

The Truth About IHOPKC

My name is Johnny Youssef and I am 29. I moved to Kansas City to be a part of the International House of Prayer in January 2009 when I attended a six-month internship called “One Thing.”

I have served at IHOPKC in some capacity for over six years. One of my roles was the district pastor for the young adults at the church.

I wanted to share my story and experiences for several reasons. The main reason I decided to write this is because I have been asked numerous times from friends and relatives on my experience, especially after moving away, and I wanted to shed light on it. I pray that my writing will bring clarity and encouragement to you.

Let's Start From the Beginning: Long Story Short(er) on How I Got There

I was born and raised in a loving Christian home in Cairo, Egypt. I grew up in an incredible church that taught me so much about God, but they didn't believe in the active work of the Holy Spirit.

I always felt that there was more than what I knew. In 2001, my family moved to Virginia right after my 15th birthday. It was a difficult and scary transition; after all, 15 is a very awkward age to start over with new friends in a new country; but it lead me to hunger for more of God.

Fast forward to college, I got involved with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and I had a wonderful college experience. During that time, I experienced more hunger and desire to know Jesus better.

I started having monthly overnight prayer meetings at my

apartment, where about 10-15 of us would meet to worship, pray and read the Bible. We prayed for each other, InterVarsity, our campus and our nation. We often started in the evening and kept going until 5 a.m. or so, and we broke our fast by going out and eating together. That's when I heard from my friend Tamice about IHOPKC.

She shared a sermon with us by Misty Edwards, a worship leader, and to be completely honest, I didn't get half of what Misty was talking about, but I felt connected to what she was saying, and it had to do with having more of God and not being satisfied with earthly things. I remember those days, they were so precious, especially because we had no idea what we were doing. We just wanted to know and love God.

After graduating college in 2008, I decided to quit my promising job in a local news station and move to Kansas City to attend One Thing, a six-month internship with intensive Bible study, attending weekend services, and spending a lot of time in the prayer room.

It didn't make sense to my parents. I was asked questions like "Why would you leave your family, a great job and a community of believers here to go somewhere far away?" and "Is the prayer room like a monastery that you will go to?" My responses were, quoting what Jesus said in Matthew 19:29, that if I leave my father and mother for His sake, He will reward me.

My second response was that taking six months away as a young man to go after God will never hurt, but will help define who I am before I go into the 9-5 life for 40-plus years. It was the most difficult decision I have ever made.

The original plan was to go back home to Virginia after the six months, but I had a very unique personal experience that made it crystal clear I was supposed to stay in Kansas City. At first, I ignored it and went back home, but in just a few

months of being home, I knew Kansas City was where I needed to be. I moved back to Kansas City and an incredible job opportunity was offered to me at Glad Heart Realty, a real estate company that is part of IHOPKC. A few months later, the Awakening took place.

Now, Let's Get to My Experience

Given the fact I was there for over six years, I have so many stories and experiences. Also, being an extreme extrovert with so much on my plate added more to my experiences.

I want to focus on 2015 because so much has taken place in the past eight months in my life. Towards the end of 2014, I decided to move closer to downtown Kansas City and further away from IHOPKC for several reasons, including the fact that I am a landlord and a property manager and I was getting stressed living in the midst of my tenants.

Another reason was because I realized, after several years of wrestling, that my skills, passion and calling are primarily in the marketplace and not in ministry. I finally gave myself permission to think of real estate as my passion, and I wanted to be closer to downtown because I had a special interest in commercial properties.

Ironically, Diane Bickle, my boss at the real estate company and the wife of Mike Bickle, IHOPKC founder, had tried to tell me that years ago but I didn't listen and tried to push for ministry.

From January to June, I developed so much doubt and unbelief toward Christianity and even God's existence.

I know this is shocking for so many. The truth is I have prayed and believed in God in so many personal promises over the years, but a seed of disappointment and doubt in God was planted a while back. It grew to a point I could no longer ignore it.

Proverbs 13:12 says “Hope deferred makes the heart sick”
Let me tell you, my heart was very sick.

Fortunately, my sick heart has been healing slowly and God and I are talking again, and it’s good. Even though I do not regret distancing myself from ministry roles and from a Christian bubble, I isolated myself from fellowship, which brought everything to the surface. I am glad it came to the surface, but I wish it had been within a community and not alone.

There is so much to the story, but let’s just say that I entered a place where I was really angry with God half of the day and doubting His existence the other half. I started asking myself questions like, “Is God real?”

During those months, a couple of negative blogs and numerous posts on social media were published by individuals who were formerly a part of IHOPKC at some point, on top of that, several friends and acquaintances had walked away from the faith all together. This made everything even blurrier in my personal walk with God. I started adding to my questions: “Is IHOPKC the reason I am angry at God?” I started wondering if I threw away my 20s in the Midwest to the wrong cause and wrong ministry.

How Did I Get Out of That Funk? What Happened Next?

Well, in the midst of my despair, I was approached by Diane Bickle. She told me that she was worried about me and she took time off with Mike to meet with me. When we met, she shared how she has been praying for me (she spends so much time praying for each of her employees). She felt, through prayer, that I was not doing well (I am tempted to cry as I am writing this).

Both Mike and Diane were so kind and tender, and I felt so much peace and safety to open up to them. The broken version of me was screaming inside of me saying "Oh no! Mike and Diane know all of my junk and the darkest places in my soul," but part of me didn't care because I knew what I was experiencing was unconditional love.

Mike repeated over and over that no matter what happens or no matter what I do, they and IHOPKC are there to support and stand by me. I asked him: "Are you sure you don't want to distance yourself from me? After all, I am controversial. I was a pastor at IHOPKC, and now I am doubting God."

Mike answered, "Absolutely not! We are here for you and we will stand by you, and we love you." He hugged me and I felt the Father's heart in a measure I just cannot explain. Over the following several weeks, Diane took time off and met with me on regular basis. she gave me the space I needed to share the anger that I felt towards God, IHOPKC and individuals.

Even though regaining my faith and hope in Jesus has been a slow process, that day was a turning point in my life. If it wasn't for their love and care, I truly think I would have been in a much deeper and darker place.

Now That I Can Look Back With a Better Perspective on My Six-Plus Years at IHOPKC, This Has Been My Experience:

- **My six-month internship was one of the most defining seasons in my life.**

So much religiosity was broken off of me, I learned how to linger and slow down in the presence of God, and I developed a true love for the Bible during that time. I don't remember a lot of the teachings I have received, especially concerning the end times, but that's not the point. The main point is I learned to love God, myself

and others much more.

- **The integrity of the leaders at IHOPKC is way and beyond what is normal, even within the church.**

I have seen so much “behind the scenes” giving, sacrifice, and humility by the leaders of IHOPKC for those in need. Given that I was the manager of Glad Heart Realty for a season and a young adults pastor at the church for another season, I have seen so much abnormal unconditional love and sacrifice. One small example was seeing the faithfulness of Diane going to Hope City, an inner-city ministry, on a regular basis to help feed the poor for four-plus hours after eight-plus-hour work days.

- **I have always had an approachable leader who is willing to take time and care for me.**

Before I was part of Glad Heart or a young adults pastor and even before I knew the Bickles, I always knew a couple of leaders or at least full-time staff members who were there for me. I am making this point because one of the leading causes I have seen for people being offended with a church or ministry is feeling that the “main” leaders are hard to reach. I am sure IHOPKC, like many other ministries, can grow to do better, but it is impossible for a ministry with thousand of attendees to have the main five to 10 leaders be available to meet with everyone. After all, there are only 24 hours in a day.

- **I have seen the leaders of IHOPKC refuse to repay evil with evil. Instead, they have cared for the hearts of their accusers.**

One example of this is when a current staff member (who has since left staff on his own volition) posted a slanderous comment about IHOPKC on Facebook. I commented on the post telling him that it was unprofessional to speak negatively about his employer (it is common rule, and most secular employers would fire an employee who spoke negatively about a company while still being

employed). However, I was confronted the following day by an IHOPKC leader who asked me to remove the post, and was disappointed that I publicly confronted this individual. The leader told me that the individual had been going through a lot and that several leaders were personally helping him get emotionally and spiritually well. They weren't concerned about preserving their reputation. They only cared about this individual's heart and well-being.

- **I was always welcomed to share my criticism and the negative experiences I had, and they were always received with humility.**

I have shared these experiences with several leaders, including John Chisholm and Brandon Hammonds, and they were always taken seriously and with love.

- **I was encouraged and blessed when I decided to move away.**

I was also encouraged and blessed when I decided to step-off full-time staff. I have seen leaders repeatedly encouraging people to do what they feel called to do, and it has been spoken from the pulpit numerous times that it's between each individual and God to decide whether IHOPKC is where they are called to be. I have never seen someone pressured or manipulated into staying. This is something that is very rare to find even in godly churches and ministries.

Now, Am I Saying That IHOPKC Does Everything Right? Absolutely Not!

I have been involved in several churches and ministries including Youth With a Mission (YWAM), InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Young Life and five-plus churches in Cairo, Virginia and Kansas City. I am currently in L.A. and I have been visiting a different church every week including Hillsong L.A., Reality L.A., Mosaic and City Church (Judah Smith), and all of these ministries have one thing in common: They

have weaknesses and flaws that are easy to detect.

You should neither be surprised nor concerned if you see or hear of weaknesses or flaws in a ministry. The opposite is true: You should be very concerned if you or someone else believes that a specific ministry is perfect. If that's the case, run!

Otherwise, you may be a part of something that is an idol that replaces Jesus. Even though every ministry will not be perfect until Jesus' return, this should never give us an excuse to isolate ourselves (one of the most damaging things I have done) and it should also never give us an excuse to slam a ministry publicly (one of the most damaging things that I have experienced because of all the nasty blogs that came out).

Unfortunately, it's the kid who is screaming the loudest who gets the most attention.

There are many legitimate reasons someone can be hurt by a ministry; and I am sure that's the case for many, but that should never justify us, as the body of Christ, to publicly bash that ministry and to share that to secular magazines and newspapers, including one that publicly bashes Christians and enjoys seeing churches and Christians fall hard.

How is that justified when Scripture clearly tells us: "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to the law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? ... If then you have judgments dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint as judges those who are least esteemed in the church? I speak to your shame. ... But brother goes to the law against brother, and before unbelievers, at that" (1 Cor. 6:1, 4-5, 6).

Magazines have discovered that when they write a story about a celebrity's fall (divorce, cheating, stealing, failure, etc.) they get many more sales than when they write one about a

celebrity's accomplishments. Sadly, there is a rise in the church of people dishonoring each other and various ministries publicly. Unbelievers love publicizing those kinds of civil wars. Let me tell you, I am one of hundreds of thousands who are a living and breathing example of the fruit that came out of IHOPKC; I don't expect to get as many shares as the other blogs, but that's not the point.

The point is to encourage you, wherever you are and with whatever ministry or church you are part of, to honor the bride of Christ. If you see flaws and weaknesses in her, I pray that you approach her in love and kindness. If she refuses correction, quietly and honorably distance yourself and find another healthy spiritual family for yourself and choose to never expose her (Matt. 18:15-17).

Again, there are many legitimate reasons someone can be hurt by a ministry. The Bible has given us a process to take in those circumstances, but public dishonoring and revenge have never been a biblical option. Sadly, the foundation of those blogs, without quoting them, state that they are putting it out there because it's the action the writer(s) needed to take for not being honored. Jesus never taught that revenge and/or publicly bashing another believer or a ministry due to disappointment is justified, even if the other person is found guilty:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person. But whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well" (Matt. 5:38-39).

"Repay no one evil for evil. Commend what is honest in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to God's wrath, for it is written: 'Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is

thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:17-21).

The first thing some readers will accuse me of is: "You are encouraging abusers to get away with their abuse!" Before you make that assumption, I am not encouraging a believer to hide knowledge about illegal activities happening within a ministry.

Of course, if you learn of any illegal activity or abuse within a ministry (which was not the case with any of the blogs I read), go to the police directly—not to a media outlet. What we are discussing here is people-bashing and publicly criticizing ministries for negative experiences; whether those experiences are valid or not, the list of verses above are unconditional in how we are to handle these matters.

Jesus didn't say if the person is wrong then feel free to slap them in the face—He said the exact opposite: If they are wrong, turn the other cheek.

I have had several opinions about IHOPKC and a list of things that they can improve in. I shared my constructive criticism to leadership in love and in private. It's not up to me to make them change.

In fact, I can compile a list of 100-plus things that I disagree with in all the ministries and churches I was part of. Also, I can publicly share stories of several people who pointed fingers at IHOPKC, but I *refuse* to share those things publicly because honoring another believer or ministry is a choice we are commanded to walk out, even when it's difficult (James 4:11-12; Matt. 18:15; Gal. 5:15).

Finally, I would like to add a reminder: Jesus said that "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). I urge you that when you have someone speaking out loud about a

church or ministry, observe the fruit of that individual's life and that ministry they are speaking of.

After all, even though the concerns or criticisms may be true, the way they are handled shows so much about the person. I know several people who left IHOPKC and other ministries due to disagreements, but they did it in an honoring way and those individuals are now thriving in different communities. That's a sign of Christ's power that is able to make us humans forgive, love and honor.

A big reason I was tempted to get bitter toward IHOPKC (and I got bitter toward God) are issues beyond the ministry, but it's easy to get delusional and blame shift when we are angry.

I believe this is a story of many who walk away from the faith because of a ministry.

As Westerners, the first thing we are tempted to do is blame it on the ministry, but we can't blame a ministry for someone walking away from the faith. Even if the ministry is found at fault, what are the reasons?

The difference between Christianity and any other religion is that we believe that each of us has the living Holy Spirit in us who can guide, heal and renew our minds. It's one thing to be hurt by the church, but it's another to walk away from the faith altogether while blame shifting.

If you are one of those who left God because of a bad experience in a church or ministry, I am truly sorry for the experiences you have had that failed to reflect God's love. I pray, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to forgive and find another spiritual family. I heard a TED talk today and the speaker said a quote that I really like, "You have to decide to divorce your (past) story and marry the truth."

I believe God is calling those who are hurt to run back to the body of Christ, and I will be sharing more blogs on that

topic. I am thankful I am running back.

Johnny Youssef is an entrepreneur and speaker. As a real estate broker, Johnny has been involved in hundreds of real estate transactions. He is the owner of an investment company that specializes in rentals and rehabs. Johnny was born in Cairo, Egypt, and moved to Richmond, Virginia, at the age of 15; He graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a B.S. in Mass Communications with a concentration in Broadcast Journalism. He has a special passion for storytelling, public speaking, creating videos and interviewing people. His primary topics of interest are related to entrepreneurship, faith and culture. For more of his writings, visit .