

## Theology in Scotland on arts and culture

### On why we need to be trauma-informed in churches:

#### An auto-ethnographical reflection on submission language

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The second part of this article describes the making of an artwork as part of a process of theological reflection. A video of the finished work can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYXBB4-aFpY>

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 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.<sup>1</sup> A deliberate

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<sup>1</sup> Alistair McFadyen, “‘I Breathe Him in With Every Breath I Take’: Framing Domestic Victimization as Trauma and Coercive Control in Feminist Trauma

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 defences enough to operate at a functional level again, so that a simple statement doesn't suddenly trigger reactions of fight, flight or flashback. I hesitate to speak of survivorship, because the experience is rather one of remaking. Whilst those defences are softened, that vigilance over potential harms and consequences – in my case at least – has yet to completely disappear. These defence mechanisms are integrated into one's post-traumatic remade self; an integrated part of that self.<sup>2</sup>

It is against this background that I submitted myself to the denominational ministerial recognition process. I say 'submitted' because later on, this word became so central to my experience of the process as a woman who had experienced 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. It is an experience that, according to a 2024 Office of National Statistics (England and Wales) Survey, happens to one in five people.<sup>3</sup> It is a much 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 my 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. It is an eye which is now keenly astute to noticing patriarchal and coercive structures and injustices.<sup>4</sup>

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Theologies", in *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture and Church in Critical Perspective*, ed. Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross (SCM Press, 2020), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Karen O'Donnell, *Survival: Radical Spiritual Practices for Trauma Survivors* (SCM Press, 2024), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Office of National Statistics, *Domestic Abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2024*, released 27 Nov 2024, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2024#main-points>.

<sup>4</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2014), 21.

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.<sup>5</sup> So often this was a part of what coercive control was: gas-lighting; denial of personal experiences; rationalization that abusive behaviour was normal; an insistence that my own reality was what was at fault, not his behaviour. Still, I submitted to the process and remained silent – because that is what the situation required.

Then there was the application form to the Board that was to probe 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 it 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 less a demonstration of 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 imposed on me. That was the question I heard, but that wasn’t necessarily the one that was being asked.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Leah Robinson talks about this further in “Women in the Pulpit: A History of Oppression and Perseverance” in *Feminist Trauma Theologies* (cited above) and considers the potential for spiritual crisis when a woman feels ‘[...] called to do something by the God one worships. At the same time, women are told that they cannot do such a thing because of their physiology’ (p. 167).

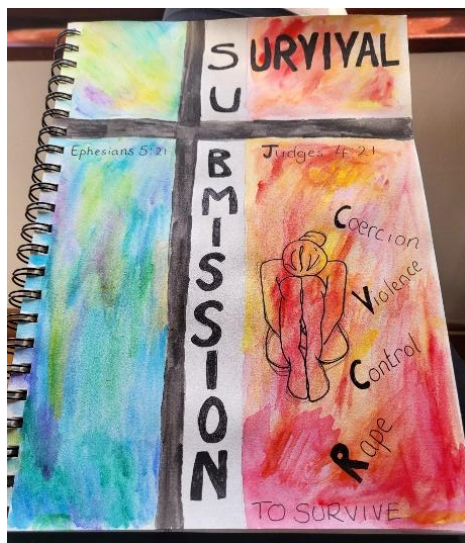
<sup>6</sup> Riet Bons-Storm explores how women conform to the language of an institution which ‘one enters on the conditions of those who have power in it.’ The discrepancy in language stems from the different frameworks, culture and usage of language within that institution. Often this is ‘part of the culture’ and unconscious, but noticeable to the outsider entering the institution. See Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women’s Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Abingdon Press, 1996), 63.

I knew that, in this context, the question being asked 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 (and indeed a whole 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 always 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.<sup>7</sup>



### Using art as a tool for theological reflection

The piece began as a picture I had painted as I reflected on the subject of the problematic use of submission language in churches for people who had experienced domestic abuse. The topic itself emerged as a wondering



stemming from my personal discomfort about the issue. In the painted version the words pertaining to abuse were prominent and clear, almost like shouts or screams, though in the final piece I made these smaller, partly because they were a little too confronting in relation to my own personal experiences. I did and remain hesitant to 'shout' about my experiences, and the final piece also reflects this reticence. So in the final piece the words as smaller

and along the outline of the cross, to draw the viewer into observing the image more closely.

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<sup>7</sup> 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. Caroline Yih, "Theological Reflection on Silencing and Gender Disenfranchisement", *Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2023): 31–42.



This was not intended to be a ‘pretty’ piece. It was meant to convey, in a stark way, the trauma that to the survivor sometimes feels like it must be hidden, because it doesn’t neatly fit into the lexicon and language of the church.

I had initially thought that I might create the image using the medium of weaving, but later changed to the technique of quilting, which is a more conventional medium for church wall hangings. I felt that this fitted the theme of ‘tradition’ (in this case the medium and method of creating) versus the ‘message’ which was supposed to be jarring and certainly not what one would expect of traditional church wall hangings, which usually convey encouraging or comforting messages and verses from Scripture.



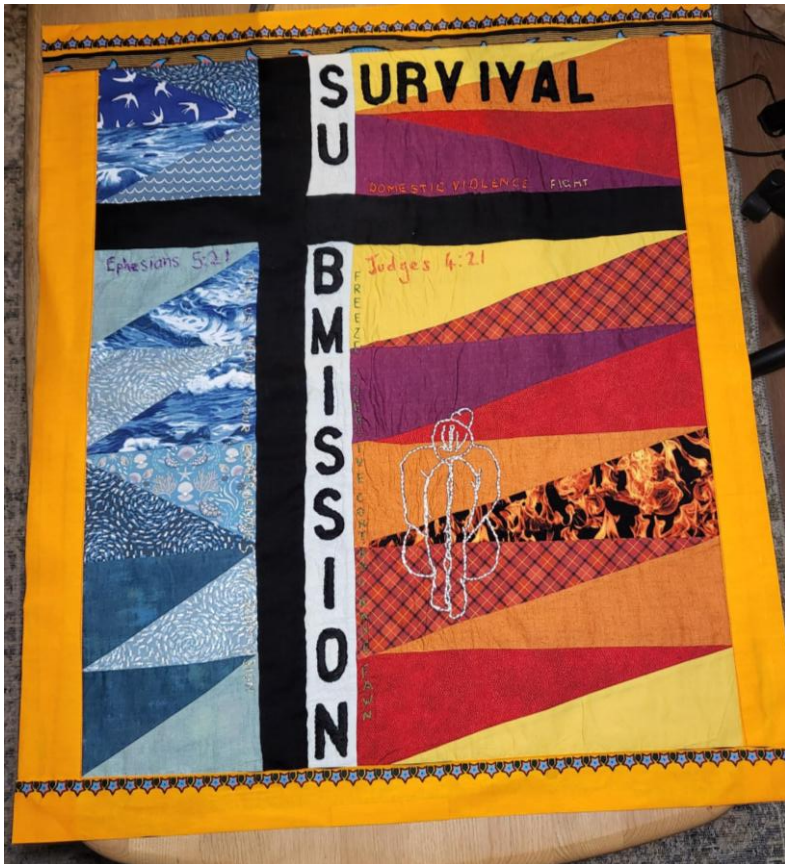
The black cross in the centre is the main structure of the piece, with the blue panels on the left side of the cross representing the ‘presenting self’: the ways in which people present to others. The red/orange panel to the right side of the cross represents the ‘underlying self’, to be understood as those thoughts, emotions and responses

going on ‘underneath’ the presenting self.

The later addition of the words ‘submission’ and ‘survival’ anchor the piece as a theological reflection. Both words share the common letter ‘s’ to highlight their intersectional nature in the life of a person who has experienced trauma through domestic violence; or at least that is the way I had previously experienced the intersection of the two words.

Throughout the piece I have used fabric which was previously resident in my ‘stash’ left over from past projects, and this was intentionally so to represent the post-traumatic remaking of the self. Trauma survivors often turn past experiences into (hopefully) useful coping mechanisms in their remade self. In a similar way, these old offcuts of fabric are turned into something new, with a message to deliver and which hopefully has its own

kind of strange, confronting beauty.



### The details

As with traditional wall hangings, there are two references to Scripture: Ephesians 5:21,<sup>8</sup> which is a commonly used reference in relation to

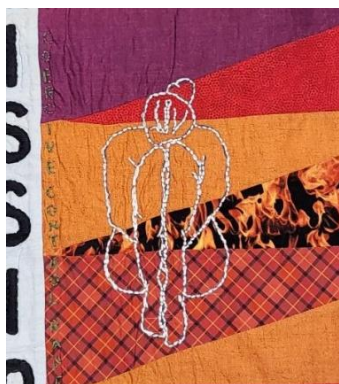
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<sup>8</sup> 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.' (NIV)





submission, and Judges 4:21,<sup>9</sup> deliberately provocative to represent a very ugly response. The Judges reference was chosen to represent feelings of anger, rage and female violence, in juxtaposition to women's self-silencing of these emotions through submission. Such submission and self-silencing can be a way in which women present a more socially acceptable, though subdued version of themselves. The language of these emotions is often silenced in pursuit of that which is a more culturally acceptable expression of female emotion.



The positioning of the female figure represents the posture of the victim, cowered, curled and protective, but also sorrowful.

The figure is double stitched, firstly in a dark thread and then overlain in a shimmering white thread. Again, this speaks to the post-traumatic remaking of the self. The darker thread represents the shadow side of the self, the part that remains hidden from view most of the time, but is present nonetheless, just as with the experiences of trauma, integrated into the remade self, but not entirely gone away. The lighter thread represents the remade self, a re-emerging of the self after integration of the experiences. I hesitate to say it is 'healed' because this has connotations of the past forgotten, but it is a lighter version of the self regardless, one which is less constrained by traumatic experiences. The lighter thread overlays the

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<sup>9</sup> 'But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent-peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.' (NIV)

darker thread, in a representation of the way that light has emerged into the life of the sufferer again. It demonstrates a past that was characterized by darkness, coercion and violence, which has now remade, or re-emerged into life which can now experience, and see, the lightness of life and being again.

Finally, there is the triggering statement itself: *'Tell us about your experiences of submission.'* On the piece it is barely perceptible, and this was intentional. For those asking the question on the ministerial recognition form, it would likely have been barely perceptible too.



Certainly, there would have been little to no understanding of how it might have been read by someone who had experienced abuse. It was probably a barely perceptible moment of their day when they read my answer to it. And so barely perceptible it is on the final cloth piece, with the ramifications, the 'underneath' of that question being demonstrated on the opposite side of the piece.



[Detail from the image above]

My use of textile art as part of the reflective process has become my preferred medium for theological reflection. The time that it takes to produce the piece induces an intentional slowing down of the reflection process. When each stitch has to be made by hand (or each weave on the loom) the slow stitching allows time for reflection on the issue at a deep level.

The use of the hands, very much an embodied process, allows for expression of ideas which are unconscious, or at least not cognitive. I often find that through the choice of colours, the selection of threads, even the



mistakes that are made, there is a kind of non-verbal communication led by the body, through the hands. This is a language and way of knowing that is beyond that which relies solely on cognitive knowing and allows for expression of those things that are not yet cognitively apparent, even to the self as it reflects on the issue. This move from unconscious knowing to reflective cognitive knowing is aided by this embodied method of theological reflection. In this way I often find that the reflection is at a much deeper level than if I had relied on cognitive reflection processes alone. It represents what, to me, is a more feminine expression and allows the ways that I may have silenced myself to come to the fore.