

The Myth of Church Is Always A Safe Place

When you are experiencing deep emotional pain, to whom do you turn for help?

Some people have turned to the church and found immediate acceptance and unconditional love from compassionate people. Others have been severely wounded by the insensitivity and judgmental attitudes of toxic churches where guilt, manipulation, fear, and shame abound.

In his book, *Why Churches Don't Heal*, author Doug Murren writes, "Often the church is just not a safe place for us to let down our guard and be real. Imagine needing urgent medical care and going to a hospital where you dare not admit that you have been injured! Similarly, it often seems that the last place we can admit to a personal struggle is in the church. And so we are not healed, and we do not heal others."

Ronald Enroth writes in *Recovering from Churches That Abuse*, "Spiritual abuse takes place when leaders to whom people look for guidance and spiritual nurture use their positions of authority to manipulate, control, and dominate."

Here are some steps to recover from an abusive church experience:

- Admit to yourself the truth about what has happened, and ask God to direct you to a healthy church.
- Find someone who will believe you and support you in your desire to find a healthy church.
- Grieve your loss of friends, family, and years of belonging to a specific church.
- Expect feelings of doubt, guilt, fear, and shame. Seek help in dealing with these emotions.
- Strengthen your trust in God, and cautiously rebuild your relationship with another church family.
- Forgive those who have hurt you in the past and move on to enjoy your freedom in the Lord.

Healthy Church	Toxic Church
Friendly, home-like environment	May seem overly friendly at first, but turns out to be manipulative, coercive, divisive, and exclusive
Place of acceptance where people don't hide their problems	"Don't ask, don't tell" atmosphere where problems are hidden
Approaches difficulties with an attitude of love—sees people, not problems	Pretends difficulties are not there or demands that problem people be dealt with outside the church
Forgiveness and grace are easily extended	People are defined by the mistakes of their past
No one is superior. Leaders and members maintain high respect toward each other	Leaders have an attitude of spiritual superiority toward other members and other churches. "Us vs them" mentality
Right and wrong is based on biblical principles	Right and wrong is based on preferences of leadership and their interpretation of scripture
People are allowed to grow at their own pace	Rigid standards are required and use of fear, guilt, or intimidation is used to control
Pastor is transparent, admits his mistakes, and is accountable to a board of godly men	Pastor is not accountable to anyone, and seems very controlling and authoritarian
Pastor guides and encourages members based on biblical principles, but does not interfere with individual decision-making	Pastor tells you what to believe and how to live, demands conformity, and pressures you to break fellowship with others who don't share the same beliefs
Independent thinking is encouraged, and questioning is welcomed	Questioning of scripture or actions of leaders is not allowed
Leadership invites dialogue and advice from members	"Don't make waves" and don't offer any opinions
Family commitments are encouraged, and boundaries are respected	Leaders expect church activities to take priority over family matters, and boundaries are not recognized
High moral standards apply to everyone alike, based on biblical principles	Leaders feel entitled to certain exceptions, and send guilt messages when people don't adhere to their personal preferences (clothing, entertainment, etc.)
Emotional or family problems are taken seriously, and the pastor may recommend professional counseling	All problems are considered a lack of faith, result of sin, or a satanic attack. Professional counseling is not often recommended.