

Independent Review into Soul Survivor: actions for the General Synod.

On 26 September 2024 the report by Fiona Scolding KC and Ben Fullbrook was published.¹

“our remit was to examine the actions and behaviours of Mr Pilavachi, and how these were enabled, contributed to, dependent upon, or produced by, the wider culture of both Soul Survivor and the Charismatic movement and the Church of England in general.” Page 9.

The Report follows on from the moving documentary by Matt and Beth Redman, “Let There Be Light”, about which I have already written.²

The 103-page Report found that:

“Mr Pilavachi’s behaviours were emotionally abusive and involved bullying and control. They were an abuse of his power.” Page 17.

“Mr Pilavachi did not recognise when interviewed that he behaved in this way. If he had sought to control something or someone, he saw it as part and parcel of his leadership role.” Page 31.

“Mr Pilavachi lacked the ability to receive challenge without it becoming personal and difficult for all concerned.” Page 31.

“when an organisation is seen as successful, people do not look carefully enough at what the price may be for such success.” Page 49.

The Report makes 44 recommendations.

This article focuses on changes that I think the General Synod should make.

1.) Don’t shorten ordination training for ‘successful’ people

The Report doesn’t reference the earlier case of Chris Brain and the Nine O’Clock Service. Church of England bishops did not learn from that mistake.

In 1986 Chris Brain ran a youth service that was an off-shoot of a Church of England church. The service grew hugely and a couple of years later the Bishop of Sheffield approved Mr Brain for ordination. Given that Mr Brain was already leading a successful church, the bishop decided that Mr Brain did not need to undertake the full period of ordination training. A few years later the Service collapsed in scandal due to the abusive behaviour of Mr Brain.

¹ <https://www.soulsurvivorwatford.co.uk/s/Soul-Survivor-Review-Final-Report-260924.pdf>

² <https://adrianvincent.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/202404-Let-There-Be-Light-documentary.pdf>

In 1996 Roland Howard's book was published, "*The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service: A Cult Within the Church?*". So, in 1996, Church of England bishops were aware of the danger of thinking that a successful lay church leader does not need to do the full training.

The origin of Soul Survivor was similar, where it was led by a lay person, who was then ordained by the diocesan bishop with a shortened training:

"Mr Pilavachi had been employed as a youth worker at St Andrew's. Mr Pilavachi's original vision for Soul Survivor Church was to provide a space for young people from Watford to come and worship. In 1993, Mr Pilavachi and 11 others began to meet in someone's house. These meetings then expanded to meetings in local community centres or schools until Soul Survivor Church found a space in 1996 at a warehouse in an industrial estate on the outskirts of Watford, where it remains. Mr Pilavachi was not ordained when the Church began and was a lay person until he was ordained in 2012. Soul Survivor Church has the largest number of attendees within the St Albans Diocese, and has attendance of around 1,000 persons each Sunday. Soul Survivor Church was not a part of the Church of England in any official way until 2014, when it became a church subject to a "Bishops' Mission Order". Before that, it was an independent charitable organisation." Page 11.

"Mr Pilavachi freely admitted in interview with us that he had no specific youth work training when he became a youth leader after a previous career in accounting. Indeed, had no formal youth work training at any time." Page 74.

"Mr Pilavachi became ordained in 2012. Both Mr Pilavachi and the diocese confirmed that Mr Pilavachi did not undertake all the relevant training (and oversight) that usually accompanies the ordination process. [...] Neither the diocese nor Mr Pilavachi can remember how the suggestion that Mr Pilavachi be ordained came about." Page 75.

"Mr Pilavachi did not undergo a Bishop's Advisory Panel which would have included four interviews and a group exercise over three days." Page 76.

"Following on from acceptance as a potential ordinand, an individual usually undertakes a course either on a full time basis over one to two years, or on a part time basis over two to three years. Mr Pilavachi did not do this [...] the course was designed and agreed to be a bespoke one for Mr Pilavachi which included a specifically curated set of modules (the Diocese tells us that this has happened with other ordinands). [...] It is assumed that it was felt that Mr Pilavachi already had sufficient experience to dispense with the practical modules given his role in Soul Survivor Church. We consider that this was a mistake. We take the view that had attendance at these "practical" courses been insisted upon, it may have identified some of the issues with Mr Pilavachi and his behaviour that have subsequently come to light. It may also have given Mr Pilavachi the tools to better manage his relationships with others. From the diocesan perspective, they saw someone who had been running a successful church for a period of time and so therefore had a "track record". To a degree that is true, but this was, in fact, a misassumption in this case that the track record could necessarily be relied upon. [...] those who will be carrying out the role of day to day ordained ministry should, in our view, be required to complete the entire course." Page 78.

The Report (page 77) explains that church law (Canons C5 - C7) gives bishops the legal authority not to follow the standard selection and training processes. Canon C7 merely states:

“C 7 Of examination for holy orders

No bishop shall admit any person into holy orders, except such person on careful and diligent examination, wherein the bishop shall have called to his assistance the archdeacons and other ministers appointed for this purpose, be found to possess a sufficient knowledge of Holy Scripture and of the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Church of England as set forth in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal: and to fulfil the requirements as to learning and other qualities which, subject to any directions given by the General Synod, the bishop deems necessary for the office of deacon.”

Regarding the phrase “subject to any directions given by the General Synod”. **My recommendation is that General Synod should produce regulations that says that:**

- i. Every candidate for ordination must have been recommended for training by a Bishops’ Advisory Panel.**
- ii. Any proposed shortening of ordination training by the bishop must be approved by the Ministry Division.**

2. Widen Ministerial Development Review

As well as Mr Pilavachi not being given the full selection and training for ordination. After he was ordained, he had no annual reviews:

“most Anglican clergy were required to undertake Ministerial Developmental Review [...] It is likely that MDR would have helped in Mr Pilavachi’s case, particularly if rigorously applied. However, it is our understanding that, that Mr Pilavachi was exempt from MDR because the regulations do not apply to people who “hold office in pursuance of a contract of employment” and Mr Pilavachi held an employed post in Soul Survivor. [Footnote] Reg (2) 3 of the Ecclesiastical Officers (Terms of Service) Regulations 2009.” Page 56.

Recommendation 23:

“23. It is clear that Ministerial Developmental Reviews (“MDR”) are not standardised in practice. This should change and, in particular, MDRs should be made to include views sought from at least two people who have knowledge of the reviewee but have not been chosen by him/her. Where MDR is not applicable to a church then it should nevertheless insist on 360 degree appraisals of those in church leadership applying similar principles. The Church of England should consider how it could create such standardisation.” Page 91.

I agree. The General Synod should produce regulations for this.

3. Strengthen oversight in Bishop's Mission Orders

When Soul Survivor started it was operating in a 'Wild West' in terms of regulation and oversight:

"Everyone we spoke with viewed Soul Survivor Church as Anglican in origin and inspiration. It came from the wellspring of St. Andrew's Chorleywood. Mr Pilavachi said it was a "plant" from Chorleywood, but that is not a view shared by all. Until 2014, however, it had no "official" status within the Church of England when a Bishop's Mission order was signed." Page 68.

"Given the above, for nearly twenty years, the Church which probably had the largest congregation in the Diocese of St Alban's had no accountability to that diocese in any formal legal sense. It was led by individuals who did not have any form of licence from the diocese until 2012, [...] the structures were not in place for the Diocese to exercise oversight. This is probably because originally Soul Survivor was not seen as a Diocesan initiative, [...] As a consequence of the lack of accountability, the Church did not have access to any formal oversight, for example by an Archdeacon." Page 70.

When the oversight of a Bishops' Mission Order was eventually put in place, it was operated in a 'hands off' way. The bishop's officer, the 'Visitor', overseeing the Soul Survivor did not attend Trustee meetings:

"Soul Survivor Church's relationship with the Church of England was formalised in 2014, when it became a BMO. A BMO is a form of oversight by the Church of England directly by the Diocesan Bishop. A church with a BMO can therefore operate outside of the constraints of the typical parish structures. It became possible to have this particular form of governance and oversight within the Church of England only from 2011 onwards (with the passing of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011) [...] A consequence of the BMO was that the Bishop appointed a "visitor" to Soul Survivor Church to provide guidance, support and oversight." Page 14.

"The Diocese's position is that the visitor should neither be a trustee nor attend trustee meetings. [...] With respect to the views of the Diocese [...] we can see no reason why, as part of the BMO, there could not be agreement that the visitor has the right to attend meetings in an ex officio capacity [...] attendance at trustee meetings would give the visitor an insight into the workings of the Trust and the church without impeaching their "independence"." Page 72.

Recommendations 18 and 19:

"18. The Church of England should consider whether Bishops Mission Orders should require that visitors be given a more formal role in the relevant church, for example that they are be allowed to attend and contribute to trustee meetings or being strengthened in other ways – such as enabling a visitor to undertake an MDR even if the individual is not compelled to have one by their having a contract of employment (as discussed above). It may be that the visitor is also an appropriate point of contact for staff to bring concerns about church leadership.

19. The Church of England should reflect upon this report when considering the new BMO Code of Practice and Measure and consider how the visitorial role could aid accountability and promote cohesion with the Diocese.” Page 90.

Another weakness was that the trustee body included no one external to the organisation:

Recommendation 11:

“11. The Church’s board of trustees should include at least one person from outside the Church. Consideration should also be given to including a trustee from a different church tradition (or from outside the church entirely). Whilst it is appreciated that the Church will wish to retain control over theological matters, we do not consider that there is anything particularly theological about safeguarding or management and an outside perspective may bring balance and accountability in such matters.” Page 89.

The trustees were also ineffective:

“The role of the trustees and accountability structures within the organisation were not well articulated to the broader church. Many people were not clear who the trustees were, or the role that they played, and were not aware that they could see them with complaints or concerns.” Page 59.

Recommendation 15:

“15. Notices naming the trustees and including their photographs should be displayed in Church buildings and on the website to improve visibility and accountability. Trustees should also report verbally to the church congregation (in a church service or special meeting) on a regular basis (at least twice a year).” Page 90.

The Code of Practice for Bishop’s Mission Orders is in Part 7 of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011. That Measure is in the process of being reviewed by the General Synod. This is therefore a good time for the Synod to make the proposed changes:

- i.) Bishop’s Visitors should attend Trustee meetings;**
- ii.) The Trustee body should include external representation;**
- iii.) Trustees should provide their contact details to church members with a procedure for how any concerns can be raised directly with them.**

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