

How Transparent Is Your Church?

Ruth Graham lied—and it's a lie we've all probably told more than once in our lives. It goes something like this:

You walk into church and your sister (or brother) in Christ asks how you are. You offer a token “Too blessed to be stressed” or “Highly favored of the Lord.”

When a friend asked Graham how she was, she wasn't completely honest. She was struggling, yet she told her friend she was fine. After the sermon, a convicted Graham marched up to the concerned sister and said, “I want you to know that I'm not fine.”

That transparent moment opened the door for the two women to pray for one another right then and there—and receive the grace of God to continue walking by faith despite life's challenges.

Graham is now working to bring a transparency movement to the body of Christ. The daughter of evangelist Billy Graham recently gathered a diverse focus group of pastors, academics and authors at The Cove in North Carolina to discuss The Transparent Ministries, a new ministry birthed from Ruth Graham & Friends.

“There are elephants in the church,” Graham says. “It could be an addiction. It could be pornography. It could be homosexuality. It could be divorce, loneliness, sickness, job loss, an incarceration, a death.

“Those elephants are not acceptable, so there's not much support from the church. The Lord has impressed on me to encourage churches to be safe places.”

Among those who convened with Graham were megachurch pastor John Bishop, *The Shack* author Paul Young, pastor and author Brian Zahnd, Women of Faith's Lisa Harper, Ted and Gayle Haggard, and many others. They prayed and collaborated on a strategy to build a theological framework that will influence local churches to be places where people—including pastors—can come as they are.

Graham needed such a place after she divorced her first husband for infidelity. Graham didn't know how to navigate life as a single parent; she just wanted someone to take care of her.

Despite her parents' warnings, she married a man she knew for only six months. Graham says within 24 hours she knew she'd made a mistake, and only five weeks later she fled the man.

"On the two-day drive back to mom and dad's, the fears multiplied with every mile," Graham recalls. "What was I going to say to them? What were they going to say to me?"

"As I rounded the bend in my parents' driveway, my father was standing there waiting for me. When I got out of the car, he wrapped his arms around me and said, 'Welcome home.' That's what God does for us when we are broken, and I want to pass that on to others."

Bishop, founding and senior pastor of Living Hope Church in Vancouver, Wash.—one of the fastest-growing U.S. churches—decided to get transparent with his congregation seven years ago. At that time, Living Hope had about 350 members; today that's up to about 7,000.

"I threw the five-year plan out the window and just decided to go where God leads us," says Bishop, the author of a new book, *Dangerous Church*. "Pastors are afraid of being rejected. Instead of hiding my problems—my son was a drug addict—I shared my heart with the congregation. Our church started to explode. It's all because of transparency."