

Hurt at Church Testimony

Church Hurt Up Close

What follows is one person's perspective on a deeply painful situation at church. We are sharing stories such as these because we think it is important to hear the voices of those who have been through these experiences. We are sharing stories like these because we hope, and pray, they will fuel corporate, Christ-centred, lament. And we are sharing stories like these as an aid to personal reflection – something to help us all grow in our understanding of how we tend to respond when situations like this arise. As you read, please resist the temptation to try to identify who the author and church are – these stories have been specifically chosen because they resonate with a range of contexts. As you read, please do ask yourself questions like: What are my initial thoughts? What emotions is this raising? Who am I most likely to believe? What am I most likely to be blind to? What questions would I want to ask? How could I helpfully pray for and love people in situations like this?

We felt a certain superiority about the amazing church we attended. It was the only faithful Gospel believing church there was. It was the only place that preached the truth. At least that's what we were told – we were fed that, and we believed that. That lie means you can't leave because there is nowhere else as good. It means you put aside any issues, any pain you feel or cause others, for the sake of the true gospel. It means you bury your head, or you convince yourself it's not that bad and you stay. The alternative is facing up to the shame of being wrong and being brave enough to say so.

A culture of stiff upper lip meant any issues we had we kept deep down. Men don't cry, leaders don't run. Talking about problems or hurt was seen as gossiping and widely rebuked and discouraged. That means nothing could be shared. The church had no accountability, the pastor had the final say. There was nowhere to go for help when help was needed.

Winning the ear of the boss meant honour and reward. Going against the boss meant sulking commenced and weeks of being ignored had to be endured. Paranoia kicked in and you started wondering what you'd done to be treated this way. You didn't sleep. You'd look for ways to earn back his love and attention. You'd do all you can to make it better.

As part of working for this church, male staff members were told to be clean shaven. One day my husband shaved his beard on his day off. He was worried we might see or bump into his boss that day and wanted to shave, just in case. That was a defining moment for me. That was when I thought, are we trapped? And if we are, how do we get out?

The church leader was controlling and manipulative and it took us a very long time to see it for ourselves. But we got out after my husband went against his advice and chose to study at a Bible college not of the senior pastor's choosing. We were shunned after that, pushed out and encouraged not to return. I found out after that my parents prayed every day that we would leave that church. It took five years before that prayer was answered.

I couldn't read the Bible after that. I felt unable to understand it or even rejoice in it. It didn't taste sweeter than honey anymore. It tasted of hurt and regret, of shame and anger. It tasted of fear. I was scared all I'd been taught before were lies or half-truths. I couldn't read it for myself. It was a reminder of suffering and pain. So how do you walk with the Lord when his very words bring you fear and trembling?

I went back to basics. Listening to Christian music, praying the words would penetrate my heart. I talked a lot about what I was feeling, and Biblical Counselling helped a lot with that. Our counsellor gently pointed to the gospel of grace. God put a leader in our path at that time of recovery. This came at a particular time when we were desperate to see godly leadership. Leadership that grows people and loves them. Leadership that gently pastors people. Leadership full of humility and grace. What struck me the most at that time was this godly leader sat at the foot of the cross himself. He simply asked us to sit there with him, shoulder to shoulder. He pointed not to himself but to Jesus. He was really good at addressing us both. He asked me questions directly. I never had to offer my thoughts because he always wanted to know what I was thinking. He made me feel like my husband and I were a team, and I mattered in his ministry.

My heavenly father also taught me about godly leadership through my husband. I'm encouraged always by him to be charitable in my thinking of others. He models this in front of me and in our marriage. I've seen him do it many times, another man in leadership who gently serves me and his church family. He is quick to ask how has he wronged someone or sinned against them. All this is the result of God's kindness in pain.

The heartache of what we went through brought us closer to Jesus and to each other. Closer than joy could bring us in some ways. We met at that church so you have to pull apart the hard things and then see the sparks of sunlight shining through the cracks. We saw firsthand how not to do church. What followed church hurt was church healing and the kindness and patience of others. Gentleness and time, the Lord's words of faithful promises kept.

Church hurt has not completely gone away. I've had to be careful about how I respond to it now. I must not let past pain dictate present struggles. My past is significant, but it does not define me or tell me who I am. Jesus is the best author of my life. The wonderful thing about him is he asks me to bring it all to the foot of the cross. I look back on the past sin and hurt and see the Lord in it and how far he has brought us. I carry a heavy load to the cross and put it on the shoulders of Jesus which means I can walk a little lighter now.

God has always been good and he will always be.

"You intend to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20)