On why we need to be trauma informed in churches

By Rev. Laura Gilmour

Language is a slippery thing. A simple question, apparently innocuous and inoffensive, can mean one thing *before* and another thing *after*. In the before, things were simpler and a question posed was as it seemed. Before, was before trauma shattered the illusion that life was as straightforward and simple. Now language, questions and statements require careful analysis – What do they really mean? What do they really want to know? Why do they want to know this? And most importantly, is it safe for me to answer this, or could it be used against me at a later date?

Alistair McFadyen, points out that language and its ambiguous usage is a key component of coercive control and emotional abuse.[[1]](#footnote-1) A deliberate ambiguity keeps the receiver of the abuse on their toes, walking on eggshells, constantly second guessing the potential consequences of every word uttered, deciphering, discerning the potential negative repercussions. Part of post traumatic remaking is learning to soften these defenses enough to operate at a functional level again. Avoiding a simple statement triggering reactions of fight, flight or flashback. I hesitate to speak of survivorship, because the experience is indeed one of remaking – whilst those defenses are softened, that vigilance over potential harms and consequences – in my case at least – have yet to completely disappear. Rather, these defense mechanisms are integrated into this post traumatic remade self – as an integrated part of that self. [[2]](#footnote-2)

It is on that background that I submitted myself to the denominational ministerial recognition process. I say submit because later on, this word, became so central to my experience of the process as a woman experienced of domestic violence and coercive control. Even here language is slippery – I am not a survivor, not a victim, I am not special in this regard, this is an experience that happens to 1 in 4 women according to 2023 Women’s Aid figures. A more common occurrence than many of us would care to admit. Even the word ‘experience’ is slippery, ‘experienced’ implies past tense, and whilst the violence and coercion is in the past the experience of it has become an integrated part of this remade self. It has become part of the lens through which I interpret the world in the present. I see through an eye that looks for the safety of myself and other women, who can read a room seconds upon entering it, who intuits those people that feel ‘safe’ and those who don’t. An eye which is now keenly astute to noticing patriarchal and coercive structures and injustices. [[3]](#footnote-3)

At first it was submission to the denominational ministerial recognition process… laying down my thoughts, my desires, the whispering of the calling I felt, even laying down the plans for the future I felt God calling me to. Laying all this down before a panel of elders to assess whether they thought that what I was discerning was true. The panel was primarily male – at an earlier point in my traumatic remaking I had vowed to myself that never again would I ask for the affirmation and approval of men. Never again would I allow a man to tell me that my own reality was not true. [[4]](#footnote-4) So often this was a part of what coercive control was – gas lighting and denial of personal experiences – rationalization that abusive behavior was normal. An insistence that my own reality was what was at fault, not his behavior. Still, I submitted to the process and remained silent – because in both cases that is what the situation required.

Then there was the application form to the Board, the one that probed almost every aspect of my life to assess my suitability for ministry. The question on the form read *‘Tell us about your experiences of submission’.* There is was again, the slippery worm of language – flip flopping between the question that they really wanted answering: ‘Tell us about your experiences of being led by others.’ – and the way I read it through the lens of trauma. They didn’t want to know that to me, submission was a means of survival, a way to ensure that I wasn’t hurt more. Submission was less a choice to demonstrate humility, but rather an enforced means of survival. Submission meant doing that which I needed to do to avoid future pain – to conform to the model that patriarchal structure imposes on me. That was the question I heard, but that wasn’t necessarily the one that was being asked. [[5]](#footnote-5)

I knew that, in this context, submission was about submission to Jesus and the authority of the church. Jesus, probably the only man to walk the earth that was truly safe – but in a church couched in patriarchal structure, heck in a world couched in patriarchal structures the safety that Jesus offers isn’t necessarily a safety that is paralleled in the church. It can’t be assumed that submitting to the authority of the church is submitting to the authority of Jesus. And so, I submitted to the process and remained silent – because in all cases that is what the situation required. [[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Alistair McFayden, “I Breathe Him in with Every Breath I Take’: Framing Domestic Victimization as Trauma and Coercive Control in Feminist Trauma Theologies” in O’Donnell, Karen, and Katie Cross, eds. *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture and Church in Critical Perspective*. London, England: SCM Press, 2020, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. O’Donnell Karen. *Survival: Radical Spiritual Practices for Trauma Survivors*. London: SCM Press, 2024, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2014, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leah Robinson talks about this further in “Women in the Pulpit: A history of Oppression and Perseverance” in *Feminist Trauma Theologies* and considers the potential for spiritual crisis when a woman feels ‘called to do something by the God one worships. And at the same time, women are told that they cannot do such a thing because of their physiology.” Pg. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Riet Bons-Storm explores how women conform to the language of an institution, an institution into which ‘one enters on the conditions of those who have power in it.’ The discrepancy in language stems from the different frameworks, culture and usage of language within that institution. Often this is ‘part of the culture’ and unconscious, but noticeable to the outsider entering the institution. See Bons-Storm, Riet, *The Incredible Woman,* Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Caroline Yih’s theological reflection on silencing and gender disenfranchisement, for a deeper exploration of the issue of women’s self-silencing in church settings. Yih, Caroline, ‘Theological Reflection on silencing and gender disenfranchisement’, *Practical Theology,* Vol 16, No 1, Mar 2023, 31-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)