, the powerful institution at the expense of those harmed, then it, in and of itself it feels unjust. And the whole review feels like another injustice. Which is why I'm finding it hard, I know it's got valuable things in there, but as someone who's been harmed I'm finding it really hard, like I wanted to read it before we spoke, and I wasn't able to read it again. Because it just feels painful because it feels unjust.

Sarah

However, it was not only because of the way the report foregrounded the voices of Pilavachi and those who had enabled his actions that she has struggled to engage with it, but also due to her experience of trying to contribute to the review. She responded to the initial call immediately, but did not provide any information about her experience since the subject matter was so sensitive. She sent several follow up emails and the response she kept receiving was that a lot of people had come forward and therefore they would get back to her. Eventually, Sarah received an email towards the end of February 2024 thanking her for giving the team her consent to view her information. She responded immediately and told them that she had not given her consent because her information concerned rape and sexual assault and therefore she wanted to know how the information was going to be used before sending it. It was only then that the reviewers responded to her in a meaningful way. Sarah said:

It felt like it shouldn't have been that way. [...] How can I have trust in a process where actually, all of that has happened as well? Where actually, you're not interested in speaking to me? And then I read the report and there's these detailed, interactions with Mike, they've met him several times. [...] So it's just, it just feels unjust.

Sarah

Victims-survivors also had mixed feelings regarding the Church of England's response. Adam described this as 'inadequate, pathetic, from the beginning. And has continued to be. Really, at almost every level.' Referring specifically to the Diocese of St Albans, he noted that:

The diocese of St. Albans [...] was initially very hesitant about Soul Survivor, and then just kind of gave up as Soul Survivor became popular, and had no oversight, input, did not hold Soul Survivor accountable, didn't hold Mike accountable in any tangible way, you know, like you could say it's there on paper but not in any tangible way, and I think we're all kidding ourselves if we think otherwise. And their response has just been like typical mealy-mouthed institutional.

Adam

A few also voiced their dissatisfaction and frustration with the CDM processes. Sophie, for example, felt that it was 'very, very wrong' that Pilavachi had been able to resign beforehand. Eric noted that the lack of sanctions against Pilavachi 'was not because Mike was innocent, it's because the process is flawed. Fundamentally flawed.' In a similar vein, Adam – referring to the finding of the Church of England's National Safeguarding Team that Bishop Graham Cray had 'failed to report information ... to church officials' regarding Pilavachi's conduct[30] – said, 'Graham Cray has got away with everything, like there's, why is he not being hauled up and being reamed by the Church of England?'

One of the positive comments concerning the Church of England's response related to the support someone had received from the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer at St Albans, both during the investigation and afterwards, which they said had been 'incredibly healing'. Another came from someone who was part of the Working Group that was formed following the publication of the Scolding Review, to report to General Synod on the actions the Church should be taking. This was found to be a 'very positive and very open' experience. The person said to us: 'we were taken very seriously and given a lot of space. But, more importantly, it wasn't lip service. [...] I was expecting there to be a resistance, I was expecting there to be a kind of corporate protection'.



4.2 What has been missing?

We heard a range of reflections regarding what has been missing from the response to date. Some pointed to the lack of focus on the age and gender of those impacted; Adam, for example, was still a child when he was harmed by Pilavachi. For Adam, one additional aspect that has been absent from the wider conversations is discussions around culture change. More specifically, the need

to really examine the negative sides of our practices, particularly within the charismatic church. I think the charismatic church really needs to look at how it prophesies, how it appoints leaders, how it talks about anointing, [...] this explicit we do not criticise leaders mantra [...] has to be taken down, has to be ripped apart, it is absolutely ripe for abuse.

Adam

Noting that since Pilavachi's abuse had been uncovered he had not seen evidence either of a change in church practices, or a willingness to examine these, Adam said: 'there is no real desire to change within that world. By anybody who has any like power or authority.' Although he acknowledged that most churches will have a protocol for abuse, Adam was emphatic about the fact that until there is culture change, 'the protocols are not going to cut it.' Similarly, Eric voiced strong disagreement with the line of thinking that 'as long as we have this policy, you know, we will all be safe. Or, you know, this was just down to bad structures [...] you can have a lot of structures, and a lot of abuse can still happen within those structures.'

Also on the subject of protocols and structures, Steve felt that what was lacking was a deeper understanding of Pilavachi's celebrity, and how this enabled him to sidestep processes and avoid accountability. He said that because of Pilavachi's 'celebrity'

in terms of governance, he was able to find loopholes and how to break and bend the rules and avoid accountability. And that's not normal, you don't find that happening often. So when you've got a set of rules for sort of safeguarding and governance, [...] they work for 99% of people [...] And also, the fact that Soul Survivor was this sort of grassroots thing that started in in a warehouse and then eventually became part of the Church of England but had its own governance. So, all these factors come together to make it such a unique one-off [...] the average vicar is not Mike Pilavachi. [...] It's about understanding a situation where all of the normal checks and balances didn't kick in, didn't apply, and there was someone who was incredibly skilled at manipulating them.

Steve

Steve reflected that Pilavachi was 'less accountable than the average vicar, but he had a magnified ability to do harm [...] because of, yeah, this sheer power and celebrity that he had.' Steve also commented on the way in which 'key figures in the Christian world' have 'closed ranks' and supported Pilavachi, pointing to examples of his accomplishments. He referred to Pilavachi as 'the goose that laid the golden egg', seeing this as one of the key reasons why he avoided scrutiny:

I've got friends who are wanting to be ordained, friends who have been ordained, and when you understand the level of scrutiny they go through just to become a curate, it's huge. And I'm not saying that's right or wrong, just saying it for a number of reasons, he didn't have that.

Steve

Several participants pointed to the lack of justice and accountability, and Sarah spoke about the feeling she had that things were still unresolved because of this:

I don't know why, it's just that sense of not being able to let go. And maybe it's just the unresolved nature of the fact that [...] there's been no justice, there's been no accountability, and sort of wanting someone to take that and do something with it, but that hasn't happened and it's still not happening.

Sarah

She saw this lack of resolution as accentuated by the silence and confidentiality that has surrounded the situation. She said, 'how can I make sense of something if I don't understand what it was?'

4.3 What should happen next?

Those we spoke with had similar thoughts on the question of what should happen next, but each highlighted aspects that were of particular importance for them at a personal level. Steve spoke about the need for acceptance from the Church of England for its part in what happened:

I think there needs to be a full and frank acceptance from the Church of England about how they legitimised [Mike] by Soul Survivor being part of the Church of England, and how they failed to have the right oversight, and an apology. [...] you know, they're not directly responsible, but they're related, they're part of it. That's important to me. But equally, I recognise for other people that almost might, they wouldn't welcome that, you know. They might see that as an attempt at whitewashing, or, too little too late, but on a personal level that would have meaning to me.

Steve

Sarah also spoke about her personal need for apologies; however, she emphasised the need for these to be 'personal' and 'specific': 'It's not okay just to say, we're so sorry for any harm caused, that's not, that doesn't do anything for me.' She also questioned why the Bishop of St Albans had seemingly not assumed a more pastoral role in response to what had come to light:

I don't understand why the Bishop of St Albans, for example, hasn't offered to meet with every single person who's been harmed. Actually, I think even in September 2023 when the concerns were substantiated, why could he not have, he's had eighteenth months to meet with people, and instead he's standing down in a few months, I think. So why has he not tried to meet with everyone?

Sarah

Although Sarah recognised the legal implications of apologies and responding to abuse, she said that for her personally, being able to name the specific injustice was important:

And I know it's hard. Because I know that there are legal implications. [...] But for me there's something about naming what's happened and having it in writing to be able to look back and say, or even [an in person] apology... but I think... yeah, naming the injustice would be really helpful. [...] [Because] even if the Bishop of St Albans moves on, even if Mike is not there anymore, I have an unresolved feeling towards [the church] because of the things that I've experienced.

Sarah

Speaking about his personal desire for apologies to be made, Adam also included former trustees and other leaders in his comments, something mentioned by others, too:

They don't have to like, confess to anything, and they don't have to like, come all like begging and sorry, and like I would just like them to say, I wish I'd done more, like I knew that Mike was hurting people and I tried, but I didn't do enough. You know! It's like, it's such a simple thing, and wouldn't ruin their lives in any way. In fact, it would increase people's respect for them.

Adam

For Adam, such apologies would be 'very healing', 'very informative' and 'really helpful for the culture'. He said, 'I'm heartbroken that that has not happened yet. My feeling is it won't happen. My feeling is everyone will just want to move on.' Adam also spoke about the wider church, particularly those in leadership positions who were still choosing to remain silent:

Humility from anyone, any leadership, any leader, [...] saying something. Like just some humility about the actual damage, like, because the damage is in, you can't refute it. You can't. [...] So, like, I don't understand how they all exist without, addressing it.

Adam

Steve spoke about the need for a case study to explore 'why this this person was able to do what he did for years and no one was able to successfully call it out, when [...] I think several people tried':

I guess it's, being part of Soul Survivor for the time I was, reflecting back on it, understanding what happened and others experiencing it but being in that church when, and part of the wider festivals, and the global movement, understanding the sheer power and celebrity that he had, connecting that back to how he was unchallenged for so long, it's, I just recognise it's not about, well, should there have been seven trustees instead of four? Yeah, look, maybe there's a perfect number of trustees, but the key issue is it, it's tied up in his personal enigma. [...] it's all about the how, how he did it.

Steve

Steve explained that this would help him personally, and Sarah made a similar remark: 'for me what would be really helpful is to actually understand what was happening. I think for my own faith, to be able to understand exactly what was happening.'

Several participants mentioned the need for more understanding around silence – what silence is and what silence does in situations such as this. Sarah said that she did not understand why some were continuing to remain silent even though ‘there’s clearly been harm’. She said:

The truth hasn't come out, but it's not just that, it's also that the wrong 'truth' is being heard, [...] even where it's implicit because of the silence. So for me as someone who was harmed, who's sort of seeing everything play out, I feel like every time the wrong version is heard, [...] it feels like injustice every time. So then you're layering more injustice onto an already unjust situation. [...] so it's that things aren't in the open, it's that people aren't being listened to, and then it's that the wrong 'truth' is being heard, and then it's that silence is speaking, like the silence is saying something.

Sarah

Looking forward, Sophie commented that she would like to see ‘more accountability’ within the church, and ‘better processes and procedures for whistleblowing’: ‘the church has got to be a safe place. [...] the church shouldn't be a place where people feel intimidated, and there are abuses of power.’ Yet, she said, ‘the institution keeps trying to silence those who are brave enough to blow the whistle and speak out, which is in itself, a form of abuse.’

Eric emphasised the need to be asking the right questions in response to all that happened at and through Soul Survivor.

we need to use a different kind of lens through which we as a church view this to begin with. And the seriousness of it. And that this is fundamentally impacting people's lives in very deep ways, and we can't just brush it over 'because it wasn't sexual'. But actually, we need [...] to hear those voices properly, and understand [...] how they've viewed things, what it's done to them, and how it's impacted them. And if we can have that conversation, then I think it could open to, up to different kind of questions that lead on then to, well, what do we then do, and how do we address this, and what do we need to put in place, what do we need to do differently? [...] I think at least at this stage it's more about asking the right questions.

Eric

For Eric, what is important in the response is the starting point, which has to be a recognition that

we have to do something about this. [...] It matters to people, and [...] it fundamentally impacts the way people engage with the church and by extension God.

Eric



5. Discussion

To this point, our main aim has been to present the testimonies of our participants, supported by the words of others who have spoken publicly about their own experiences of Soul Survivor. We have arranged material, offered paraphrases and summaries, and drawn attention to common threads, and we take full responsibility for the interpretive work that this has involved. We have, however, tried to keep our commentary to a minimum, and to allow our participants space to speak.

From this point on, however, we shift to offering our own reflections on all that we have heard. We continue to draw on what our participants have said, and acknowledge that our thinking has been informed by them, but we do not want to give the impression that they are responsible for our reflections.

In this section, then, we offer a series of diagnostic reflections, seeking to name some of the harm done and some of the factors that enabled that harm. We reflect on questions related to power, intimacy, and discernment, and also discuss the concept of 'grooming'. In the final section of the report, we will go on to offer a series of reflections on what we and our churches might need to learn from all that has happened, if we are in the future to keep one another safe, as best we can, from abuse like that experienced by our participants.



5.1 Abuses of power

When the National Safeguarding Team and the Diocese of St Albans first reported that they had found the allegations against Pilavachi to be ‘substantiated’, their press release described his actions as an ‘abuse of power’.[31] This has provided one focus for our reflections: the nature of the power dynamics in the Soul Survivor story.

We use the word ‘power’ to refer to all the ways in which someone is in a position to influence the lives of those around them – to shape their opportunities, their choices, their understanding, and their self-perception. Power in this sense is not inherently evil (it is not wrong to influence others, nor to be influenced by them). Nevertheless, where the influence does harm, or is exerted in inappropriate ways, or is surrounded by insufficient safeguards, power very easily becomes abusive.

To understand the forms of power in play in the Soul Survivor context involves understanding the ways in which Pilavachi influenced those around him. Some aspects of this are relatively straightforward. Many have referred to his charisma and charm, for instance. He also had a certain position in the Soul Survivor organisations, which gave him the authority to make various decisions. He was in a position, say, to decide who to invite onto the stage at the festivals, or to decide what songs would be sung. We have heard, however, that this decision-making power was surrounded and reinforced by much more complex dynamics.

One dimension of this that comes through clearly in the testimonies of our participants is the *economy of attention* that surrounded him. He was so central to the life of the Soul Survivor community – the ‘spider’ in the centre of the web, in Chris’s* words – that attention from him became a kind of currency. Eric speaks of being ‘keen to be seen by Mike’, for instance, and Adam of wanting Pilavachi’s attention ‘too much’. It made a huge difference to people’s roles and activities within the Soul Survivor context if they could get and keep his attention. Even if he had not handled that power so capriciously, this would already be a sign of unhealthy, unsafe power. Such an economy of attention was always a seedbed for abuse.

Then there is the related *economy of intimacy*. We have more to say on intimacy below, but in connection with what we have just said about attention, it is important to note how someone’s path through the Soul Survivor community seems to have been shaped by the closeness of their friendship with Pilavachi. There was little gap between the extent to which one was welcomed into leadership in that community and the extent to which one was welcomed into (apparent) friendship or intimacy with Pilavachi. Even the Soul Survivor Watford trustees, according to Steve, were ‘kind of his mates ... and whatever Mike’s vision was, was what the vision of the church was.’

It is not, of course, that there is anything inherently wrong or dangerous about friendships amongst those in leadership. The problem arises when there is no real distinction between being a ‘mate’ and being allowed a significant role in the church. Again, even if this economy of intimacy has been handled in less harmful ways, its very existence should already have been a red flag.

One counter-intuitive element of Pilavachi’s power is the role played in it by his performative humility. We have heard how his frequent performances of humility did nothing to undermine his power. In fact, they reinforced it. They made it harder to name his failings as problems (because he had already, apparently, acknowledged them), and they made it harder for people to recognise the coercive and controlling nature of his behaviour (because it came in this cloak that seemed so humble). There can be, perhaps especially in church circles, a naivety about the power of humility.

The testimonies we have heard have also reinforced our sense that Soul Survivor was shaped by the masking of power by informality. There can be a tendency when worrying about power to associate it with formal, visible structures, and to think that informality and affability inherently undermine it, reducing the risk that power is being abused. And there is, of course, nothing wrong with informality as such. But there is something wrong with the idea that informality is all we need to keep us safe from problematic power. In fact, the culture of informality at Soul Survivor seems to have underpinned the abuse that took place. It did nothing to lessen Pilavachi’s power, but meant, for instance, an absence of effective oversight, an absence of routes to challenge him, and free rein for the economies of attention and intimacy to dominate decision-making and advancement.

Another factor influencing the power dynamics at play within Soul Survivor was a particular *theology of anointed leadership*. There was, in our participants’ testimonies of their early encounters with Pilavachi, a pervasive sense that they saw him as someone anointed by God to do God’s work. He was, in John’s words, a ‘prophet’, or in Eric’s, someone capable of ‘invoking the Holy Spirit’. The existence of this anointing was reaffirmed by every powerful event he led, and every success of his ministry, just as it was reaffirmed by every sign of his apparent humility, and even every sign of his acknowledgement of his failures. It lifted him above accountability and criticism. As Adam said, if you criticised Pilavachi, you were ‘not just criticising or having issues with a religious leader, you [were] having issues with God’s chosen.’ To criticise him was to criticise what God was doing.

It is not, of course, necessarily wrong to believe that God has raised up a particular leader and is working through them. But nobody can or should be lifted above accountability and criticism, however powerfully God works through them. And any sign that the leader's authority and God's authority are getting confused – so that to challenge them is tantamount to challenging God, or questioning them to questioning God's plan – is a very clear sign that something is wrong.

Institutional authorisation is another element in what went wrong. Pilavachi's power was reinforced by the visible backing he received from the Church of England, from New Wine, and other organisations and institutions. Adam noted how organisations have tried to minimise the extent to which they were directly involved, but Soul Survivor in general and Pilavachi in particular were in multiple ways given the implicit (and sometimes explicit) imprimatur of those organisations. That definitely served to reinforce and extend Pilavachi's power, and to make it difficult to challenge him. We have heard, for instance, Sarah explaining that she had assumed that 'if an official person high up in the Church of England [is involved] [...] it must be above board'.



5.2 Unsafe intimacy

We have already touched on the economy of intimacy that shaped the Soul Survivor story, but there is more to say about the way that this economy functioned. One part of the story that we have heard from our participants is of Pilavachi's exercise of domination in the context of intimacy. Ben* described Pilavachi's wrestling as 'a sign of being accepted'; Eric said that 'it almost kind of reinforced the sense of, you know, the closeness of experience and relationship and intimacy' – but Steve also said that 'there was definitely something about dominance there'. There are parallels in other parts of Pilavachi's behaviour, as with his mocking of Adam on stage, which left Adam feeling 'chosen and humiliated at the same time'. What we seem to see dramatised in these moments is a pattern of intimacy without equality: of people drawn into an intimate relationship with Pilavachi, and finding the intimacy of that relationship confirmed by actions that at the same time confirm that he is absolutely the one in charge. That combination, of intimacy and asymmetry, is dangerous. The intimacy did not neutralise or mitigate the asymmetry, but reacted with it to produce something toxic.

Another part of the story of Pilavachi's abuse is of his relation to young men and women who were at a formative period in their lives, in search of identity and purpose, longing to be where God was at work and longing to be used by God. Beki* spoke about how, as an eighteen-year-old, she trusted 'this person who, you know, is promising all these amazing things and seems to have this direct line to God'; Adam spoke about how hearing from Pilavachi that he was 'special and important' was 'very potent, very powerful, for me personally'. Pilavachi was a charismatic authority figure speaking to young people one-to-one about the deepest purposes of their lives, and promising them involvement in a palpable movement of the Holy Spirit. In doing this, he was engaging with them in a very intimate way, speaking to their deepest hopes and fears, with tremendous power to affect how they saw themselves and the course of their lives.

The care needed to make such intimate engagement safe is in direct proportion to its intimacy – and there should therefore have been very strong safeguards in place. In the stories we have heard, however, those safeguards are strikingly absent. There appears to have been little or no concern about Pilavachi meeting young people for extended one-to-one meetings, in his own home or other private settings, to discuss highly emotive matters. We have also heard about his repeated offering of misplaced certainty, making promises of purposeful involvement in ministry that were often left unfulfilled. We have heard about the ghosting that left people flailing, trying to understand what they had done wrong to fall out of Pilavachi's favour – and, by implication, out of God's favour. And we have heard that the process of being drawn into Pilavachi's circle seems at times to have had the effect of isolating people from other sources of advice and wisdom, so that he became their primary source of meaning and value.

Eric notes that Pilavachi regularly insisted, when telling people what he thought God was saying, that they needed to test his words – but that it was in reality very difficult to do so, given Pilavachi's power and presence. There is no sense, in any of the testimonies we have been given, that there was in Soul Survivor a culture that encouraged real testing and discernment, that helped people develop practices of questioning what they had heard, of discussing and testing it with help from others. There is no sense that real caution and care was being taken to create a culture in which people could safely process the very powerful, very compelling things that they were being told about themselves.



5.3 Grooming

We have discussed abuse of power and unsafe intimacy, and one lens that brings these aspects together in a way that merits closer attention is that of grooming. Through our conversations with those reporting having been directly harmed by Pilavachi, it has become clear that several aspects of the way he formed and developed relationships with young people align with what is described in studies on adult grooming. Here, we highlight those aspects of the grooming process that are particularly relevant in relation to the testimonies that we have heard.[32]

Since relationships in which grooming is occurring will likely resemble typical adult relationships, its initial stages are hard to spot. Added to this is the fact that the grooming process tends to be experienced as positive and rewarding by those targeted, and therefore it is also very difficult to distinguish between genuine and harmful intent on the part of the perpetrator. In Eric's words, Pilavachi 'made you feel special', a word used by Adam, John, and Chris* too. One of the ways in which the resemblance of Pilavachi's behaviour to grooming is particularly visible, though, is the process that eventually led to him giving interns massages. When Pilavachi reportedly first casually mentioned massage in conversation with these interns, many would have already benefitted from his generosity, whether through encouragement, restaurant visits, or trips abroad. He would then offer to pay for professional massages, and this was followed by suggestions for the interns to receive massages from him, often in his home. More broadly, one could point towards the wrestling described and even his reported teaching on the importance of human touch, as Steve noted, as creating a context in which young people were desensitised to physical contact with Pilavachi and massages were normalised.

This points towards another aspect of the grooming process, which is the attention and care that predators will often give to grooming environments as well as individuals.[33] In order to minimise the chances of their behaviour being identified, they will often seek to establish themselves as trustworthy and credible not only with their intended victim, but also with their environment. One of the goals that predators will typically have in view when grooming an environment is to ensure that there is a 'credible rationale' for their actions. The trust and credibility they develop serves 'to frame behaviours in a positive and benign light' and 'creates a perspective through which the predator's actions are interpreted in a way that garners belief in the predator's "genuine" care and concern.'[34]

In the context of Soul Survivor, discipleship was the pretext for Pilavachi's development of intimate relationships with young people. This rationale served to create ambiguity around his actions, enabling them to be interpreted in a positive light. As Adam observed, 'Mike was incredibly good at plausible deniability. So everything [...] has this side of it where it's like, maybe he's just naïve, [...] trying to do good things and [...] is messing up, [...] very busy, [...] under a lot of pressure.' From what we have heard, along with the testimonies that are in the public domain, it appears that this is how Pilavachi's behaviour was most often framed and interpreted.

Another aspect of the grooming process relates to actions that seek to blur and violate professional boundaries within relationships between people in positions of unequal power.[35] It can be argued that Pilavachi sought to present his relationships as if they were between peers – using the language of 'best friends', as Sarah noted – when in fact there was an imbalance of power within them. By using such language, however, Pilavachi would have been able to blur the professional boundaries that should have been in place and violate these by seeking to draw people into inappropriate intimacy with him. The power imbalance within these relationships removed the possibility for real consent, and this was only accentuated by Pilavachi's spiritual status. In Eric's words, however, the 'audience of one' that the young people Pilavachi was disciplining were supposed to be living for 'was not God, it was Mike'.[36]

Conversations on consent connect to those on the intersection between power and vulnerability in relation to grooming – sometimes referred to as the ‘power/vulnerability nexus’.[37] Aspects such as celebrity, charm, social status and personal standing can all work within a situation to give a predator power, and can interact with vulnerability factors to enable the grooming process.[38] While Pilavachi’s celebrity, charm and status have already been discussed – Steve’s comments, in particular, draw attention to these aspects – two vulnerability factors highlighted by previous studies are worth noting here. The first is age, specifically in relation to 18-23-year-olds, and this resonates with what we have heard from participants. Beki* described being ‘completely naïve’ and trusting when she joined Soul Survivor, for example, and in relation to Pilavachi’s abuse of power, Adam said, ‘I had no language for that at that age’. The second is ‘desire’, whether this is the desire to ‘be seen by God, and to do that which God has called us to do’ as in Eric’s case, or to have opportunities to ‘write and to make music’, as in Adam’s case. Pilavachi was able to use his celebrity, charm and status where these intersected with vulnerability factors within the young people he was discipling, to draw them into inappropriate intimacy with him.

A final aspect of grooming to mention here relates to the community characteristics that enable it.[39]

One such characteristic concerns the degree of trust placed in spiritual leaders, which can overpower community members’ ability to trust their own perceptions of events. Victims-survivors’ immediate response will therefore be to assume that they have misunderstood or misinterpreted their experiences (as Eric said, ‘my immediate approach was to think that I’d done something wrong’), and those around them will tend to assume that they are overreacting to their experiences (‘young emotional people are going to get upset,’ as Adam put it). Another characteristic concerns the way behaviour becomes normalised within a community because of the public setting in which it occurs and lack of challenge from bystanders. That certainly does not mean that bystanders are absolved from responsibility, or that they have nothing for which they need to apologise, but it does set their behaviour in a wider context. In many respects, Pilavachi’s grooming of them, of the wider environment, and of the individuals he harmed fell into a pattern all too recognisable from other contexts of abuse: the pattern of adult grooming.



5.4 Mishandled testimonies

There is another aspect of the mishandling of intimacy that we have heard about in the testimonies we have received. As we noted at the start of this report, when someone shares with you testimonies of abuse they have suffered, or other kinds of trauma they have experienced, they unavoidably make themselves vulnerable to you, and you need to handle what you have been given as a very delicate gift. Listening attentively, honouring the seriousness of what you have been told in the way you respond, keeping confidentiality except where you need to inform a relevant authority, not using that testimony against the person, not appropriating it for your own purposes – all this and more is quite obviously called for if such sharing is to be safe.

The context that Pilavachi convened at Soul Survivor appears to have been one that invited such intimacy without any appropriate safeguards in place. In times of ministry (both public and one-to-one), people were encouraged to share the deepest testimonies about themselves. Sometimes, that was by explicit invitation (as in John's description, above, of Pilavachi probing the reasons for the anxiety he experienced when praying). At other times, it appears to have been more of an implicit invitation, generated by the atmosphere that was created, by the kind of stories told on stage, or by the nature of the 'words of knowledge' that were spoken. There is little or no sign in what we have heard of any recognition that the eliciting of such intimate testimonies might require safeguards to be in place – appropriate training, signposting to relevant support services, structures of accountability, assurances of confidentiality (and clarity about its limits), and so on.

At times, it is clear that Pilavachi actively mishandled intimate testimonies that he had been told. The Scolding Review, for instance, gives a detailed description of the mishandling by Pilavachi and by David Pytches of Matt Redman's disclosure that he had been subjected to sexual abuse. The Review also explains that Pilavachi, having heard this disclosure from Redman, got him to tell the story on stage – noting that this was done without appropriate care and consideration of the consequences.^[40] We have, in our research, heard the testimony of Sarah, who judged that her similar detailed disclosure of abuse had been elicited by Pilavachi for his own self-protection. In both cases, the interests of the person who told the story do not appear to have been at the forefront of the way it was elicited, handled, and deployed. Their confidences were abused.



5.5 Failures of discernment

There is another factor that we want to touch on, which has to do quite directly with the way in which God was understood to be present and at work in the Soul Survivor context.

It is undeniable, from the testimonies we heard, that Pilavachi's abuse was enabled by people's certainty that God was present and at work in the Soul Survivor movement, and specifically in and through Pilavachi's ministry. We heard Eric, for instance, saying that 'We were desperate to be given a word by him. Because somehow, he seemed to have had a direct line [to God].' We have also heard that Pilavachi's behaviour was enabled, for many who became part of his circle, by their sense that God had guided them to that position – that they could see providence at work in the chances and impulses that had brought them there. The whole movement of which Pilavachi was a part was one that encouraged and intensified the expectation that God's presence, activity and guidance could be identified in this way.

It is also clear, however, that people's confidence in seeing God's hand at work made it harder to accept that abuse was taking place, harder to name it as abuse, harder to call it out, and harder to be heard when they did so, as well as making the impact of the abuse upon their sense of their relationship to God all the deeper.

What seems to be missing in these testimonies is any sense that, alongside being taught to expect that God's presence and activity would be tangible and that God's guidance would be heard, people were also being helped to remember and to dwell with the fallibility and provisionality of their discernments of and feelings about God's presence and activity. We have not heard that people were being encouraged to acknowledge the mixed, creaturely and fallen nature of all the events or situations in which they believed God to be present, or to nurture a healthy scepticism about themselves and others. They were, it seems, being taught a form of discernment unmoored from wisdom. This is something to which we will be returning in the final section of our report.

5.6 Silence and spiritual harm

As we close this section of our report, we want to acknowledge the additional harm that people have suffered on account of the way that many leaders and organisations have responded to the allegations against Pilavachi.

When stories of Pilavachi's abuse were finally being told in public, there was prolonged silence (or responses so brief or so slow as to be little better than silence) from many of those who had over decades formed strong connections with Soul Survivor and Pilavachi. We have heard Adam describe the lack of reflective response from some such sources as both 'terrible' and 'heartbreaking'. The leaders and organisations in question are ones that had, in the ways described above, reinforced Pilavachi's power by giving him a platform, an endorsement, and implicit or explicit support. They were therefore leaders and organisations that unwittingly played a role in the story of his abusive behaviour. To respond with silence to the publication of the testimonies of the abuse that their support had enabled was yet another way of mishandling the gift of these testimonies, of failing to treat them with the honour they deserved.

This silence may be related to the nature of the abuse and how this has been perceived and often downplayed (as Eric said, many have responded by suggesting that 'it can't have been that bad' or minimising it because 'it wasn't sexual'). While to some, the pull-push dynamics, control, manipulation, physical touch and ghosting may not appear to amount to much, it is undeniable that these actions and behaviours have had a long-lasting impact upon people's lives – in Adam's words, 'the damage is in, you can't refute it'. Indeed, for some of those we had initial contact with, and who later felt unable to participate in the research, the pain of the abuse that happened decades ago is still too keenly felt for them to be able to even speak about their experiences.

Highlighting the spiritual aspect of the abuse can help us to understand the extent both of the initial harm, and that caused by the ensuing silence. Afterall, a person's spirituality and spiritual growth are connected to their deepest sense of identity, to their desires, dreams and longings, to the very core of their being. The damage from such abuse is therefore often enduring and immeasurable, and importantly, only magnified when people are met with poor responses from other representatives of the faith. Silence, in particular, inevitably compounds the harm already done.

6. Lessons learned

As we, the three researchers on this project, have reflected on the testimonies that our participants have entrusted to us, we have continually asked ourselves what lessons we and our churches need to learn. How can we collectively make it harder for abusers like Pilavachi to operate unchecked in the church? How can we make it easier for people to notice such abuse, to name it clearly, and to call out those perpetrating and enabling it? How can we identify those aspects of culture and theology that allow abuse like this to grow, and that get in the way of it being acknowledged, challenged and responded to well?

There are lessons to be learned in many different areas. We are aware that a good deal has already been said about formal governance structures, and about what needs to happen to avoid failures of oversight and accountability like those that made the Soul Survivor situation possible.[41] We have therefore chosen to focus our attention elsewhere, and to give priority to the cultural and theological factors on which we dwell in the previous section.

6.1 Power

The church needs to be pursuing and disseminating a deeper literacy in relation to good and bad power, the dynamics of spiritual and religious authority, and the structures that are needed to keep power safe. The more powerful somebody's ministry seems to be (which also means the more powerfully God seems to be working through them), the more attention to their exercises of power is needed.

Our first reflection is that our churches need much more wisdom, collectively, in how we recognise power and its dangers. The Scolding Review includes a recommendation that all who are preparing for ordination should receive at least a 'minimum level of training' that 'should include instructions on how to recognise the imbalance of power between church leaders and laypeople and how to manage those relationships'.[42] In our view, what is needed includes but goes significantly beyond this. Those with positions of responsibility in the church need a literacy in power, and in the subtle ways that it can operate. They need to be alert not just to the overt ways in which someone in a position of power can try to enforce compliance and quash dissent, but to the less visible forms that emotional, psychological and spiritual manipulation can take, and the ways in which people and institutions can end up colluding with such manipulation without necessarily seeing what they are doing. And the more powerful somebody's ministry seems to be (which also means the more powerfully God seems to be working through them) the more attention to their exercises of power is needed. Those with spiritual authority bear a particular responsibility, since their behaviour invariably has the potential to become conflated with divine action.

The Soul Survivor movement had deep roots in the charismatic movement, and one telling emphasis of that movement has been upon the way in which the Spirit works in and through every member of Christ's body. The body as a whole is built up by the gifts and ministries of every member. The kind of concentration of power that we see in the Soul Survivor story, and the way it congealed into coercion and control, are betrayals of that heritage. Hearing the testimonies of those who have been harmed by this abuse of power should call us, not only to a greater awareness of the ways in which power can be misused, but also to explore and pursue a more positive vision of power: of power as something that, in the Body of Christ, is fundamentally shared. 'Power' should be the measure of how fully each member of the Body belongs in its common life together, and is able both to give to and receive from that life. Given the tendency, however, for power to concentrate harmfully, such a vision of shared power needs to be protected by structures of accountability, by routes for excluded and marginalised voices to be heard (including good routes for complainants and whistleblowers), as well as more generally by a culture in which criticism is welcomed, and by an expectation of diversity of various kinds – including theological diversity – amongst those in positions of leadership and governance.

6.2 Intimacy

The church needs to be pursuing and disseminating a deeper literacy in relation both to vulnerability within the specific context of church communities, and to the harmful ways in which power and vulnerability factors can intersect within such communities.

We have seen the way in which intimacy was handled in deeply unsafe ways during the Soul Survivor story. The deepest need in this area is, perhaps, for the nurturing of wisdom. The testimonies we have heard point to the need for churches to nurture quite practical wisdom about appropriate boundaries. It is, of course, typically a good thing when people with very different backgrounds, very different levels of experience, and very different levels and kinds of power, are thrown together as they pursue the kingdom of God in each other's company. It is often a good thing when that mixing breaks down some of the barriers that can separate people, and so allows them to learn from one another and grow deeper in faith together. It is often a good thing when that enables close and perhaps unlikely relationships to form. None of that, however, removes the need for wise safeguards.

It remains vital, when there are significant asymmetries of power, to take care over when and where people meet, at what times, and over how many people are present; it remains vital to take care over the appropriateness of the activities engaged in; it remains vital to ensure that those involved have real access to others who can be trusted to notice potential problems and to express their concerns. This is all the more important when it comes to young adults who fall outside the remit of typical safeguarding policies but are in a uniquely vulnerable position that comes, amongst other things, from being in a transitional stage of life. The Scolding Review includes four recommendations regarding 'Managing discipleship' but does not include discussion of the power/vulnerability nexus, which we believe must receive greater attention within the church, particularly where discipleship is concerned.[43]

The kind of charismatic Christianity represented by Soul Survivor has often been very good at affirming that discipleship involves every area of one's life. It involves not just one's intellect and one's behaviour, but one's emotions and memories, one's fears and hopes, and the deep patterns of one's imagination. There is often a palpable expectation that the whole of one's existence, in all its complexity, will be brought before God in worship, and will be involved in the fellowship that the Spirit is creating. This is an important emphasis, and a powerful one. The Soul Survivor story, however, demonstrates the need for care and wisdom in handling all that can come to the surface in such intense contexts. The more intimately people share about themselves in worship and fellowship, the more vulnerable they are, and the more safeguards need to be in place.

6.3 Discernment

The church needs to inculcate a culture where the identification of God's activity is most fundamentally a *shared* endeavour in which everyone's voice matters, and at its deepest a *slow* endeavour, in which the tracing of the fruit that emerges over time – the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – is the most important test.

In the previous section, we spoke of the need for our churches to help people to remember and to dwell with the fallibility and provisionality of their identifications of and feelings about God's presence (however intense). We spoke of the need to acknowledge the mixed nature of any event or situation in which people might believe God to be present, and to nurture a healthy scepticism about themselves and others. However confident one may be that God is at work in some situation, or through some person's ministry, that cannot and must not lift that situation or person above scrutiny and criticism. In fact, as we have already indicated, the more powerfully one believes God to be at work, the more scrutiny and wise discernment are needed.

Reflecting on what we have heard from our participants about the discernments of God's activity that shaped their stories, we have found ourselves asking what it would mean to inculcate a culture where the identification of God's activity is most fundamentally a shared endeavour in which everyone's voice matters, and at its deepest a slow endeavour, in which the tracing of the fruit that emerges over time – the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – is the most important test.

There may well be moments when we recognise that God is present and at work. Sometimes such moments will be very powerful, and will play an important and life-giving role in our ongoing story. Without denying the possibility and importance of such moments, however, we think that the Soul Survivor story also reveals the need to cultivate a certain kind of wisdom in relation to them.

At the level of theology, this might push us towards a vision of God's action in the world that sets any focus on God's working in the moment in the context of God's working over time. Whatever God is doing here and now is one part of an extended action that stretches out into the future – ultimately, one part of the whole unified action of God in creation, salvation and consummation. If that is the case, we will only know any one particular moment truly to the extent that we come to know what role it plays in the whole ongoing story.

At the level of spirituality and practice, it might be important, without undercutting the expectation that God will work, or the trust that God is now working, to cultivate also a certain provisionality, a certain quality of waiting, in relation to our discernments of where and how God is in fact at work. Our discernments are always fallible, however compelling they seem to us at the time, and they always concern people and situations that are complex mixes of the helpful and the harmful. In that light, we need communities and practices that enable us to keep on paying attention, to keep on looking for the fruit that emerges over time, and always to be ready to pay attention when we see signs that tell us when something is deeply amiss.[44]

6.4 Testimonies

Those in positions of responsibility within the church need greater awareness and understanding of the ways their responses to abuse can either compound the harm already suffered or bring healing. Whenever abuse comes to light, responsibility needs to be taken for the ways in which people and organisations have contributed to the enabling of that abuse, whether consciously or not.

It is a well-established phenomenon that how leaders and organisations respond to abuse can have a lasting impact on victims and survivors. Those in positions of responsibility have the power to perpetuate or even compound the harm suffered. On the contrary, good responses to abuse can be deeply healing.

We have already suggested that testimonies such as those we have been entrusted with during the research process and have shared in this report need to be handled with gratitude, respect and care. Yet there seems to be a tendency, for whatever reason – whether fear of reputational damage, legal action or saying the wrong thing – for those in positions of responsibility within the church to respond to such testimonies with denial, minimisation or silence.

Reflecting on all that we have heard, it seems the primary lesson that still needs to be learned by the church relates to the positive impact and healing that responding well to abuse can have on those who have suffered harm. The Scolding Review calls for the church to reflect on how healing can occur in light of people's pain, and our view is that what is still desperately needed is for the church to listen more deeply and intentionally to those who have been harmed.^[45] Since the allegations against Pilavachi became public in April 2023, victims-survivors have been asking the church to pay attention to their individual testimonies to acknowledge the harm caused, and to commit to responding well and learning from these. The cost of not doing so is too great, both for those who have already suffered harm, and for the Body of Christ as a whole.



Endnotes

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- [1] 'Joint Statement', 2 April 2023 <<https://www.soulsurvivorwatford.co.uk/latestupdates>> [accessed 21 July 2025].
- [2] Church of England, 'Concerns substantiated in Mike Pilavachi investigation', press release 6 September 2023 <<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/concerns-substantiated-mike-pilavachi-investigation>> [accessed 21 July 2025].
- [3] Hannah Barr, 'Soul Survivor: Farewell in the Big Top', *Church Times*, 13 September 2019 <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/13-september/features/features/soul-survivor-farewell-in-the-big-top>> [accessed 21 July 2025].
- [4] 'About', Soul Survivor Watford, n.d. <<https://www.soulsurvivorwatford.co.uk/about>> [accessed 21 July 2025].
- [5] 'Joint Statement', 2 April 2023.
- [6] Church of England, 'Concerns substantiated'.
- [7] Fiona Scolding KC and Ben Fullbrook, *Independent Review into Soul Survivor*, 26 September 2024 <<https://www.soulsurvivorwatford.co.uk/s/Soul-Survivor-Review-Updated-Final-Report-181224-PDF.pdf>> [accessed 21 July 2025] (p. 100).
- [8] Scolding Working Group, 'Response to the Scolding Review', January 2025 <<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/gs-misc-1402-response-to-scolding-review.pdf>> [accessed 21 July 2025] (§§29, 30).
- [9] Concetta Perôt, Jane Chevous, and Survivors Voices Research Group, 'Turning Pain into Power', 2018 <<https://survivorsvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Survivors-Charter-v2.pdf>> [accessed 31 October 2024].
- [10] Pat Jones, Marcus Pound and Catherine Sexton, *The Cross of the Moment: A Report from the Boundary-Breaking Project* (Durham: Durham University, 2024) <https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/catholic-studies-centre-for-ccs/The-Cross-of-the-Moment_digital.pdf> [accessed 20 August 2025].
- [11] *Soul Survivors*, produced by Megan Cornwell and Kelly Valencia (Premier Plus, 2024); Matt Redman and Beth Redman, *Let There Be Light* (YouTube, 2024) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVZkgdt32u8>> [accessed 20 August 2025]; Chris Bullivant, 'When the music fades,' 30 June 2025 <<https://www.chrisbullivant.com/articles/whenthemusicfades>> [accessed 20 August 2025].
- [12] 'Soul 61', *Soul Survivors*, produced by Megan Cornwell and Kelly Valencia (Premier Plus, 2024), episode 2.
- [13] Bullivant, 'Music'.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Church of England, 'Concerns substantiated'.
- [17] Bullivant, 'Music'.
- [18] Redman and Redman, *Light*.
- [19] As noted in the Scolding Review: 'Mr Pilavachi asked a vulnerable adult for information of a very sensitive nature in order to protect his (Mr Pilavachi's) interests and to seek to discredit another person. This information was also passed to Bishop Graham Cray, the chair of trustees of Soul Survivor Ministries' (Scolding and Fullbrook, *Independent Review*, p. 44). See also section 4.10, and the discussion of the allegations reported to Bishop Graham Cray in 2016 (ibid., pp. 60-62).
- [20] 'Red Flags', *Soul Survivors*, produced by Megan Cornwell and Kelly Valencia (Premier Plus, 2024), episode 4.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] 'The Open Secret', *Soul Survivors*, produced by Megan Cornwell and Kelly Valencia (Premier Plus, 2024), episode 3.
- [23] Bob Yule, Ruth Yule and Liz Biddulph's involvement in Soul Survivor is discussed in the Scolding Review (Scolding and Fullbrook, *Independent Review*).
- [24] The definition is developed in Lisa Oakley, Kathryn Kinmond and Justin Humphreys, 'Spiritual Abuse in Christian Faith Settings: Definition, Policy and Practice Guidance', *The Journal of Adult Protection*, 20.3/4 (2018), pp. 144-154 (p. 151) and Lisa Oakley, Kathryn Kinmond and Peter Blundell, 'Responding Well to Spiritual Abuse: Practice Implications for Counselling and Psychotherapy', *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 52.2 (2024), pp. 189-206 (p. 190).
- [25] For a definition of 'religious coercive control', see Natasha Mulvihill, Nadia Aghtaie, Andrea Matolcsi and Marianne Hester, 'UK Victim-Survivor Experiences of Intimate Partner Spiritual Abuse and Religious Coercive Control and Implications for Practice', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 23.5 (2023), pp. 773-790 (p. 776).
- [26] A worship leader active in the 1990s.
- [27] The Scolding review found that Pilavachi's behaviour caused 'deep psychological harm to many with whom he worked closely over 30 years' and that 'numerous people ... are still struggling to come to terms with the effects of Mr Pilavachi's behaviour towards them' (Scolding and Fullbrook, *Independent Review*, pp. 5, 7).
- [28] Redman and Redman, *Light*.
- [29] For additional perspectives from victims-survivors, see Natalie Collins, 'Scolding, Colluding or Both? My Critique of the Scolding Review into Soul Survivor and Mike Pilavachi', *God Loves Women*, 26 September 2024 <<https://mrsglw.wordpress.com/2024/09/26/scolding-colluding-or-both-my-critique-of-the-scolding-review-into-soul-survivor-and-mike-pilavachi/>> [accessed 26 September 2024].

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[31] Church of England, 'Concerns substantiated'.

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[34] Sinnamon, 'Grooming'.

[35] See, for example, Anna Bull and Tiffany Page, 'Students' Accounts of Grooming and Boundary-Blurring Behaviours by Academic Staff in UK Higher Education', *Gender and Education*, 33.8 (2021), pp. 1057-1072; Kathryn A. Flynn, 'In Their Own Voices: Women Who Were Sexually Abused by Members of the Clergy', *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 17.3/4 (2008), pp. 216-237; Kennedy, 'Poisoned'; Diana R. Garland and Christen Argueta, 'How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts', *Social Work & Christianity*, 37.1 (2010), pp. 1-27.

[36] Flynn, 'Voices'.

[37] See, for example, Stephen De Weger and Jodi Death, 'Clergy Sexual Misconduct in the Roman Catholic Church: The Misuse of Professional and Spiritual Power in the Sexual Abuse of Adults', *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, 30.3 (2017), pp. 227-257.

[38] Sinnamon, 'Grooming'; De Weger and Death, 'Clergy Sexual Misconduct'.

[39] Garland and Argueta, 'Misconduct'.

[40] Scolding and Fullbrook, *Independent Review*, pp. 41-43.

[41] Scolding and Fullbrook, *Independent Review*.

[42] Scolding and Fullbrook, *Independent Review*, §26.

[43] Scolding and Fullbrook, *Independent Review*, §35-38.

[44] We are grateful to Helen Collins for having discussed these points with us.

[45] Scolding and Fullbrook, *Independent Review*, §5.

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