

How Do You Leave a Church That Becomes Toxic?

Two weeks ago, I shared several practical guidelines on how to leave a church gracefully. I wrote this because I hear so many stories about people storming out of churches because their feelings got hurt. But one astute reader didn't appreciate my observations because I didn't mention the fact that some churches manipulate, control or abuse people.

The person who contacted me has been trying to raise awareness about alleged abuses in some churches in Australia that have either covered up instances of abuse or engaged in manipulative or authoritarian behavior. I certainly don't believe the majority of churches do this, but I'm aware that it's more common than it should be. Spiritual abuse happens, and it's never healthy to stay in a church where it's occurring.

So how do you leave a church that is spiritually abusive? What if the pastor or other leaders are guilty of sexual misconduct, unethical or illegal financial activities or controlling behavior? The rules for leaving an unhealthy church are different from the rules for leaving a healthy one.

1. Get outside advice. Before you plan your exit, make sure you are looking at the situation rationally. Talk to two or three people who are not members of this church or ministry. You might even want to set up a meeting with another pastor from your city. Explain your concerns. They will help you see if you are overreacting, or if you really have a case.

2. Gather the facts. Never base your concerns on rumors or unfounded allegations. Can this improper behavior be documented? Is there a paper trail? Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:19: "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on

the basis of two or three witnesses.” If there has been wrongdoing, there will be evidence. (If you find concrete evidence that something illegal is going on, such as extortion or child abuse, you should contact the police.)

3. Confront the issue. This will not be easy if the leader in question uses threats, manipulation or anger to run over people. I normally advise that meetings be in person, but don’t meet alone if the leader in question is a manipulator. Take people with you so that you can’t be bullied. It’s also best to put your concerns in writing and take the letter with you.

4. Make a clean break. If you know that the pastor or other church leaders are guilty of behavior that disqualifies ministers, and there are no signs of repentance, you don’t have to stick around. God gave you two feet, and you can use them to walk out. Some people feel guilty for leaving an abusive church, but you must renounce feelings of false guilt or displaced loyalty. God will help you start a new life. Don’t let anyone (especially extended family members) manipulate you into staying.

5. Get counseling and prayer from a mature Christian. Spiritual manipulation messes with your mind. People I know who were part of an abusive ministry were made to feel guilty for simply asking questions. They were told that God required them to be blindly loyal, and that if they ever left the ministry something terrible would happen to them. (One woman I know was publicly shamed by the pastor from the pulpit just because she left the church.) If you were under this type of toxic control, you need someone to pray for you—so you can break free from psychological abuse.

6. Find a healthy church. Never let the devil convince you to give up on church just because the one you attended went off track. You need God’s people in your life. Some frustrated saints who have been wounded by unqualified leaders have asked

me, “Are there any good churches left?” My answer is always yes! The Great Shepherd always leads us to green pastures where we can be healed and comforted. If you isolate yourself from church, you are wasting your spiritual gifts and ruining your chances of being restored.

7. Help others to heal. In my work with abused women, I’ve seen that those who suffered the most became powerfully effective in helping others after they experienced healing. This can be true for people who were wounded in an unhealthy church. God does not waste our pain! He can use your testimony to help those who are going through similar situations.

Once you leave, it is possible that other members of your church will contact you—and some of them will be honestly seeking the same freedom you have found. You owe it to them to share the story of your exit. If you stay healthy during the process of leaving, God can use you to pull others to safety.

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