



Out of the Pit of Despair

Presented by Michelle L Hofer & Jill Hofer

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Before We Begin



- Spiritual abuse is real and it is devastating.
- Many people suffer triggers and re-traumatization in certain contexts.
- During the next hour we will be talking about spiritual abuse, abusers, tactics of abuse and other topics which may trigger your own trauma or stir other difficult feelings.
- If at any point you become overwhelmed, please feel free to leave the room.
We are here to provide information on a difficult subject.
Please practice self care.

- We are not counselors, therapists nor trained professionals.
- We are two individuals who have shared an experience of spiritual abuse. Through research and education we have come to understand the difficult journey of recovery and healing from spiritual abuse.
- If you find yourself in a situation causing harm and trauma, we would encourage you to seek out professional assistance.



Who we are and why we are here

- ▶ Jill Hofer

- ▶ I grew up in the Mennonite Church, first in Manitoba, Canada w/my family and then in Freeman. I attended the same church for 20+ years, until I chose to leave the place where I was spiritually abused. I have completed a Certificate of Theological studies (AMBS) and am a certified Spiritual Director (SFS). I am a survivor of spiritual abuse.

- ▶ Michelle Hofer

- ▶ I have wrestled to accept who I am as an artist in all of my past church experiences. The German Reformed (Calvinist) denomination I grew up in told me it was idolatrous to explore my faith through my artistic gifts. The Mennonite church I married into at times indicated my artistic expressions of faith, while appreciated, were less valuable than the acts of service held dear. But it was the spiritual manipulations of one pastor and the fallout experienced communally which nearly destroyed me. I am a survivor of spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse defined

- ▶ **Jill** – Spiritual abuse occurs when spiritual authority is used to intentionally cause harm to those whom they are intended to lead. Coercion, manipulation, and control are wielded as weapons to uplift the abuser all the while undermining and destroying the abused and their sense of spiritual worth.
- ▶ **Michelle** – When persons in positions of spiritual authority and respect demand specific behavior of you in order for you to keep relationship with them, the church and with God, it is spiritual abuse.
- ▶ **Ken Blue** – Abuse of any type occurs when someone has power over another and uses that power to hurt. Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds.
- ▶ **David Johnson/Jeff Van Vonderen** – Spiritual abuse occurs when a leader uses his or her spiritual position to control or dominate another person. It often involves overriding the feelings and opinions of another, without regard to what will result in the other person's state of living, emotions or well-being. In this application, power is used to bolster the position or needs of a leader over and above one who comes to them in need. Spiritual abuse can also occur when Spirituality is used to make others live up to a "spiritual standard." This promotes "spiritual performance," also without regard to an individual's actual well-being, or is used as a means of "proving" a person's spirituality.



The Spiritual Abuser

behaviors they demonstrate

- Rarely demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, & self-control) and actually often demonstrate the opposite, such as have frequent angry outbursts
- Seeks a minimalist structure of accountability and promote secrecy and there is a lack transparency (in their own behavior); there is often an atmosphere of confusion due to poor communication.
- Expect behavior from others they don't expect of themselves, and they do not allow or tolerate pushback or disagreement
- See almost everyone else as inferior to themselves all the while showing favoritism to those who are in the inner circle (sycophants or "yes" people); abuser is often self-absorbed and play the martyr
- Manipulative, including saying one thing to some people, but different things to others
- Either seek to dismiss or marginalize people or they attempt to develop them (people are a means to an end)

From ***Broken Trust***, Remy Diederich

The Spiritual Abuser

tactics they may use

- **Because I'm the pastor, that's why** – authority based on the position they hold; become a power broker and penalize people for noticing that they are just a human
- **You can trust me** – abusers often lead a double-life and/or participate in double-talk & hypocrisy; external restraints used to temper the sin they themselves struggle with
- **Image is everything** – maintain a false image of perfection, ministry becomes all about image as this has become the sole source of value
- **Straining gnats & swallowing camels** – inverted spiritual values, the insignificant becomes significant
- **The weight of religion** – the yoke and heavy burden of spiritual performance; perform works in exchange for salvation
- **No admittance** – bait-n-switch; the promise of free salvation but then heap on rules and unrealistic expectations
- **Spreading the gospel** – message being preached does not lift weight off, set free, nor reconnect people to their true source of life – cause of great harm
- **Role reversal & devoured** – instead of leaders being there for the true well-being of the flock, the flock is there for the well-being of the leaders

From *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by Van Vonderan/
Johnson

The Abusive System

nurtured by an abusive leader

- **power-posturing** – other leaders are made to feel important in their positions of power and authority by the abusive leader
- **performance preoccupation** – cooperation/obedience are expected of everyone – this is your service to God and your Kingdom work
- **unspoken rules** – “do not question what the pastor says or does” “do not raise concerns” “don’t say anything negative about the pastor or the church” – become evident when you break them
- **secretiveness** – being advised to always keep meetings/discussions “confidential”
- **lack of balance** – emphasis on education level/intelligence vs. spiritual maturity OR an opposite emphasis on “God told me” vs. biblical truth/practical truth
- **cultivating victim culture** – being told you aren’t being a good Christian if you can’t overlook the problem – “just forgive”...“don’t judge”... “learn to love”... “we’ve all been hurt”
- **inducing paranoia** – being led to believe you are only safe/“saved” in the system
- **demanding loyalty** – through scare tactics OR being punished/pushed out followed by pleas to stay/come back

From *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by Van Vonderan/Johnson

The Abusive System

tactics modeled and encouraged by the abusive leader

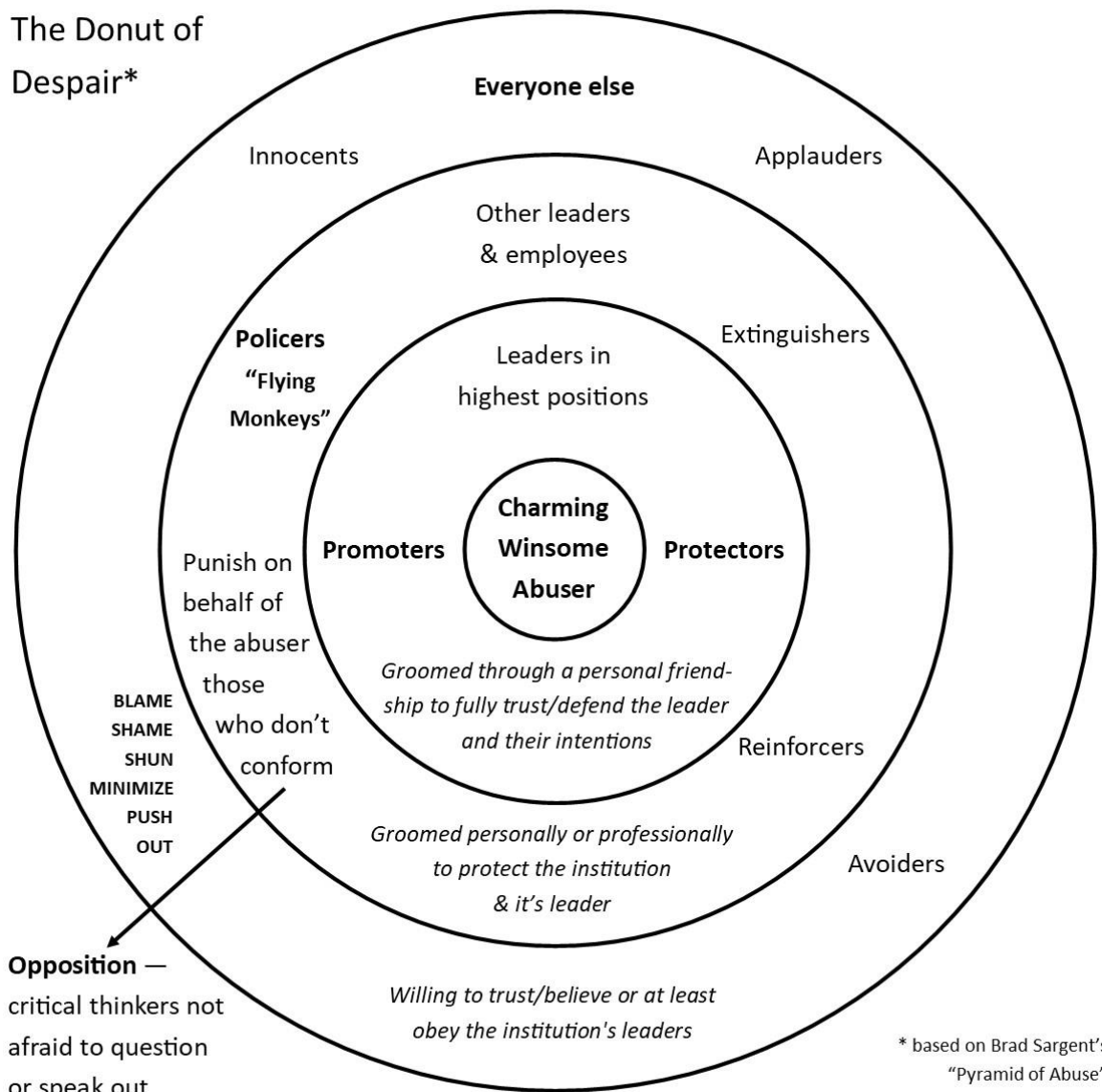
- **grooming** – the act of maneuvering another individual into a position that makes them more isolated, dependent and likely to trust
- **gaslighting** – manipulating the cause of a negative situation to appear as the fault of the victim; ALSO making the victim believe the experience didn't happen in the way they remember or that it didn't happen at all (AKA crazy-making)
- **double-talk** – a mark of false spiritual leadership is people who, in their effort to look good, lie – everything has a double meaning.
- **tone policing** – conversational tactic that dismisses the ideas being communicated when they are perceived to be delivered in an angry, frustrated, sad, fearful or otherwise emotionally charged manner
- **spiritual double bind** – the abuser is involved in a behavior that is know to be wrong so they stress this wrongness in their preaching/teaching
- **proof texting** – taking a passage of Scripture out of context and using it to manipulate, coerce or control others

From *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by Van Vonderan/
Johnson

The Cycle of Abuse

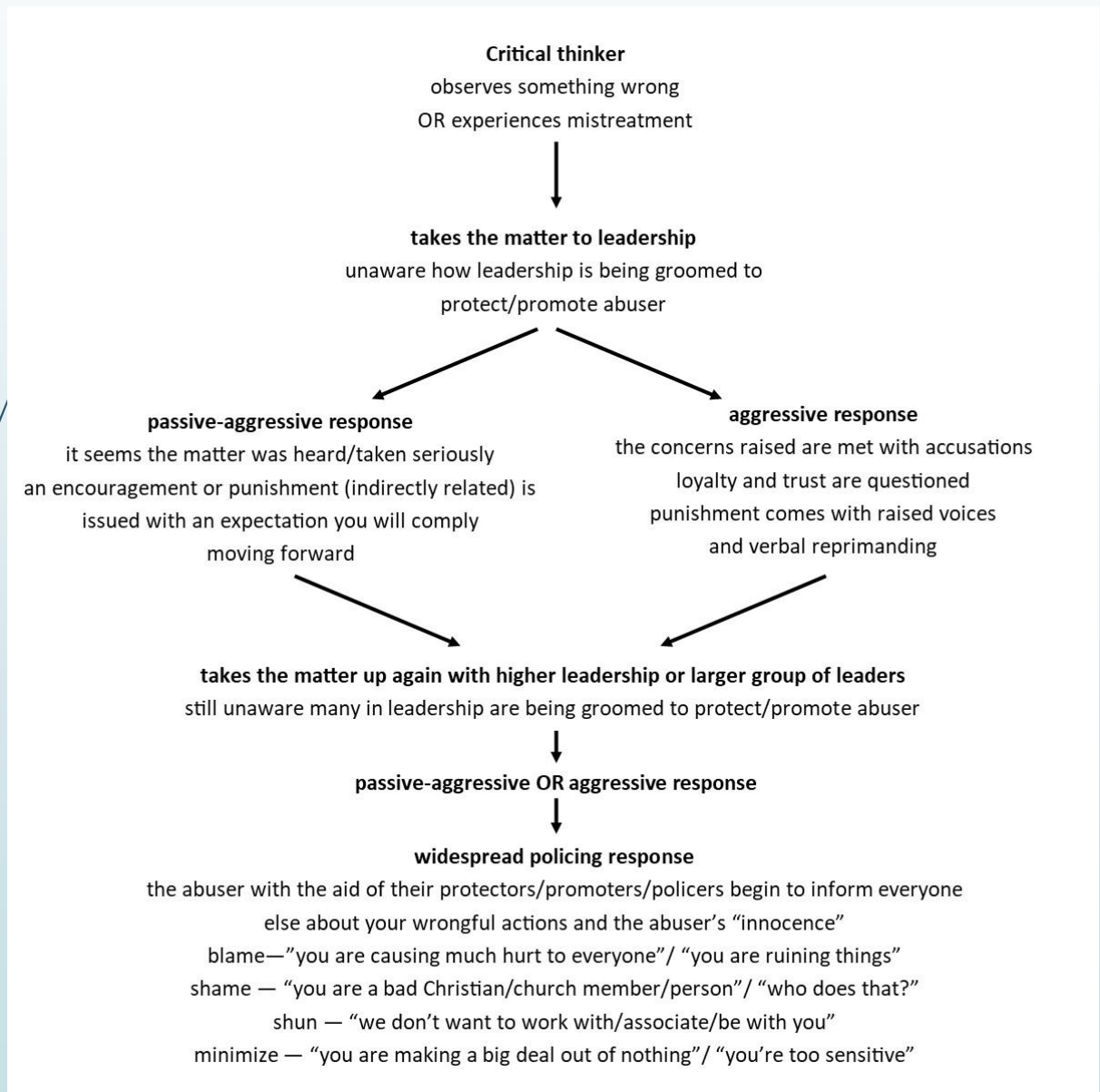
how church structure lends itself to protecting an abusive leader and eliminating opposition

The Donut of Despair*



The Cycle of Abuse

secondary abuse experienced in calling out a spiritual abuser





The Cycle of Abuse

our thoughts

- Jill – Churches/individuals are hesitant to admit that abuse has taken place...The church/individual who admits abuse has taken place has to wrestle with the idea that they were either complicit in the abuse or abused themselves. Admission of abuse also requires a response of reaction-action. Now the institution or individual is responsible to making things right or at the least, stand on the side of truth. Both of these responses are difficult and uncomfortable at the least.
- Michelle – Good people get caught up in a spiritual abuser's manipulations. It happens any time an abuser begins to work an institution's system to their advantage. The secondary abuse experience is almost guaranteed if victims decide to speak up within the church. Educating everyone, especially leaders, on abuse and trauma is so necessary.



The Devastation and Trauma

experiences/effects of abuse on victims

- **trauma** – a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. Spiritual trauma occurs when there is repeated behavior that degenerates a person's worth and spiritual value. Loss of spiritual safety or security
- **PTSD** – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, reliving the traumatic experience over and over as though it is the first experience
- **shaming** – a feeling of being bad, unworthy, or wrong; creates feelings of fault, unworthiness, and disappointment (to God, yourself & others)
- **shunning** – rejection and emotional distancing by the body or individuals; whether by agreement or not, victim is “set aside” as a punishment
- **devaluation** – person, giftings and talents are no longer meeting the needs of the abuser, “I don't need you nor what you offer”
- **depression, loneliness/abandonment** – because the community is no longer accessible, there are few places to turn for comfort and validation.
- **panic/anxiety attacks** – sudden fear overwhelms causing racing heart, shortness of breath, etc.
- **spiritual doubts** – the need to reevaluate many things that were once part of a firm, well-developed faith
- **character assassination/slander** – because abuser twists events the victims become the “bad” people, gossip tends to run rampant



Is recovery possible?

- ▶ **Michelle** – There is a great paradox in spiritual abuse. Often those who experience this abuse are those who desire and pursue God with great passion. While the abuse can be devastating, it holds the possibility to go so much deeper in faith than ever imagined. The pain is pushing me to rediscover who I am and who this God is I have long sought.
- ▶ **Jill** – Hope of recovery is what drives every survivor of abuse forward. Hoping that someday, the pain of being made to feel valueless will decrease, finding a new identity in God and God alone – dependent on no other human for personal value but rather, finding one's value in the wholeness of God's being – will bring healing and a new wholeness to what was broken.



Stay or Go?

a difficult decision

- Should you stay in an abusive church system/with an abusive leader?
 - Permission to walk away
- Can you stay and be able to survive in a system that most likely will not change? Will you be further harmed? What is the cost?
- Can you walk away/leave the church? What is the cost?
 - Be prepared for loss of community
 - Support needs to be in place before you walk away
- Staying means that accountability is the only option; there is a commitment to a healing journey between the church/abuser and the abused no matter how long it takes. There is an admittance of wrongdoing by the church.
- Restorative justice/mediation – while these practices are suitable in some situations, in an abusive situation, with a manipulative abuser, these practices can facilitate revictimization and re-traumatization of the victim. No one should be pressured or forced to participate.

Forgiveness

- ▶ the process of forgiveness may stretch over many, many years just as it took many years to build relationships in the church and the abuse was often misunderstood/endured over many years
- ▶ situations involving spiritual abuse are some of the most difficult to forgive because they involve a betrayal by the very shepherds who ought to nurture and protect us

Human forgiveness as an internal series of decisions to release your own animosity, hatred, anger, fear, and the desire for revenge against another, replacing these emotions with more benevolent feelings, including love. Since these are our decisions alone, forgiveness is not dependent on the actions of the other. — Ball and Puls, Let Us Prey

Betrayal augments abuse when a person in high position violates our trust. The deep pain and damage suffered are unlike any other. When the beloved becomes the beloved enemy, we are stretched to the end of ourselves and beyond by Christ's command to forgive... — Ken Blue



Forgiveness

our thoughts

- ▶ **Michelle** – When you have been so beaten down by spiritual abuse and you have lost your own sense of value, worth, belonging, and goodness, THE very last thing anyone should prompt or encourage a survivor to do is forgive those involved. You do not need to bring this up. Trust that the Holy Spirit can do her job and nudge the survivor in that direction when it is time. The survivor most likely is already thinking too much about this and beating themselves up for not being able to instantly forgive.
- ▶ **Jill** – We live in a culture that says "You should forgive but you don't have to forget" but in reality the expectation is to forgive and forget... and do it in short order. The impossibility of this task adds to the burden of those who have suffered from spiritual abuse. The church needs to re-examine what forgiveness is and what we expect of believers and especially of those who have been traumatized by abuse. Forgiveness is a slow process of healing and endless forgiveness, efforts that happen over and over, allowing for the Holy Spirit to work in the healing and timeline of the one who has been harmed.



The Healing Process

what does it look like?

- A long process, show yourself grace
- Learning about spiritual abuse can be part of the healing (brings understanding); being able to admit that you have been a victim of abuse
- Find a trusted **counselor, therapist, spiritual director** and a steady and trustworthy support system
- Everyone deserves to have their story heard; **validation** of experience is important and necessary, find support that will offer these openly
- Becoming aware of **triggers** and avoid sensitive situations (if possible)
- **Rebuilding trust** – relearning to trust God, people, churches, leaders will be a long process and requires intense work – be kind to yourself in this process
- **Finding a new faith community** – only if you are ready; evaluate what is important, take your time to ease into this process



The Healing Process

walking with survivors

- **Don't rush the process** - recognize that healing is a long process and take the pain seriously; allow for time and space
- **Sharing blessings** with traumatized victims, let them know they have worth and value, ex: "you are courageous, brave, etc."
- **Hearing the story and offering validation** – expressing belief of the story you are told – and be willing to hear it as many times as necessary
- Find or provide a **good therapist/counselor/spiritual director** - someone to guide you through the wilderness journey; don't offer quick fixes or "you should" statements
- **Allow space for the tears, grief, and anger** – let there be no shaming over strong emotions – it is a big deal
- **Self-educate** – research and learn about spiritual abuse and be prepared to share what you know
- **Stand for truth** – public declarations of belief and validation are invaluable to the healing of the survivor
- Appreciate the **sensitivity** of the victim and be mindful of situations that they may find difficult or impossible

Healing Practices

- **there is no one practice or series of practices that will heal the pain** or heal it quickly – each survivor must work to find healing in ways that are specific to them
- **set forgiving aside for now** – especially in the early stages of recovery, trust the Spirit to nudge the survivor when it's time to begin this work
- **cast off the burden of blame and shame** – a survivor often accepts this burden as they most likely are a sensitive and caring person who has been led to feel responsible either for the abuse and/or for hurting individuals and the church
 - the survivor must learn they are not to blame for what happened
 - the survivor must place the blame properly on those who perpetrated the abuse or protected the abuser
- **recognize/feel the full scope of harm and its painful effects** – most likely the survivor has been encouraged to minimize the damages or chooses not to acknowledge the depth of harm in an effort to self-protect
- **make space for anger** – the survivor must allow themselves to feel and direct anger (in healthy ways) towards the abuser and those who protected the abuser
 - turning the anger inward and directing it towards oneself (taking the blame for what happened) is highly common among abuse survivors and often manifests as severe depression, lack of self-worth, active or passive suicidal thoughts
 - best done with the help of a therapist or spiritual director
- **focus on practices that help restore** sense of self-worth, God's care and acceptance, dignity/reputation and life calling – all that was most likely worn down, manipulated or destroyed by the abuser and abusive system
- **making space for rest** – the exhaustion is real



The Healing Journey

for Jill

- **Showed kindness and practiced self-care** – taking time to rest, slept a lot, took mild sleep aides, exercised when I had energy for it
- **Mental well being** - when thoughts were overwhelming, I allowed time and space to just be, “feel your feelings” but also allowed times to set it down
- **Caring for others** - spent time caring for my family and friends – cooking, baking, etc.
- **Support system** - sought out time with trusted friends and family who held my story and didn’t shy away from the strong emotions
- **Self-educated** – researched A LOT about spiritual abuse which provided validation of my experience
- Retained a **Spiritual Director** and a therapist
- Spent time doing activities that were not attached to the responsibilities I had at church – gardening, reading, painting/art, etc. as a way of **re-establishing value in/of myself**
- Gave myself permission to **“let go” of commitments** that were difficult and overwhelming, ex. studies



The Healing Journey

for Michelle

- **creating** – practicing art to work out feelings/thoughts/prayers
- **journaling** – allowing all thoughts and feelings to surface without judgment
- **getting outside** – breathing in beauty through the senses, tending/nurturing plants also nurtures me
- **music** – listening to music that soothes/comforts and uplifts/energizes and also music that helps me feel my anger – also playing piano
- **tending my body** – minding trauma symptoms manifesting as anxiety, depression, pain and muscle tension and being kind to myself
- **leaning into others** – reaching out when I am fearful, lonely or angry
- **professional counseling** – weekly sessions involving EMDR for alleviating complex-trauma symptoms
- **writing a personal declaration** – remembering who I am and intentionally change how I speak to and about myself
- **forgiving myself** – recognizing that what happened was not my fault... “I did not ruin everything.”



The Healing Journey

for Michelle

Personal Declaration 2021

I am... a gifted, mindful person full of energy, compassion and generosity towards others. I am an artist who creates remarkable things.

I love... using my creativity to celebrate life and influence others in positive ways. Illuminating the magic and mystery of God gives me a sense of purpose and fills my heart with joy.

I live for... God and choose to remember His unending love and affection for me. I am never alone. My source of energy and joy comes from my spiritual connection to God.

I have... the courage to face all present troubles. Today I give priority to tending my grief and trauma and taking care of my physical body.

I am no longer... listening to the voice blaming and shaming me. I am precious to God. My worth and value far exceed both my mistakes and the beliefs, opinions and judgments of others.

I am no longer... giving in to despair. Giving up is not an option. I chose to live by faith and hold on. I have hope that all my sorrows will one day be turned to joy.

I commit to... seeing the possibilities of today. I begin my day with gratitude for my life, the people around me, the joy and adventure of being an artist. I can set aside fear and trust in God's presence and provision for today.

My purpose at this moment... is to share hope and comfort through my art and writing. I am providing ways for others to connect with God and navigate the troubles of life with renewed strength.



Final Thoughts



- Michelle – With all that I have been through, I have not questioned God's guidance, care or love for me. Having been blamed, shamed, punished, shunned and receiving very little validation, support, protection or exoneration, I am weary. Yet I hold onto the goodness of God.
- Jill – Through the whole experience of abuse and started recovery, it has been my hope and stay to believe that God is present in all of it. This alone has sustained me. God is present – at all times, and this is enough.



Psalm 40:1-3

- I waited a long time for the Eternal; He finally knelt down to hear me. He listened to my weak and whispered cry.
- He reached down and drew me from pit of despair where I was stranded, mired in the muck and clay. With a gentle hand, He pulled me out to set me down safely on a warm rock; He held me until I was steady enough to continue the journey again.
- As if that were not enough, because of Him my mind is clearing up. Now I have a new song to sing— a song of praise to the One who saved me. Because of what He's done, many people will see and come to trust in the Eternal

Resources

- **The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse** by Van Vonderan/Johnson, 1991
- **Healing Spiritual Abuse**, Ken Blue, 1993
- **Let Us Prey**, R. Glenn Ball and Darrell Puls, 2017
- **Broken Trust**, F. Remy Diedrich, 2017
- **Spiritual Abuse Recovery**, Barbara M. Orlowski, 2010
- **Healing from Hidden Abuse**, Shannon Thomas, 2016
- **The Empathy Trap**, Dr. Jane McGregor and Tim McGregor, 2013
- **Traumatized by Religious Abuse**, Connie A. Baker, 2019
- **Rising Strong**, Brene Brown, 2015
- **When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community From Emotional and Spiritual Abuse**, Chuck DeGroat, 2020
- **Don't Forgive Too Soon**, by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn & Matthew Linn, 1997
- **The Allender Center Podcast**, Dr. Dan Allender and Rachel Clinton
- Paige Britton – Spiritual Abuse articles, www.grassrootstheological.wordpress.com
- Brad Sargent – Pyramid of Abuse and Culpability/Complicity, www.futuristguymedia.wordpress.com
- David Hayward – Why the church is the perfect culture for spiritual abuse, www.medium.com