

July 2020

[CHURCH NAME]

ATTN: [PASTOR NAME, ELDERS NAME, BOARD MEMBERS NAME]

We are survivors of abuse inside of [CHURCH NAME], and it is time we have an important conversation. For the last [AMOUN OF TIME] [CHURCH NAME] victims and survivors of abuse, ranging from verbal and emotional abuse to physical and sexual abuse; have been reporting what was happening to them. These have been treated as isolated instances at best, or absolutely ignored as the victims are silenced and ostracized, at worst. But as more stories surface, and more of us find each other, it's well past time you face that what you have in your hands is a systemic problem. A problem fueled by some of the doctrine you teach, and the systems you've set up. It is well past time for you to address this, admit you've been complicit, and recognize that you have the influence and power to effect change, and protect future victims.

The abuse we will describe below is all from stories of people in [CHURCH NAME], they have been from people who worked as full time staff, both paid and unpaid, and full time and part time volunteers, as well as from members and visitors. They are not 1 or 2 isolated cases, and we know there are more.

We define abuse as a pattern of behavior used by one person/organization to gain and maintain power over another person. It's not just a one-time thing, but instead a pattern of behavior. None of these have happened to people only once.

Verbal and emotional abuse

Deeming rebellious anybody who raises questions against leadership.

Demanding blind loyalty to pastors and leaders as a way to "honor God."

Calling those who speak of abusive practices "demon possessed" or "people working for the devil."

Telling people who have been abused they need to forgive as a way to demand they don't push the matter any further (protecting the abuser).

Asking people to submit to abusive leaders.

Gossiping about victims, lying about their character to minimize their story.

Telling those abused they have a spirit of division, a spirit of jezebel, a spirit of fear.

Telling those abused they are bitter and need to let go of their bitterness.

Claiming the abused have a “heart issue”, or “hidden sin”, which caused the abuse (victim blaming).

Asking victims to extend grace when abusers continue abusing. Which is re-traumatizing the victims.

Passive aggressive sermons about victims of abuse, or people who choose to leave the church.

Shaming volunteers both publicly and privately for taking time off, taking holidays off, and not being at church or small groups every week.

Demanding blind loyalty from staff and volunteers.

Demanding people remove personal statements from their own social media accounts.

Asking people not to report abuse to authorities.

Psychological and mental abuse

Telling people the voice of God is often the same as the voice of the pastor.

Telling people their feelings are not valid, to get over them.

Believing pastors and leaders over victims of abuse.

Protecting pastors and leaders over victims of abuse.

Calling victims of abuse immature, or weak for not allowing the abuse.

No respect for people's boundaries.

Asserting problems inside the church are because of one particular person, and not systemic issues.

Demanding victims apologize to pastors and leaders.

Creating a church hierarchy where people cannot bring concerns to the pastor, all concerns go to untrained leaders.

Promoting untrained leaders due to nepotism and/or personal favoritism.

Sending people to untrained pastors and counselors to deal with serious personal issues.

Identity and cultural abuse

Overt and covert racism.

Overt and covert sexism.

Overt and covert xenophobia.

No clarity in regards to LGBTQ+ policies and stances.

Overt and covert homophobia and transphobia.

Demonizing other cultures and cultural practices.

Conversion therapy practices.

Short terms mission trips.

Financial exploitation

Demanding tithes to be able to serve in the church.

Teaching tithes are a way to get God's blessing.

Demanding a lot of unpaid volunteer work from people by holding opportunities only for those who are able to work for free for a long time.

Coercing people to give more through emotional manipulative messages.

Teaching the most important thing people will do for the kingdom of God is the free labor they do at the church.

Asking people who receive some sort of aid from the church to sign a commitment to serve and tithe for a year.

Not paying employees a livable wage.

Asking students/interns to do a lot of unpaid work unrelated to the ministry. Including personal work for pastors.

Not giving employees health insurance by paying them salary and under reporting hours.

Physical abuse

Screaming at staff and volunteers for simple mistakes, or misunderstandings.

Telling people being overweight is an indictment on their relationship with God.

Promoting corporal punishment as adequate parenting.

Teaching that the notion of breaking a child's will is appropriate.

Overt and covert ableism.

Asking women to stay in abusive marriages to honor God.

Not allowing people to serve on stage due to their appearance.

Not reporting incidents of physical violence.

Exploiting students/interns.

Asking students to babysit for free, clean the homes of pastors/leaders, clean the church, do a lot of physical work.

Sexist dress codes.

Racist dress codes.

Elitist dress codes.

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse of adults and minors.

Sexual harassment.

Sexual grooming.

Telling married people they can't deny their spouse sex.
Covering up for pastors/leaders accused of sexual abuse.
Not reporting abuse, including abuse of minors.
Allowing and funding pastors with a history of sexual abuse to keep their jobs.
Blaming women for pastor and leader's sexual advances.
Hiring a pastor from another church after they've been accused of sexual abuse without ever addressing the abuse, or protecting the victim, or future victims.
Demonizing of divorce.

As you can see, [CHURCH NAME] is not a safe space for people, and we have no doubt it is your intent and desire to ensure every single person that walks through your doors is safe, and protected. So for the purpose of ensuring [CHURCH NAME] is a safe space, we believe you need to be committed to:

- Hire an outside consultant to offer awareness training and set up abuse prevention systems.
- Racial awareness, anti-bias, diversity and inclusion training should be mandatory for all pastors and leaders.
- Set up a protocol for victims of abuse to safely report abuse inside the church and beyond the walls of the church.
- Document all incidents and follow up on them. Victims should let you know when they are satisfied with your involvement. Hold abusers accountable.
- Commit to ending nepotism and favoritism, and hold leaders accountable when nepotism and favoritism is displayed.
- If the victim is comfortable with it, make all incidents and follow up on them public.
- Challenge patriarchal leadership. More diversity in pastoral and leadership teams.
- Challenge yourselves to reflect the community, your leadership and pastoral teams should reflect real diversity and inclusion.
- Offer appropriate support and care for victims of abuse (this is not the same as pastoral counseling, it should be professional care done by someone who understands religious abuse and is not employed by the church).
- Listen to victims and survivors and believe what we are telling you.
- Allow LGBTQ+ people to lead in all capacities. If this is a non-negotiable for you please state clearly on your website and everywhere else what your stances are on LGBTQ+ leadership and marriage policies. Full clarity.
- If you have a physical building(s) hire a disabled accessibility consultant to assess your buildings.

- Terminate employment and/or remove from leadership, those who've been accused of criminal abuse, and those who refuse to address non-criminal abuse. Share publicly why you've taken this step.
- Address the exploitative environments of internships and leadership colleges.
- Pay all your employees a livable wage.
- Ensure your full time employees have appropriate health insurance.
- Offer an open and public apology letter to all the victims and survivors of abuse inside of churches.

We believe you can effect real change and ensure your building and ministries are safe spaces for all people in the community. We hope you'll be able to read this letter with an open heart, and consider what we are asking here.

Thank you for your time.

We can be reached at dobetterchurch@gmail.com.