

# Season1Episode2

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

church, people, pastor, sermon, plagiarism, colleen, hurt, elders, shared, feel, ministry, untangled, listening, preaching, shepherd, faith, hear, god, story, congregation

## SPEAKERS

Sarah O., Gary Stratton, Pastor, Colleen R., Amy Fritz, Mary DeMuth, Jeff O.



Amy Fritz 00:00

Previously on untangled faith.



Colleen R. 00:04

They were all sitting around this table and he walks in like no big deal. And he's like, "I'm supposed to apologize for borrowing some sermons but-" and he walked out the door.



Gary Stratton 00:17

There is, I hope, a profound level of trust that's established between a congregant that chooses to come under the teaching of, of a pastor, whether they be male or female, Pentecostal or Church of Christ or something in between. That, that I understand that what you're sharing is not just coming out of your head that's coming out of your life.



Amy Fritz 00:52

This is Amy Fritz, and you're listening to Untangled Faith, a podcast for anyone who has found themselves confused or disillusioned in their faith journey. If you want to hold on to your faith, while untangling it from all the things that are not good and true, this is the place for you. Welcome to Episode Two of the Untangled Faith podcast. Last week, we

heard from my friend Colleen as she shared about discovering that her pastor had plagiarized over 200 sermons. This week, we'll hear the rest of her story. I'm excited to also let you listen in on a few conversations that I know will give us some extra context and insight. Mary DeMuth joins us again later in this episode. And we also have a new guest. I invited Dr. Gary David Stratton to join us. Dr. Stratton is a Dean and Professor at Johnson University. Because he spends much of his time investing in those who plan to go into pastoral ministry, I wanted to hear his take on pastoral plagiarism. Here's our conversation. Tell me your thoughts about the what's happening with pastors and using other people's sermons?



Gary Stratton 02:12

Well, it, you know, it's very complex, there is a lot of pressure, let's face it. I think one of the things that's really changed is what is expected of pastors. It used to be a pastor, his job was to go into his study for 20 some hours a week and come out with a sermon. They weren't expected to be the model CEO of the church, but just a lot of the demands that are on on pastors today, were not there. At the same time, there also wasn't the temptation of quite so much access to almost a limitless supply. Like if you're if you become addicted to this, it's like a drug that's always there. It's like someone who's addicted to pornography, like you, you can't escape from it. Whereas probably 20 years ago, I don't know someone it would have been very much more challenging to become addicted to pornography because they would have to to go out a lot of work to get it. Well. It's the same sort of thing here. Once it's done the trick, you get the endorphin burst people respond. Well, the sermon, it didn't take you nearly as much time. I mean, I can understand the temptation. And the thing that's so sad to me about it is that there is a long, rich history of giving other people sermons in the church. Billy Graham, in the New York Crusade, the crusade was extended. He didn't have time to prepare. It'll come back to me some evangelical leader, a famous one, basically, you know, gave him his sermons and he picked what to do and he, you know, used his sermons. There was a revival that took place in one part of, of Europe from people reading George Whitfield's sermons.



Amy Fritz 03:43

Yeah,



Gary Stratton 03:43

John Wesley came to faith after listening to Luther's preface to the book of Romans being. But in each one of those circumstances, people knew who the author of the

material was,



Amy Fritz 03:56

yes,



Gary Stratton 03:56

what's happening so often today is someone is basically be just becoming an actor, with someone else's writing without giving any credit to the writers.



Amy Fritz 04:05

Yeah. And I feel like there's sort of a generational thing to where some of the seasoned mature members of the congregation didn't really see the problem in it. And I wonder if they're coming more from a context of, well, how can you plagiarize the Bible? I wonder if the difference is preaching has changed. There's a lot more personal stories and in this circumstance, it wasn't real deep exegesis. It was very topical.



Gary Stratton 04:42

Yeah, I went back and listened to one of them just in preparation for today and that Wow, it's really well created as a story as a as an entertainment piece, but also, I think, as a moving sermon. But yeah, it's not it didn't look like it was compared. It was done with a concordance in a Bible Dictionary. So



Amy Fritz 05:00

What do you think the line is? Where it's just like what's okay? And what is not appropriate?



Gary Stratton 05:07

Well, okay, that's not a super easy thing to say. What's easy to say is the general principle in plagiarism is wrong because it's stealing.



Amy Fritz 05:16

Sure,

G

Gary Stratton 05:16

it's wrong because it's stealing somebody else's ideas without credit. It is a big deal in the academy. I mean, we have programs that students turn in papers that analyze them for plagiarism. You can as an academic, you can literally get in trouble and lose your job for plagiarizing yourself. Without credit, like you can quote something from another book that you've already written and not footnoted that you wrote this someplace else. And that's like a big No, no. So because intellectual property is a really big deal. And your job as an academic is to find a voice and to find something that you're an expertise in. become an expert in that hopefully, nobody else in the world has ever been more of an expert than you are. And there's one little piece of knowledge out there. Yeah. So and so when someone steals that and claims it as their own. And that's the problem. It's not using it. Using it is not a problem. If properly footnoted or referenced or whatever, that's perfectly allowable. That is not plagiarism, that's not stealing. It's when you use something and give the general impression. Or even say that it's your original work. That's when it becomes plagiarism. That's when it becomes stealing. And I don't think that matters. If you're a freshman, rushing to get a paper in and block cutting something you found online, or a pastor that's in a rush block grabbing something online. I don't think there's any real difference between those two. I think they're both wrong. A lot of schools you get thrown out for doing that once



Amy Fritz 06:43

before our conversation, I sent an article to Dr. Stratton. This article was written by Bob Russell, retired pastor at South East Christian Church. In it, Russell compared a sermon to a cake. He said, If a person has little or no cooking skills, I'd prefer they buy one from a bakery. Russell went on to say, I know plagiarism is a hot button issue in today's culture. But I'm more sympathetic with preachers than most. Ministry is a difficult time consuming pressure packed job. Imagine having a term paper due every week and having to deliver it in front of hundreds of critics.

G

Gary Stratton 07:22

I thought Bob Russell was pretty I'll say. I'll use the word gracious. Yes, in his understanding. Matter of fact, my fear was I'm not sure that that this wouldn't feel help someone justify what they were doing. And the way he put it. I know he was trying to



Amy Fritz 07:36

Right



Gary Stratton 07:37

to to create a sense of understanding for the pressure pastors were under. Yeah, but you know, I think pastors are under sexual pressure, but I don't think it's okay for them to decide, well, that girl looks pretty, I think I'll have sex with her. I mean,



Amy Fritz 07:50

yeah,



Gary Stratton 07:50

no, and you can say there's no difference. You know, there's a huge difference between Well, yeah, there probably are in terms of the immediate consequences of people being hurt. But in terms of it being wrong, morally, Nah,



Amy Fritz 07:59

I had some of the same feelings when I read that as like, oh, and I didn't know if maybe it was just because I had that personal experience. But I'm like, he's really given a pass to these guys. The timing of that one made me feel like well, maybe someone asked him about our specific church situation, I would not be surprised.



Gary Stratton 08:17

Oh, I wouldn't. I wouldn't be surprised,



Amy Fritz 08:19

This world is small, although this pastor has now gone on and he is pastoring a church again, and maybe they know and understand and have an understanding and agreement. So like, if you're on an elder board, what if the elder board says, Hey, we're fine with it? We're good if you use someone else's sermon?



Gary Stratton 08:36

Well, once again, I could see an elder board saying that. Well, you're really good at delivering, you're not so good. I mean, we'll put together a writing team for you. There's nothing wrong. You know, the fact that, you know, Conan O'Brien doesn't come up with his own material. Tom Hanks doesn't write his, you know, the scripts and the lines he delivers. I mean, that's fine. But those people that are doing those things are credited for it. They're valued for it. They're compensated for it.



Amy Fritz 08:59

Yeah.



Gary Stratton 08:59

So if a church said elder said, you know, we're, you can just beg, borrow and steal the steal part maybe not so much.



Amy Fritz 09:08

Yeah.



Gary Stratton 09:09

Yeah, we'll put some disclaimers on it in a way that people understand that you're drawing from a lot of sources, but you're not allowed to just, you know, take an entire sermon from someplace else and deliver it without that being credited. I mean, I, I suppose. Here's what my problem even with that would be there is, I hope, a profound level of trust that's established



Amy Fritz 09:31

Yeah.



Gary Stratton 09:32

Between a congregant that chooses to come under the teaching of a pastor. Whether they be male or female, Pentecostal or Church of Christ or something in between. That I understand that what you're sharing is not just coming out of your head. That's coming

out of your life. That used to be a really, boy if you want to get a great turn on this I mean, one of my mentors I feel like in my early ministry was Charles Haddon Spurgeon. And his Lectures to my Students, and you know, for him, it's the question is not preparing the sermon, the question is preparing the preacher. Are you the kind of are you in the state with God that you are a conduit between heaven and earth to bring the Word of God in a way that would be transformative in someone's life and not just informative or entertaining?



Amy Fritz 10:25

Yeah.



Gary Stratton 10:25

And so I have a lot of trouble. I would even have trouble with with the the understanding of what's going on in preaching what's going on. If preaching is a sacrament, which I think it is,



Amy Fritz 10:35

yeah,



Gary Stratton 10:35

not just a gig, I would have some trouble with it. Even with under the leadership of your elders, you said, yeah, that's okay.



Amy Fritz 10:42

Yeah,



Gary Stratton 10:42

even if you didn't break any strict plagiarism rules, I'd still say there's something disingenuous. going on here.



Amy Fritz 10:52

Yeah. Well, and I would think that each unique community has its own needs, I would hope the pastor would be seeking the Lord, like, what do you have to say, to this community. What does my church need to hear from the Lord? What can I show them from God's Word?

G

Gary Stratton 11:10

Yeah, I agree. And I agree, as the church gets bigger, I'm sure the temptation is well, I can't meet the needs of all these people individually, you know, but to me that Spurgeon arguably had the first mega church in the English speaking world, and he managed to preach once every Sunday morning, once every Sunday night. And then, I love this, every Wednesday night, their prayer meeting, he would preach, but he always preached spontaneously, he would speak that the direction of the Lord based on what he thought that his congregation needed that night.



Amy Fritz 11:38

That's a lot of preaching. He probably wasn't creating social media posts and writing books.

G

Gary Stratton 11:44

And no, he probably wasn't, he was, you know, diligently, you know, went to bed, threw people out of his house, you know, at an early hour, because he didn't feel like, if he wasn't up praying when the peddlers started going through the streets, you know, his wife said he would, you know, he complained to himself, like, How can I be ready to go be an ambassador for God, when the the shoe shoe makers and street vendors are out on the street before before I'm in my study, praying. But he would have been out of the tradition, that half of the time that you spent in preparation for sermons should be in prayer. And half should be actually the writing of the sermon, Spurgeon and most Christian leaders before, we'll get to the key date in a minute, believe that unction, or the anointing of the Holy Spirit, was the more important thing to have to transform people's lives. You know, they all had the Bible, they could all go home and read it It was and it wasn't tickling their ears. That it was actually a spiritual transaction, a spiritual gift that was imparted. I have watched that function, how spiritual gifts function in a very different way than the natural gifts. I've seen people who are incredibly gifted communicators. But you know, deader than a doornail spiritually and admittedly so. You can learn a lot from him up here. But it's rarely transformational. Where people that aren't even talking on a spiritual subject who are deeply connected the Lord, it just has a transformational edge to it.





Amy Fritz 13:14

Yeah,



Gary Stratton 13:15

that's what I would like to see in someone who's preaching the Word of God.



Amy Fritz 13:19

Yeah.



Gary Stratton 13:20

Our very first ministry we are part of, we went to a leadership conference, and the speaker was not, was a local pastor, but he wasn't from our ministry, but and he gave this really the series of three really, you know, great works. So I got home from the conference. And I think it might have been Leadership Journal that a leadership magazine came in, and I opened it up, and all three talks were in there. And he'd never mentioned in that kind of thing that you talked about when someone shares a story, as if it was their story and tweaked it with their things. But it's not even like it wasn't even their story. You know, I remember going to my area director, kind of head of the conference, and saying, you know, like, showed him the article talking about things as well. I'm sure he just forgot to tell us where we got it. Well, fast forward 10 years and one of these bizarre things, you know, that happened. I was leaving a university to go teach at another university. I won't, I was surprised to learn that they had hired as my replacement, this pastor, and it says, because he's got such a big speaking ministry and speaks all over the country speaks to college students, and he's it'd be so good for us. And then I wasn't, you know, there's 3000 miles between and didn't think about it much later. But I was talking to a friend I mean, not that many that that long later, the same place. So within seven years later, who somehow this person's name came up. Wow, we finally got rid of that guy. It was he was just so terrible to have around so centered and full of himself. And then finally we just caught that everything he was saying was plagiarism. And I just thought, Man, what if, because he was relatively young. When he was spoken at this conference, Sue and I were at what if that area director had the balls.



Amy Fritz 15:02

Yeah.



Gary Stratton 15:03

To go confront him? And, you know, would it you know, would it have knocked him upside the head? Would he have, you know, realized what he's doing? Would he have fallen out of that addiction to praise and adulation that you don't deserve? I don't know. But I just think of all the people that have been crushed and hurt by all the horrible things that have gone on in the church and embarrassed church ministries. And I'm just so grateful for you, Amy for for being a voice in the wilderness, reaching out to those that are hurting and saying this is the way walk in it.



Amy Fritz 15:41

About a year after our situation with our former pastor, I emailed a couple of local pastors to ask their thoughts. Two responded. One was very clear. He said he had spoken to her former pastor and that he believed this pastor was profoundly disqualified to be a minister, the other pastor who responded hedged, and said he couldn't really speak to the situation, but that it was really hard for pastors to credit every single idea they have. He did say that sharing stories as if they happen to you when they didn't, wasn't alright. But he was very hesitant to weigh in. His response left me feeling confused and gaslit. Being a local pastor, he did know exactly what happened in our church. It wasn't the response of a shepherd. It felt like the response of someone who felt more concerned about people questioning a pastor than they were concerned about people hurt by this unmistakable deceit from this pastor. Today, I have lots of feelings. Honestly, I'm sad. As I was researching for this episode, it hit me just how common it is for pastors to use other people's sermons without giving attribution. If it's perfectly acceptable, why aren't pastors telling their congregation the sermon is from Mark Driscoll or the sermon is from Brian Jones, or Bob Russell? If you're preaching someone else's sermon, and someone comes to you, and thanks you for the sermon telling you how much they appreciate it, do you let them continue believing that it was your own work? Isn't this dishonest? I have some really, really complicated and sad feelings about the whole thing. When we last left Colleen, she had just shared what had happened when her pastor came to meet with the church staff and a couple of elders to confess his plagiarism and apologize. Instead of apologizing, when the time came for him to talk, he walked out of the room and left them all there dumbfounded. After they got over the shock, one by one, each of the staff members opened up and shared about the dysfunction that had been happening behind the scenes in the church office.



Colleen R. 17:52

I felt terrible for those people that I knew and loved that had been sat through, you know,

had sat through all of that. I was grateful, because I knew that this might come to a very abrupt end. I also kind of felt validated, because he showed his true colors.



Amy Fritz 18:12

At the end of that week, the elders invited some of the church volunteer leadership to a meeting to hear an important announcement. Nathan and I gave Colleen a ride to that meeting. We had no idea how the people there would receive this news.



Colleen R. 18:28

You were nervous and, you know, but grateful at the same time because you guys knew what was about to happen.



Amy Fritz 18:35

Yeah, we were all I think we were probably talking about how we were gonna have to pretend like,



Colleen R. 18:40

yep, so we sat in this meeting, we read the statement from the church that was very well written.



Amy Fritz 18:47

During this meeting, the elders shared the lengths they had gone to to work with the pastor, and how he had refused to cooperate at every turn. He also shared that when they had talked with the staff after the pastor left, that the staff was in unanimous agreement, that it was the right thing that the pastor was gone. This elder also shared that the church was still providing salary and benefits to help the pastor and his family during this time of transition,



Colleen R. 19:15

where they named my family me and my husband, as the family to protect our identities, which was great, but the absolute vitriol, is that the right word for it? That came from some members of the leadership in the church, against this family. It was during the meeting

after they had read the letter. They opened it up for questions and I mean, my stomach's in my hearts in my stomach. I am listening to these people like attacking "the family", which was me and it was incredible because one of the elders stood up and stopped it and they said "No, these people protected this church and they risked a lot to protect this church." It was still such a shock to me, though, how vicious people were



Amy Fritz 20:11

that next day, the entire congregation was told the news, Colleen had hoped she would feel freedom now that the truth was finally out. But that feeling of relief was short lived.



Colleen R. 20:23

This was going to be a secret I had to keep for a long time,



Amy Fritz 20:27

right? Because probably initially you thought I need to keep it until the word is out that's what happened. Right? His leaving. But you probably had this moment, like at that meeting where you're like, oh, maybe it's not time.



Colleen R. 20:45

Yes,



Amy Fritz 20:45

For our name to be out there. And I actually think that was a very wise decision. I think it could have distracted from the actual issue at hand.



Colleen R. 20:55

Yes. Because not only did we not know what he would do, finding out but we also didn't know what other members of the congregation would do. Yeah, but often, the truth tellers, as we know, are blamed. They're the ones who are raked through the mud. They're the ones who are dragged, you know, behind the tractor and tarred and feathered. That's just what it is. And it shouldn't be that way. I lived that life for a very long time.



Amy Fritz 21:23

As we're talking about this, people probably are understanding that you're no longer at the church. Why did you go What was it? Was there one last thing?



Colleen R. 21:35

Part of it was my guilt that kept us there. I felt like I had to support the church because I was the one who created the chaos. I've since learned, that's not the case. Visiting another church and me feeling the freedom of being able to walk into church and not have to lie about who I was. Because I was having to walk in and pretend everything was okay. And everything wasn't okay.



Amy Fritz 22:03

One of the most confusing and painful parts of this experience was that after the initial announcement of the pastor's termination, the church leadership never addressed this issue publicly, again, there seemed to be resistance to looking back and doing a post mortem. It felt like they wanted to move ahead as if nothing had happened.



Colleen R. 22:23

The church was hurting.



Amy Fritz 22:25

Yeah.



Colleen R. 22:25

And they did nothing to handle the church's hurt. We've got to go. But I still wouldn't go. Our friends, best friends, came into town from Florida. They said, "We are taking you somewhere else to visit church today."



Amy Fritz 22:42

These friends wouldn't take no for an answer. They told Colleen and Brian to choose a church and they would go with them.



Colleen R. 22:49

God spoke directly to my heart and said, it is time for you to go. They knew. I knew. By the end of the service when I am literally sobbing like ugly cry sobbing, they knew that they had done. God had worked through them that morning, and I get emotional when I think about that. Because that was when I was released from all of that guilt, all of that obligation.



Amy Fritz 23:14

Yeah.



Colleen R. 23:15

That I felt and it was God saying go, it is time for you to go.



Amy Fritz 23:20

I asked Colleen what healing look like in the aftermath. What is church PTSD look like for you?



Colleen R. 23:27

Yeah, gosh, every time you walk into a church space, or a church group, you are constantly vigilant. You're constantly on edge. I'm always wondering, okay, is this the real deal? Are these real people? Can I trust these people? Can I trust this preaching? Can I trust that if I get involved I'm I'm going to be okay? I mean, there's things where I will see an image from a church that isn't even mine. That looks similar. I mean, there was one that came from a local church, and I remember calling you going, Oh my gosh, no, you and I stopped and listened to it. Because we had to God led us to where we are now currently. I didn't really get very involved. I volunteered a little bit here and there really spent that time healing, just trying to find my way back to the relationship with God. I had.



Amy Fritz 24:23

As we talked, I asked Colleen At what point she realized that this church experience was spiritual abuse.



Colleen R. 24:30

That took a long time because at that point, I had not really understood or had heard that term, your education of the topic, your discussion with me a few other people in my life, some other things coming up in other churches in the country. And then doing some research and my discovery like through you of Wade Mullen who is amazing.



Amy Fritz 24:56

Yeah.



Colleen R. 24:56

has such a grasp on the topic.



Amy Fritz 24:58

Yeah. With the pushback Colleen had already received, I wanted to know why she would want to speak about this. Is this just cancel culture? Here's what she said,



Colleen R. 25:10

You know, my story could help someone, it could give somebody the strength to stand up and say, I won't do take this anymore.



Amy Fritz 25:18

Right. There are people that say, why would you even want anyone to know about this? Doesn't it just make the church look bad? Doesn't it just make people not want to get to know Jesus?



Colleen R. 25:33

Why would any person want to share any abuse story, there are good, healthy pastors and shepherds of their flock.



Amy Fritz 25:43

Do you think you can recognize that easier now,



Colleen R. 25:46

my radar for that stuff is very strong.



Amy Fritz 25:50

Or maybe that's one of the gifts of going to church hurt is that you realize that you can't build your faith on your pastor, when you make your living as somebody who represents Christ, the consequences can be and should be a lot more far reaching.



Colleen R. 26:07

But that's that's the nature of being a church organization, business that aligns themselves with Christ, whether your nonprofit for-profit, whatever it happens to be, you're aligning yourself with an all powerful God.



Amy Fritz 26:24

Right.



Colleen R. 26:25

And when you mock that, those consequences are very large, God still moved through it. Yes, he did. It doesn't excuse it, I see it so much, especially recently, with people speaking out and about the church abuse that has happened is the idea of that we start excusing their behaviors, and oh, but they were but look at all the work, they did. Look at all the people, they helped. Look at all the people that were saved at the church. That happened despite this preacher, and that is what I have clung to, for a long time.



Amy Fritz 27:06

You know, some people want to say, Let's not talk about it, because it's just gonna hurt the church. And I say, let's talk about because the church has already been hurt, whether or not we talk about it,



Colleen R. 27:21

there is redemption, there is peace, there is reconciliation, there is hope. The hope is what should shine through. And that is why I would still tell my story. If somebody asked me,



well, you're going to hurt the church. I don't know how love and hope can hurt the church. He walked me through this valley. I don't know how that testimony could hurt the church. But if I tell my story, and somebody is dealing with church hurt in their life, and my courage, if that can give them that courage to step out on faith, and either bring it forward or even just step get out of it, then I have done Kingdom work.



Amy Fritz 28:06

My final question for Colleen was this, what would you say to someone who is in the middle of a painful situation, and they just can't find it in themselves to darken the door of a church?



Colleen R. 28:18

you're making me cry. They're not alone. And this is very, kind of a trite answer. But don't give up. Grab a friend, and hold on tight. Find somebody that you trust, and bring them with you. But also, I'm gonna say this, give yourself time, spend the time in the hurt, feel the hurt, and then feel that little ounce of strength that's telling you to keep trying, really, it was the fact that I had surrounded myself with people who believed me. who encouraged me. And who wouldn't let me give up. For somebody going through the middle of it. The biggest thing is, is you're not alone.



Amy Fritz 29:06

Coleen's story blends beautifully with the words Mary DeMuth shared with me about healing from this kind of painful situation. We talked about what the timeline looked like for getting over something like this. And we talked about the question of gossip, and how that plays into the narrative when someone tells their story of how they've been hurt.



Mary DeMuth 29:25

Well, I think about all the healing that I've gone through my own life. The lion's share of that healing came in groups of one or two or three. Of me plus one or two or three of people listening and praying. That's how simple my healing journey has been. Have I gone to counseling? Absolutely. I've gone to counseling. Have I done trauma therapy? Yes, of course. I've done that. But the lion's share of it was just one on one one on two people loving me listening to me and praying.



Amy Fritz 29:55

How long does it take like people will say Yeah, 12 months I'll be fine.



Mary DeMuth 30:03

38 days?



Amy Fritz 30:04

I wonder, is it linear? Are there steps we go through? If we just check off the boxes? Am I gonna feel safe again?



Mary DeMuth 30:12

What's it look like? One of the things I talk about in The Wall Around your Heart is that God uses the very thing that wounds us to heal us. And



Amy Fritz 30:22

you don't want to hear that.



Mary DeMuth 30:23

I know, it's just a really sad truth. Here's what I'll say, if you've been wounded in negative community, even though it's excruciating, if you can identify one safe person, that safe relationship, in relationship you will heal. When you're, when you're broken in relationship, really, the only way to heal is through the same means- through a good relationship. So broken in negative community healed in good safe community. And is that a risk? Absolutely that's a risk. Because usually when you've been wounded by a leader, you thought you knew them. But you have to kind of go back to the people who you really know. And take another little step of trust of someone who has demonstrated their trustworthiness over the years and begin to process with them. And I've told audiences this so many times an Untold Story NEVER heals, you have to let it out. If you are quiet about it, and you never talk about it, you will not heal it because it's untold, it's not let out into the light. It is not something that can be processed, prayed through, talked about. You have to do that. And you cannot do it on your own. And I'm so sorry, that that's the truth.



Amy Fritz 31:34

I know that there are church leaders that have good, well intentioned, leaders that when a new person comes to their church, and they have been hurt in their old faith community, and that person wants to talk to them, I have seen and heard pastors that very much don't want to go there. They'll say, I think there's two things. One is, is it gossip? The other is, I think some of these leaders are afraid that this person is hard to please. And that if they're coming into their church talking about their past faith, community, church hurt experience, that before you know it, they will be out the door, talking about them. I've seen pastor say this on Twitter, it's a nice little pithy quote about like, if somebody comes into your church complaining about their old one. They're gonna leave complaining about yours. Tell me your thoughts on that.



Mary DeMuth 32:31

While that may be true, I would say that if you are a shepherd of a congregation, you should always err on the side of being a shepherd. Being a shepherd means listening to your sheep and loving them. Also, if there is a no gossip policy in a ministry or a church, you should be very cautious. And I am very against gossip. I think gossip is a terrible sin. And we don't talk about it enough. But gossip is talking about things with an intent to harm or bring salacious things forward. And really, you're the you get the glory for the gossip. It's about you. It's about you getting attention. It's about you saying Look how much I was hurt. But it is not gossip, to process pain. I just think sometimes if you say statements like that, well, if they complain about their past church, they're going to complain about mine. I understand where that comes from. It comes from brokenness and hurt and just all of the pain of ministry and I affirm it. It's it is rough. But I would hate to have pastors shepherds miss out on their calling, by dismissing people who had pain.



Amy Fritz 33:41

Yeah. So what would you say to somebody that's in the middle of a really hard season at their church? They've tried to do all the biblical things to resolve it. When do you know when it's time to leave? And when do you stay? How do you know that?



Mary DeMuth 33:59

First of all, if it's affecting your mental health you need to leave for your sake. It doesn't mean that you'll never come back. It just means that if you're being continually injured, you will never never heal and that wound, will just get bigger and bigger. It's like, you have an open wound and the church is pouring in germs into it. The only way you can heal from

that open wound is to go away from it, seal it up, take your antibiotics and not and not have germs thrown into your wound. Another way to figure it out, is talk to someone outside of your context outside of your church. Tell them everything that you're going through. That's not gossip, that's just trying to process something that you're going through and say I need your opinion, is this a healthy place for me? Is it should I stay a little bit longer is is there a breakthrough coming or whatever and, and a mature believer will be able to help you outside your context to help you understand but you're not gonna be able to figure it out inside the context.



Amy Fritz 34:57

There's so many good godly men and women that lead. Would you say something to those that are really, that feel really nervous and discouraged when people start talking about spiritual abuse, where they feel like it's sort of piling on the church, you know, maybe you could speak to them. And also people that like talk about spiritual abuse, how can we encourage good men and women of God?



Mary DeMuth 35:22

all of us that have the goal that the church is the beautiful bride of Christ, and she has some markings on her, she's got some mess. And so as the body of Christ, we should welcome prophetic voices that call us to account. And so instead of being discouraged by that I'm actually very encouraged by that. I'm glad that the sexual abuse scandals have come out, rather than being buried. Because in the light, they have a chance to heal. One of the things that I tried to do in writing the book, "We Too", was to always have my love of the church at the forefront of my mind, my job and my heart, was to help the church do better because I love her. There are people out there who are slamming the church because they hate her. Those are two different motivations. And my heart is not to rip it apart. It's to see it re-mended. And where it's been torn to see some of those places repaired. Yes, it does hurt when we hear people bashing the church. But I think the other question that's more helpful and winsome is "Why?" Even if the person hates church, and they're asking, why is the church so terrible? We need to ask why. And really, there's a wound there. And then that gets back to shepherding again, if someone is saying things like that they are a wounded sheep, and, and they need to be loved back to health. And some of us are called to do that. Just because that may be part of our ministry does not mean that we don't love the church, it means that we actually really, really, really do love the church. And I would say, if we don't talk about it, how will people come to know Jesus?



Amy Fritz 37:04

Yeah,



Mary DeMuth 37:05

because people that don't know Jesus can see a faker a mile away. And I would rather go to a church who says, "We messed up, we did this wrong, we're sorry, then I'm going to cover this up, and we're perfect. "



Amy Fritz 37:16

We have people that are already being hurt. It's not the speaking that caused the hurt. I when I was speaking with Bob Smietana, before going on the record, I asked the question of myself, you know, for him, like why would Amy be willing to do this? Why would Amy do this? It came down to this for me. That people are already being hurt. And I'm just sort of moving the curtain over to the side, in hopes that it's stops additional hurt from happening. Not looking at it doesn't mean it's not happening. Not telling people about it doesn't mean it's not happening. And the the hope is healing. That healing process can be very painful. But if nobody looks at it, it's hard for healing to happen. What is giving you hope these days?



Mary DeMuth 38:06

the African arm of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, which is no longer going to be a thing in terms of name, their response to it all gave me a lot of hope. It was to the effect of " We're heartbroken. Where we're sad. We're repentant. We're sorry. We hope that more victims come forward so we can be a part of the restoration process." That kind of thing brings me hope. And I think there's a lot to be learned from churches outside of your frame of reference and leaders who are just being godly in small places and not that Africa's. The continent is gigantic. But you know what I'm saying? Like not your typical Amero-centric contexts. Yeah. So yeah, that brings me hope.



Amy Fritz 38:52

If you had a chance to sit down with somebody just feeling wounded, church has hurt them, pastors hurt them, or a Christian ministry has hurt them- What would you want to tell them? And how would you encourage them?

M

Mary DeMuth 39:07

I would repent before them. What I mean by that is I just recently read the Daniel prayer where he repents for Israel's sin as if it were his own. I had an experience in South Africa, where I was at the congress of world evangelization in Cape Town. And I had a guy at my table, heard my story. And at the very end of the convention, he came to me, he got on his knees, he knelt before me. And he said, "I apologize on behalf of all the men that have done all those things to you." And it was profound. And so I feel like even though I didn't do the thing that hurt the person, I'm part of the body of Christ. And I can empathize and say, yeah, it was bad. And I am so sorry. And I choose to repent on behalf of the body of Christ that did that to you. And I am, you know, please forgive all of us, Lord for having these kinds of systems in our churches.



Amy Fritz 40:07

I wanted to wrap this up with a few personal thoughts. I wish I could sit with you and kneecap to kneecap and see you and have this conversation. But this is the next best thing. Some of you are listening and wondering if you should leave a church, a ministry or an organization that you've been a part of. Mary's advice to talk to someone outside of your specific context is so powerful. Reach out to a friend who isn't in the middle of this and ask for their thoughts. Some of you have experienced pastoral plagiarism at your own church. I wish this wasn't as common as it is. But I have received several emails over the years from people hurt by this. I'm so grateful for Dr. Stratton being willing to talk about this. And I hope it was an encouragement for you. Finally, some of you listening are ministry leaders who are faithful followers of Jesus, and your highest desire is to be the shepherd that God has called you to be. I am so thankful for you, your work is hard and holy. Don't be afraid of the families that come in the door still hurting and guarded because of their past hurt. They aren't a threat to you or your church, and they might just be some of your greatest teachers as you grow in your role as a shepherd. I've talked to so many people who have had their hurt compounded by leaders who dismissed them. As Mary said, I would hate for pastors to miss out on their calling, by dismissing people who have pain. This is your mission field, the hurting and the vulnerable. They need a gentle Shepherd more than they need a perfect sermon. As I was just about to finish producing this episode, a few things happened that derailed my progress. I received word from a friend that the pastor who had plagiarized all those sermons, referred to his experience of leaving our old church in his most recent sermon. Here's what he had to say, in his own words.

P

Pastor 42:05

Five years ago, my family and I, we went through a very devastating discouraging season. I was serving as a lead pastor in a church where God was straight up moving, people were worshipping. We had a record number of baptisms every year, people's lives are being changed. And then one day, I got a call from two of the elders in the church. They wanted to meet with me on a Saturday afternoon. And they relayed to me that I had been terminated, immediately fired. I had no moral failure. No embezzlement issues. I did have sin. I'm not perfect. I repented of some sin. But there were some people in the church who didn't like me. And instead of coming to me with their problem, they went to the elders and the leadership team at our church, they formed a coup and I was fired. And I had been slandered, and instead of working through this with me, they dismissed me immediately. And we were ostracized from the church right away. We lost our church, we lost our friends, we lost our income, we lost our future dreams, we sold our home.



Amy Fritz 43:05

The untruthful narrative this pastor shared turned out to be part of this small percentage of that sermon that was original work. A quick internet search confirmed that much of the rest of that sermon was lifted from Mark Driscoll. Thanks for listening to Episode Two of Untangled Faith. If you enjoyed this episode, I would be so grateful if you would share it with a friend and leave a review on iTunes. You can find me on Instagram and Facebook as Untangled Faith. for transcripts and show notes check out [untangledfaithpodcast.com](http://untangledfaithpodcast.com). On the next episode of Untangled Faith.



Jeff O. 43:49

We tried to explain these kids have been traumatized by being abandoned. And you know we couldn't we can't do that to them a second time, you know,



Sarah O. 43:59

And through that time God was really faithful to us.