



1. Executive Summary



1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mike Pilavachi – who we shall call “Mr Pilavachi” during this report – was one of the most successful Christian pastors of his generation both in the UK but also internationally. The Soul Survivor movement which he founded, and which included a series of festivals, a church and a ministry training scheme, became known the world over and was responsible for thousands of young people devoting themselves to Christianity, with a significant number also devoting their lives to Christian ministry. Mr Pilavachi was a charismatic individual, and we have heard many positive accounts of his ministry. He was ebullient, generous-hearted, kind to many, and an inspirational figure. But alongside that, hiding in plain sight, was someone who manipulated and controlled others, bullied and sought to abuse his power to those whom he worked alongside in the church and those who came to learn alongside him. That abuse of power has caused deep psychological harm to many with whom he worked closely over 30 years. This report seeks to explain why he was allowed to accrue such power, what he did with it and why and how this could have happened. Mr Pilavachi’s behaviours around young men and young women who came to learn and work alongside him were inappropriate and should never have been allowed to happen.

In 2023, allegations about Mr Pilavachi’s conduct came to be reported in the press. Mr Pilavachi resigned from his roles at Soul Survivor. The allegations against Mr Pilavachi were reviewed by the Diocese of St Albans and the Church of England’s National Safeguarding Team (“NST”), which concluded that the concerns about Mr Pilavachi had been “substantiated”. The NST stated: “It was concluded that [Mr Pilavachi] 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”.

This review has been commissioned by trustees of various Soul Survivor trusts to look at how Mr Pilavachi’s conduct was 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. We have done this by collecting evidence from a wide range of sources.

We have found credible and consistent evidence of the following behaviours on Mr Pilavachi’s part:

- (1) Mr Pilavachi developed inappropriately close relationships with young men, which would then be followed by long periods of “ghosting” whereby Mr Pilavachi would seem to break off all contact with an individual for no apparent reason. This behaviour, which also affected women with roles of responsibility within the organisations overseen by Mr Pilavachi, was extremely hurtful for the individuals concerned; it was controlling, manipulative and has led to long term psychological damage for some. The sudden ostracization that people experienced was confusing to them, and often led them to alter their behaviour

towards Mr Pilavachi (in particular to not criticise him or act contrary to what they perceived his expectations to be) in order to avoid it occurring again.

- (2) Mr Pilavachi would promise some young people roles within the Soul Survivor organisations which did not always then materialise, and he raised the expectations of these young people unnecessarily – then dropping them after a period of 2 or 3 years, almost as if their usefulness had expired.
- (3) Mr Pilavachi exhibited inappropriate levels of controlling behaviour in the way in which he ran Soul Survivor Church and the summer festivals.
- (4) Mr Pilavachi engaged in lengthy, one-on-one wrestling sessions in private with young men in the 1990s, 2000s and possibly even the 2010s. This was a serious abuse of power, as in our view its aim was to literally “dominate” under the guise of “horseplay”. For many young people this was not something that they wanted, welcomed or felt comfortable with.
- (5) Mr Pilavachi gave one-on-one massages to young men in private in the 2000s. The men involved would be only partially clothed (sometimes only in their underwear) and would lie on Mr Pilavachi’s bed. These massages were not sought out by the young people, they were not enjoyed, and many young people felt deeply ashamed after them. They were an abuse of power: they involved imposing physical intimacy in circumstances where the young men felt unable to refuse, and whilst views differ, two young men subject to the massages perceived them to be fulfilling a sexual outlet for Mr Pilavachi. Mr Pilavachi says that his behaviour was not sexual in intent – but the very circumstances described above would be widely seen in society as a precursor to sexual intimacy, if not sexually intimate in and of itself. Whatever the reasons for this behaviour, it was deeply inappropriate for a man who was in a position of responsibility to these young people and who held roles of spiritual power.
- (6) Mr Pilavachi, and others, displayed poor safeguarding practice in several cases involving third parties.

We consider that people in positions of leadership in the church and trustees (although not all) knew of Mr Pilavachi’s relationships with young men and his “ghosting”. It has not been possible for us to identify exactly who knew what and when, but we consider that those most involved in the church and its leadership would have known about Mr. Pilavachi’s behaviours towards others. It is likely that some (albeit not the majority of the trustees or those in positions of leadership) also knew of the wrestling, at least to some extent, and highly likely that a very small number of people knew about the massages – at least well before they came to public attention in 2023. Moreover, in our view, people *should* have known about these things. This is an unacceptable state of affairs and represents failures on many levels.

It has also caused a great deal of harm, to the individuals involved, the Soul Survivor community and the wider church. We have heard accounts from numerous people who are still struggling to come to terms with the effects of Mike’s behaviour towards

them. Many have had to seek professional counselling. Some have had their lives uprooted. Mike undoubtedly bears primary responsibility for his behaviour and its effects. The impact of bullying and abuses of power on some of those to whom we spoke has been insidious and long lasting – it has impacted all aspects of their lives and some bear deep scars.

However, we have sought to analyse why these things happened. Our analysis suggests that various other matters are likely to have contributed to Mike's behaviour and the failure to stop it. These include (but are not limited to) the notion of spiritual celebrity and the anointed leader, the blurring of boundaries within the Soul Survivor organisations, inadequate performance management and oversight from the trustees and the Church of England, and a failure to take action when matters became known. Overarching all this is the view we have taken that, when an organisation is seen as successful, people do not look carefully enough about what the price may be for such success.

We have made a number of recommendations about how we think things could improve in Soul Survivor, the Church of England and the Christian church more generally. We sincerely hope that they will be carefully considered and implemented. We are grateful to all those who have participated in what, for many, has been a painful process. This includes Mr Pilavachi. We hope that this report will help them to heal and help those subject to Mr Pilavachi's abuse to move forward and for organisations to be able to identify and deal with such abuses.