

My Story

By Jonna Petry

This past summer I saw the movie, “The Help,” and a seed of courage was planted in my soul. One of the last lines of the movie:

God says we need to love our enemies. It hard to do. But it can start by telling the truth. No one had ever asked me what it feel like to be me. Once I told the truth about that, I felt free.

This story is an earnest attempt to speak the truth in love that freedom and new life may flourish.

My husband Paul and I started visiting Mars Hill Church back in the summer of 2001. I had recently read and loved J.I. Packer’s classic, *Knowing God*, and was finding great solace and security in a deeper understanding of God’s sovereignty. In those days, Mars Hill Church was about 400 members. There were not many families with children. And we came with five – our oldest 12 and our baby just turned one. We were very warmly embraced. Our family was rather ooo’ed and ahh’ed over. We seemed to have found a place where we were wanted and where we could lovingly serve (even if the music was completely unfamiliar to our ears.) And, what we didn’t realize, where our pride would be amply fed as well.

We were not without caution or discernment. We had seen enough upheaval in churches to know you’d better look closely at who’s in charge, how the leadership is structured and where the money goes. A year earlier, we had come across Alexander Strauch’s fine book, *Biblical Eldership* where he instructs about church government:

“By definition, the elder structure of government is a collective leadership in which each elder shares equally the position, authority, and responsibility of the office.”

In comparing this structure to what we had experienced previously, it was easy to embrace the premise that shared leadership, authority, and accountability are necessary for the healthy functioning of the church. For us, this became an essential for any future commitment to a church. And, our first Sunday at Mars Hill, there on the book table was a copy of Strauch’s book.

So we started attending regularly, heard a number of the pastors preach (because in those days they took turns preaching), listened carefully to what was said and mostly delighted in what we experienced. Mark Driscoll stood out then, as a persuasive speaker with a strong attitude but, we had confidence the leadership team, Mark included, was committed to the distinctive of biblical eldership. Though Mark was young, he was surrounded by a group of godly older men - Bent Meyer being one who also had years of pastoral experience behind him. This was very reassuring to us.

The church was growing and we became completely immersed in loving, serving and teaching. My father (who had not been in church for almost 40 years) and my sweet stepmother joined us monthly and then weekly for worship services - ferrying over from Poulsbo, Washington, to spend the day with us. Mark often used the expression that our church was “family” and we rather believed it - so effective in building a sense of belonging.

These were happy fulfilling years for us. My husband and I hosted a weekly home fellowship group that quickly grew to be the largest in the church. We had the space to welcome people in and hospitality was ministry for us. We hoped to demonstrate to the best of our ability the sacrificial love of Jesus because we believe this is the foundation of our lives as Christians. We were delighted to find a church home and thought we'd be there always. We loved and gave our very lives to the people in this church. Strong bonds of commitment and love were made and reciprocated. (We thought.)

After two years had passed, in the spring of 2004, Mark approached my husband, Paul, and asked him to consider serving as a pastor/elder. Mark at this time had become the primary preaching pastor in Ballard and Lief Moi, who bought an old theater for the church in Seattle's University District, became the primary preacher at that venue – the Paradox Theater - which featured concerts by local bands on weeknights and was active in street ministry. Each venue had its own feel and crowd and we were blessed to see the diversity and unity in the Body of Christ.

After much consideration and prayer, Paul started the elder process and was confirmed a pastor/elder – before the entire church with the laying on of hands by the eldership. How excited we were, I was. I was so proud of my husband and the ways God was moving in our lives. Paul served as a pastor, unpaid, almost full-time, and continued to work as an attorney in private practice to support our family. It was a big commitment, a lot of work, but we loved it. We loved the people we were with. It was a great season for awhile.

After a year serving as a volunteer pastor, Paul was offered a full-time position as Pastor of Families and Member Care. It would mean walking away from his private law practice and taking a pay cut in his annual income, but after more prayer and consideration, Paul signed an employment contract and gradually shut down his law practice. The church was growing, many newly married and young families were attending and we relished the work of providing encouragement and teaching to strengthen all these dear ones. It felt so fulfilling to be used for the Kingdom of God.

It wasn't long though, till the bubble started to leak and our eyes began opening a little...

What we had thought and hoped would be an entrance into deeper fellowship with godly leadership and with the Lord turned into a heavy burden of unspoken pressure along with the realization that things were not all they appeared to be.

Shortly before Paul was confirmed as a pastor/elder, I was invited to a dinner to celebrate Grace's (Mark's wife and my friend) birthday. There were a dozen or so women in attendance and I ended up sitting next to Karen Schaeffer, who was Mark's administrative assistant - a lovely, older, godly woman whom I greatly respected. Sitting next to us was an elder's wife who was close in age and who also had quite a bit of previous ministry experience. The three of us enjoyed great conversation – alive, encouraging, as iron sharpens iron. We ended up being the last three to leave the restaurant and as we walked to the car decided we should pray together for some of the things that had been shared. We got in the car and ended our time together praying for many things, including the elders, our families and the church.

The next morning I heard from the elder's wife, the one Karen and I had so enjoyed - that she had shared our conversation with her husband and he felt that it showed "disloyalty" on Karen's part, was gossip, and that it needed to be brought to Mark, which he did. Karen was fired. The gist of what she shared that was branded "disloyal" was a heart of thankfulness that my husband, Paul, was being made an elder because Mark needed strong men around him who could handle and stand up to push-back. When I found out what this elder and his wife had done, I called Mark immediately in tears and asked him to forgive me for my part in that conversation. Looking back, I'm not sure that Karen or I really did anything wrong, but I was sure afraid.

Regretfully, I treated my friend, Karen, horribly. After she was fired I stopped seeing her altogether. I was afraid of what it might mean for me if I continued as her friend. It was never spoken but rather understood that to remain in contact with her would be unwise. So with fear and pride in tow I conformed to the toxic system in order to show respect and loyalty. I chose to believe that God put us there for a reason – thinking now perhaps so we could encourage and strengthen the things that were weak.

Another rather ominous circumstance occurred in late 2005 when Paul was asked to participate in re-writing the church bylaws shortly after he came on staff. This happened after the church had renovated an old hardware store warehouse and moved into the 40,000 square foot facility. Lief shut down the Paradox Theater in the University District and returned to join the pastoral team at the new Ballard facility. Many from the Paradox congregation felt that Mars Hill had "sold-out" to a corporate model at that time, but with Lief's and Mark's assurances, most of them joined the Ballard congregation (Mark's first book, *Radical Reformation – Reaching Out without Selling Out*, had just been published).

As the church was growing, Mark wanted a smaller group of men involved with the everyday details of running the church without the need to gather every pastor/elder for discussion and voting. A number of issues had to be hammered out and the bylaws changed in order to allow a smaller group of elected elders (termed "the executive elders") to operate freely with the day-to-day administration and "vision" aspects of running the church while still granting full disclosure and including all the elders in votes for major decisions like changes to the bylaws and purchasing property. This was to ensure accountability and protection.

The elders wrestled back and forth some, concessions and compromises were made, but in the end, the newly adopted bylaws turned out to be, at least in Paul's mind, a great governing document that would ensure the health of the church. Those bylaws were voted on and affirmed by every elder. As they were shaking hands, Jamie Munson (the church's administrative pastor/elder, a very young man and fairly recent convert) said to Paul, "This is only half way." I guess that should have been a premonition.

The last happy thing that transpired during our time at Mars Hill Church was near Christmas in 2006. Mark had asked the elders to consider which of them felt called to lead the new Wedgwood campus in NE Seattle (formerly Anchor Baptist Church) and to let him know. We had been thinking and praying about what was next for us as Mars Hill Church continued to grow and this opportunity seemed perfect. We went to Mark at the staff Christmas party to express this. He was delighted, saying it was a confirmation for him. He said Paul was just the elder he had in mind. Mark brought over Lief Moi (his best friend, co-founder and right-hand man at the time) to share the good news. Lief expressed delight as well. How excited we were.

Then something happened in late January or February. There was a shift. Mark had been seeking all kinds of information and strategy help for another reorganization plan in order to “grow the church to the ‘next level’” and had recently had meetings with Larry Osborn in California amongst others. Paul had one meeting with the executive elders about taking on the lead pastor role at Wedgwood. One Executive Elder, Steve Tompkins, insinuated that Paul had many people who looked up to him in the church and that could potentially lead to a church split. Steve asked Paul what he had to say about that. Paul was really shocked and hurt at the poison of this remark and no doubt this had something to do with the outcome.

Many drastic changes occurred in the spring of 2007. Mark pressured all the elected executive elders [with the exception of Jamie Munson] to resign their posts, saying a new structure was necessary. Mark also decided that Lief would no longer function as the pastor of the Ballard campus (the primary and largest campus where Mark taught mostly in person) and as a result the two of them had a horrible falling out. This was an ominous sign for me because Mark had often spoken about his love and appreciation for Lief’s willingness to go “toe-to-toe” with him and how this was vital for the health of the church.

Nobody talked to Paul about Wedgwood again until May, when in a sort of backhanded way, Paul heard from another elder, James Harleman (a former executive elder who had just resigned from that position under Mark’s pressure), that Paul was no longer being considered for the position, that James was in fact going to lead Wedgwood. That was really hard, but we covered over our stinging disappointment and chose to believe that God must have something else in mind for us.

During this same three months, another drastic change occurred. The way all the pastors’ salaries had been determined completely changed. It was proposed that Paul’s annual salary be cut by \$15K to more accurately reflect his “importance to the church mission.” Further still, Paul, who is an attorney, was not asked to help rewrite the newest bylaws which Mark and Jamie were planning, despite the fact that Paul had helped draft the previous bylaws.

Mark was preaching through the book of Nehemiah, utilizing it to promote his future vision for the church. And now, into summer, an oppressive heaviness began to overshadow everything. There was a real sense of spiritual warfare and I fasted and prayed under the burden on multiple occasions. The summer elders’ retreat in Whistler, B.C. was all about the importance of “unity” and how the new structure and bylaws were essential if we were going to keep growing as a church. Saying that there was heavy coercion applied would be putting it mildly.

Up until that time it was a regular practice for the elders’ wives to gather monthly and pray and share and encourage one another. At our meeting in August 2007, I had been asked to give a short devotional lesson before we broke up into small groups. What I felt inspired to bring were a few Scriptures on “the testing of our faith” and I reflected on how the various struggles and testing we often face as a church and as individuals are God’s means to refine and purify us. How little did I know what severe testing would come.

Shortly after this meeting, in my praying for the church that God’s will would be done in the upcoming changes, I sent a letter to the elders’ wives inviting them to join me in prayer, along with Scriptures I had been meditating on. Mark, who reads Grace’s emails, was livid about it and verbally lambasted the elders at their next meeting for not keeping their wives in line.

Mark was upset by an invitation to prayer? Why he would be so upset is still a mystery. But I've often wondered if it was perhaps because *his* plans were already made.

We had been there long enough to see how growth, power, and money, were influencing decisions. We were not surprised to see how power tempts and corrupts. We knew that leadership was in the throes of testing. My husband took very seriously his role as an elder knowing his responsibility was first to the Lord and then to the sheep for the health of the church. The proposed new bylaws gave Mark control without any secure mechanism for accountability. Though Mark and Jamie thought otherwise, this wasn't good for them either. And no doubt, they have both greatly suffered because of it.

The deadline arrived for commenting on the new bylaws. Paul responded as asked, in writing, making suggested changes and politely proposing some edits and wording which would put in place an appeals process for church members who might find themselves under "church discipline."

Three days later on a Sunday evening at 8:30, after Mark's last sermon on Nehemiah in which he ranted about men "who don't follow the chain of command...even in leadership of this church" Paul and Bent Meyer were angrily threatened by Mark in a small private meeting that if they didn't resign from staff and as elders immediately they would both be fired and put through "very personal and painful" trials to have them removed as elders, that their "files were full and growing." No other reasons for dismissal were given. Neither of them resigned. The meeting lasted maybe five minutes. And then the hell really began.

That night after the service I was waiting for Paul in the lobby of the church. Paul had let me know earlier that evening that he had received an email from Jamie Munson saying there was a mandatory meeting following the seven o'clock service. I sat waiting for over an hour. Just about everyone had gone home by then.

I was starting to really wonder what was going on when my son and his girlfriend walked in from outside the church. "Daddy's been trying to reach you on your cell phone." (I had a few missed calls from unknown numbers). "He's walking home." (We live 7 miles from the church. It was cold and raining.) "He asked me to come by and get his cell phone, his keys and his coat out of his office. He was fired tonight, Mom." My heart fell into my stomach.

[Earlier after the service while I sat waiting for Paul in the lobby I had seen one of the newly elected executive elders, Scott Thomas, and he glanced over at me a few times with an odd look on his face. I smiled back politely. Though I didn't know it, he had just participated in that awful meeting where my husband was threatened and fired. I sat there waiting. Scott walked by and said nothing to me.]

Initially, I thought Mark had just reacted impulsively and in anger to something he thought Paul had done that was untrue. I thought, "We just need to trust God, continue to do what's right and pursue peace." I knew we hadn't done anything wrong and so everything would eventually work out for good. I was naïve and oh so trusting. That painful night in the wee hours of the morning, Paul sent emails to the four executive elders that had participated in the firing asking to know what his 'sins' and offenses were so he might consider them before God.

Paul also sent an email to all the elders telling them what happened (they had no previous knowledge of it) and asking them to pray.

The next day we received a copy of an email from one of the elders, a close friend (we thought), titled: "Your accusers." It was an internal email that had been sent from Jamie Munson to all the elders except Paul and Bent. Paul's and Bent's email access through the church network had been immediately cut off and the case against Paul and Bent was laid out; accusations that were a complete shock to us. Paul's request to the executive elders hours before was completely ignored.

Two days after Paul and Bent were fired, Jamie posted a letter to the church on the members' website stating what had been done. This caused a great commotion within the church. To say people were alarmed and dismayed is putting it mildly. [The elders were so bombarded with questions that they eventually opened up a place on the members' website for a short period so members could ask any questions concerning Bent and Paul's firing, elder trials, and the new re-organization of the church. The "elders" then crafted a 142-page document to answer "all" the questions and to quell the uproar.]

Even after a few days I thought to myself, "There is no way the other elders are going to let this stand. They know Mark's proclivity to anger and impulsiveness and they love us too much to let this continue." Yes, some of the younger men would be scared to speak up, but we had confidence that if it came to a trial the seasoned older men who loved Christ and who knew Paul and his character and who knew Mark and his character would see what was truly going on: that Paul had done nothing wrong - certainly nothing that would disqualify him as an elder, and that his convictions about the bylaws in no way warranted this kind of treatment.

I remember thinking, "This can't be happening. God, you won't let this stand. You know the truth. Lord, set this right. Please, God..."

After two weeks of "investigation" and "fact-finding," a "trial" was convened. Twenty-two elders and all the elder candidates filled a large room where Paul was permitted to read his prepared statement regarding accusations he wasn't even sure of and was then called upon to answer any and all elder questions. His accusers presided over the trial. Paul had no advocate, no friend, no witnesses to support him. After the questioning he was asked to leave the room so the elders could "deliberate." Paul was found guilty at his "trial" of: "lack of trust and respect for spiritual authority and improper use of confidential information" (for discussing the proposed bylaws with a MHC deacon/friend to get input regarding an appeals process for members under church discipline). The elders then voted to remove Paul as an elder. We were stunned.

What was going on? Why had Mark and Jamie so turned against Paul? Why had the rest of the elders gone along with such horrendous behavior? The only thing that now made any sense to us was this: that underneath all the spin and hysteria and Jamie's blatant denial to the contrary, this was about power and control (authority and submission), this was about getting the proposed by-laws passed, and Mark would have no dissent. Mark was apparently willing to do almost anything to ensure he would get total compliance. And he did.

With this realization came the awareness that the life and health of the church was hanging in the balance. Mark's behavior was frightening - angry, accusing, "beating and battering" his co-shepherds, his closest friend, and any who showed even a slight resistance or question to his desired plans. This didn't look like Jesus but more like a wolf in sheep's clothing. Who was going to protect the sheep and the church? Lief Moi (Mars Hill co-founder and Mark's so-called best friend – the one who would go toe-to-toe with him) had been demoted, diminished, and basically cast aside. Five elected executive elders had resigned under pressure.

Mark and Jamie fired the men who were willing to disagree with them. Now what men would be willing to stand up or even suggest that at least they take more time to consider this complete change to the leadership structure of the church? If the elders voted for the new proposed bylaws they would be giving up all authority to govern the church forever. In essence they would no longer *be* elders. Mark with his handpicked one or two would basically be able to do whatever he wanted with millions of dollars at his disposal.

These circumstances called for men of integrity and courage. Those days may well have been my husband's finest hour. No longer "officially" an elder yet still very much a man with a deep love and concern for the well-being of the church, Paul appealed to every elder in a heart wrenching letter pleading with them to pause, pay attention, and realize the gravity of what voting for the new proposed governing structure would mean and instead find another way. Please read his document entitled: *My Confession and Request for a Redress of Grievances*.

My husband's letter did not affect the outcome. The bylaws passed. New "elders" were added to the now impotent group and Mark had unquestioned control. It did not change the outcome, but I cannot imagine it didn't convict some hearts as my husband attempted to save the church. (My husband doesn't like that last sentence as he thinks it sounds too dramatic, but that is the way I saw it.) The men who were called to shepherd God's flock bowed under the pressure of abusive manipulative power and the church has greatly suffered because of it.

After the trial we were "restored as members" and our access to the church's members-only website was re-activated. We were still attending services, though the family class we were scheduled to teach had been taken over by other elders. But, once the new bylaws passed at the end of October, we knew we could not remain at the church under the top-down leadership authoritarianism. Not a hint of biblical eldership remained even though it was talked about as though it was adhered to.

Completely dismayed and devastated, we withdrew as members. We could not support the church's new bylaws, which was a requirement for church membership. We resigned our membership, in writing, in an email we sent in early November to both Mark and Jamie. They accepted our resignations responding back by email with empty condolences. We never heard from Mark again.

Not long after that, one of the pastors, Brad House, a young man with no previous pastoral experience, sent Paul an email asking us to come in for a meeting so we could "discuss" our grievances even though we were no longer members. Paul had a couple of heated phone conversations with him hoping that this wasn't what it appeared to be. Paul was hoping that Brad or someone in leadership really cared enough to act like a brother who loves through adversity.

It became clear that Brad wasn't sympathetic toward us or our situation at all; that he would only further attempt to use his "pastoral authority" to "help" us see the "rightness" of the elders' actions. Oh, the layers of spin and manipulation that were conveyed.

Some very dear people who were not our close friends (but proved to be) who had eyes to see what was going on, questioned the elders in emails, phone calls, and in personal meetings. And because of it, they also endured their own scenarios of abuse and resigned as members. If not for this small band of devoted Christ-followers who came alongside us and carried us through the darkest season of our lives, who knows to what extent the devastation would have been? Paul received three months severance pay but this could not carry us through the season needed for Paul to rebuild his law practice. This same group and other dear friends, some who remained anonymous, kept us afloat that first year with financial support which helped us pay our mortgage and radio ads for Paul's law practice.

Some of these same folks also rented a room in a community center near our home for a season so we would all (about 30 people) have a place to worship on Sundays while we continued pursuing steps toward reconciliation. Paul had no desire to start a church though some of that small band may have wished so. At this point everything we believed about church had just crumbled. But God's love as demonstrated in these dear ones will never be forgotten.

In the first week of December 2007, over a month after we resigned our membership, the church elders voted to "discipline" Paul and published a letter instructing MHC members to shun him. The shunning document was published on the members' website and letters were mailed to members as far away as Colorado.

I remember that day well, as my heart sank to the ground on reading the text a friend had emailed us. I could hardly breathe. In great anguish I thought to myself, "I can't just do nothing. How am I supposed to respond to *this*?" I was reminded of the words from Scripture, "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse..." So mechanically I went to the store and bought beautiful potted poinsettias and some generic but thoughtful Christmas cards that I lovingly signed and then personally delivered them - trembling and in tears - to the homes of several elders, including Mark Driscoll, Brad House, and Jamie Munson. At the Driscoll's, Grace's father and one of the children opened the door, Grace was coming down the stairs and when she saw me she said my name and hurried to the door, hugged me and cried too. No words were spoken.

In shock and heartbroken, Paul and I tried desperately that first half-year to bring about some level of reconciliation. We so longed to be restored to our friends, to have our name and reputation exonerated, and to have peace in our relationships. This had become our family that we loved and served and ministered to as our own dear children and as brothers and sisters. These were our dear friends. How could they do this to us? Words do not adequately describe the shock, horror, betrayal, and rejection we felt. The weight of the loss was excruciating.

My dear father and stepmother belonged to a Mars Hill community group that met in Poulsbo. Joining the group had been a huge step for them. Not having been in church for almost 40 years, my dad (a Vietnam Veteran and retired Colonel with 24 years in the United States Air Force) was moving toward trusting Jesus and Christians again. They even hosted the community group for a time in their home and were enjoying small group fellowship for the first time in their

marriage. After the shunning letter was posted, Brad House called my dad and said that if they could not support the elders' decisions regarding Paul, then they would have to leave their community group. So ended my father's (a man I had earnestly prayed for almost my whole adult life to know the Lord) beautiful reentrance to the church. They never went again. And no one from their group remained in friendship with them. They were shunned, too.

Thankfully, my father didn't throw away his new child-like faith. One day in their home, not long after these appalling events, I was sitting on the couch next to him, his arm around my shoulder, my head leaning on his chest, (I knew he was heartbroken for us but he was very strong and a bit stoic) and he said to me, "Honey, this is just a good reminder that we cannot put our eyes on a man, but only on Jesus." So much wisdom and love in that one statement.

Trying to do everything just right, we walked out the steps of Matthew 18, the scriptural guidelines for reconciling when a brother offends you (though before the firing and after they had not been walked out toward us). We did not mass email all our friends and acquaintances in the church (hundreds of them) to tell them what had really happened to us, as we were still trusting that godly resolution would occur and we didn't want to do anything that could jeopardize that. So we purposed to only speak about these matters to our church friends if they came directly to us with questions, believing that reconciliation would come soon.

One local pastor, a friend to our family, who heard about what was going on, called Mark and pleaded with him to take the shunning letter off the members' website, saying it was "giving the church a black eye." At one point, this pastor was thinking he might be able to serve as a mediator but he quit his involvement after Mark's continued refusal.

In January 2008, we made another strong appeal to Mark and Jamie, demanding this time that they take down the shunning letter (which had remained posted on the members website for almost 2 months), and retract the lies about Paul that had been written and published to members, or face possible legal ramifications. We implored them to face the reality of the cruelty they had unleashed on us, our children, and our family. We pleaded with them to bring in a mediator to help resolve the gross injustice. Jamie's response in a nutshell was this: "Though we still believe we have done nothing wrong, we are willing to meet with you and anyone you choose." They did, however, remove the shunning letter from the church's website.

This offer to meet felt completely disingenuous. Likely they knew they were in a legal bind and were willing to discuss a possible legal/financial settlement hoping we might agree to some sum with a requirement to sign a "gag order" or non-disclosure contract, as has been reported by other Mars Hill pastors and employees who have resigned. (Signing a non-disclosure contract appears to now be a requirement for receiving any severance package.)

Our last letter to Mark and Jamie, sent in February 2008 (a response to Jamie's "we still believe we've done nothing wrong" letter), reveals the state of our completely broken hearts. It wasn't a legal settlement we were after. What we so longed for, what we were hoping for, was a demonstration of God's love and grace. These were pastors right? This was a church, right – not a cutthroat corporation?

Along with this last letter we included a copy of a letter Bent Meyer (the pastor/elder who was fired with Paul) had recently written to the elders appealing to them to change their course, make things right and restore us. The elders (all but one or two on staff), were impotent to do anything. Nothing changed.

After multiple appeals were continually rejected by Mark and Jamie, we discreetly implored some local and then national leaders, who Mark said he respected, to help us, including John Piper and C.J. Mahaney. No one was willing to get involved. I was shocked and heartbroken again. You're kidding? The whole Body of Christ and no one is willing to step in, judge the matter, and attempt to make things right? How can Matthew 18 be carried out if not one Christian leader will stand in to bring peace and reconciliation?

Months passed as we exhausted every avenue we could think of to reconcile with leadership. We were still hoping to salvage some of our relationships with people we loved and respected in the church. Now we felt free to pursue some of them (about 30 families we hoped to remain in friendship with) to explain what really happened to us. We wrote a short letter expressing our love and desire for continued friendship and sent copies of the documents that clearly told the story (asking that the documents be kept confidential), trusting they would see the horrible injustice we endured. This was naïve on our part. The assault on our reputation and the spin from the elders had been extremely effective. Only about a third of those we pursued in love were willing to remain in friendship with us – another heart wrenching reality.

During this whole season since the firing and the months that followed, I was emotionally and spiritually devastated. I was often tormented by fear. I had nightmares and imaginations of someone trying to physically harm Paul, me, and the children. If Mark had had ecclesiastical power to burn Paul at the stake I believe he would have. I literally slept in the fetal position for months. I stayed in bed a lot, bringing the children in bed with me to do their schoolwork. I became severely depressed and could hardly bring myself to leave the house except when absolutely necessary. I cried nearly every day for well over a year thinking I must soon cry it out, right? But, the sorrow was bottomless. My faith was gravely shaken. How could a loving God allow this? Later it became clear that I had typical symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Depression and that these reactions were common in someone who has experienced spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse occurs when someone uses their power within a framework of spiritual belief or practice to satisfy their own needs at the expense of others. It is a breach of sacred trust. Christians are commanded by Jesus to love one another. When that is projected, articulated, enjoyed and then treacherously betrayed, the wounded person is left with “a sense of having been raped, emotionally and spiritually” – not by a stranger, but by someone who was deeply trusted. (See *Recovering from Church Abuse* by Len Hjalmarson)

Anyone who has experienced such treatment will tell you the greatest sorrow, however, is not over how you are harmed but how the ones you love the most are harmed. I mentioned my father. I will not mention the deeper aspects of how this has affected my husband and my children who were in close relationship with the Driscolls and other elder families. Our oldest son loved Mark and had great respect for him. He drove Mark's truck on occasions to the dump, to pick up supplies, and spent time helping Mark with other work and errands when he could lend a hand.

Our son gave huge amounts of his time, energy, and heart to the church, volunteering for building and painting projects and as a youth sound technician. Our oldest daughter regularly babysat for the Driscolls and for other elders' families. One day we were in loving safe community (we thought) and the next day completely cut off and scorned. I have never experienced such cruelty or rejection in all my life. Seeing your loved ones abused, their hearts broken, their emotions heavy and dark, and their faith nearly destroyed, is the greatest pain of all.

At several points along the way we were urged by family and friends to seriously consider suing Mark, the elders, and the church because not only had they violated Scripture, their own bylaws, and the church membership covenant, but under civil law we believed they were guilty of multiple violations as well, including intentional infliction of emotional distress, defamation, libel, slander, tortuous interference with business relationships, violations of employment standards, and more. We prayed and wrestled with the idea for months, finally concluding that it was better to be wronged and entrust it to God's judgment.

This story is not without redemption, however. For us and our children "the spell" has been broken and we are free as we continue to heal. Free to love, trust, and follow Jesus apart from abusive leadership. I have come to see more clearly my own sin and complicity with the abuse. I have come to understand that I was wrong in the way I entrusted my heart to people, looking to them for approval and affirmation, finding my identity in my relationships and in my ministry instead of completely and solely entrusting my heart to the Living God and finding my identity and security in Jesus Christ alone, who loves me and died for me and calls me His own. For we are all capable of great sin. And, no doubt, the wrong way I entrusted my heart to others coincided with the depth of my pain at their betrayal and rejection.

There have been some restored friendships with former elders. In addition to Bent and Joanne Meyer, we have reconciled with Lief Moi and his dear wife, Tonya, who were co-founders of Mars Hill along with Mike and Donna Gunn. The Moises came to our home in May of 2009, shortly after Lief resigned as an elder and they left the church. It had been over two years since we had last seen them. They stayed at our home all afternoon and poured out their hearts to us regarding their own pain of betrayal, and apologized for the ways they had sinned against us. Many tears were shed.

After relaying the painful story of my father's treatment, I asked Lief if he would consider calling my dad to also apologize to him. Lief said he would. But that night, my father, who was fighting lung disease, suddenly departed to be with the Lord. To this day, the church's treatment of my father is still one of the most heartbreaking things I have ever experienced.

In the fall of 2010, another former pastor/elder, Tim Reber, contacted Paul, expressing his desire that they meet. Tim apologized for going along with what he knew at the time was wrong. Soon after, Tim and his sweet wife, Mary, came over to our home so the four of us could repair our relationship. It is so healing to be restored to those you have loved.

Waking up to the abusive system we had been a part of, I was reminded and convicted about how I had treated my friend, Karen, years earlier. I sought her out during this same time. It had been 6 years since we last saw each other. We met for coffee. I apologized and asked for her forgiveness for how I had rejected her, and shared my *own* story of abuse. More tears were shed.

Thankfully our relationship has been restored and has now deepened into something of great beauty. God has done amazing things with us, like bringing us together last year one heart-wrenching evening as we cared for friends, a couple who were members at Mars Hill Church, the wife who lay dying of cancer after lingering for months. She departed on that day we were there to care for them.

It has been a long time in coming, but I do now have renewed hope and joy for the future. I believe God is working through all these things and who knows what the future holds? We regularly run into the Driscolls and the Munsons during baseball season. Our boys play in the same youth baseball league. We have mutual friends with many of the elders that cause our paths to cross at weddings and funerals. There has been a strained cordiality between us and that is better than open hatred. The final chapters of this story are yet unwritten and I remind myself that, "All things are possible with God."

As a result of my experience, I have come to know and depend on Jesus and his love more deeply. My faith, though crushed initially, has been greatly strengthened. I am grateful to be able to say, "What was intended to harm me, God intended for good..." And, I do pray that even as more painful stories come to light that ultimately, this will turn out for Mark's good, too. I believe there are many things he is blind to and many things he adamantly resists. I pray God will open his eyes and give him the courage to face them. Whereas, I used to believe the most loving, gracious, faithful thing to do was to keep these matters private. I do not believe that anymore. The spiritual abuse must be exposed and, with God's help, eradicated, so lives can be healed (victims and perpetrators) and the damage that has been done to the reputation of the Gospel repaired.

Two years ago I heard one of those painful stories. I sat in a room with a friend and a few other invited people as she read out loud (and I heard for the first time) her story of spiritual and emotional abuse at the hands of Mark and Grace Driscoll. I cried. My husband had been a pastor/elder on staff at the time. Though we didn't know about it then, after hearing her story the realization of our shared responsibility sank in.

On the surface, so many factors look great at Mars Hill Church. Who wants to be a critic when in many ways this ministry appears blessed and is so popular? As the thinking goes, "God must be pleased. Look how the church is growing!" Like a lot of others, we were willing to overlook Mark's immaturity, his character weakness and wrong-doing for all kinds of reasons: because he was young, because he was talented, because we really didn't know all the facts, because we trusted, because it wasn't our place, in order to extend him grace, so as not to offend him or lose his good favor, in order to protect the reputation of the gospel, because we were afraid. Just writing these excuses makes me sick at my stomach.

Not as an excuse, but the fact is, while we were at Mars Hill Church there was a lot we did not see. Many things were kept secret. And we did not have clear vision then. We were *in the ether*, under a kind of "delusion." I have come to believe that when idolatry is at play, it often creates and allows for an unreality to take hold of those who participate, as if under a spell, unable to see or hear the truth because it is all filtered through a projected "reality." But it is a false reality - a delusion. I believe this dynamic is often true in cults where there is one dominant, charismatic, controlling leader.

As I look back, this “delusion” aspect makes sense to me and helps to explain why the abuse is allowed and continues, while so many people are unaware and/or unwilling to confront. At some point though, a circumstance with leadership arises that invariably places you in the fray. You either bow and submit, or resist and face searing retribution.

By God’s mercy, that circumstance came to us. We resisted the pressure of coercion, and dreadful consequences were meted out. But ultimately, this turned out to be our rescue – as we were delivered out of a sick, dysfunctional system. And now, I thank God for it.

I have my own sin in all this. I contributed to the dysfunctional system. I acted in pride, idolatry, fear of man, people pleasing, cowardice, and favoritism. I am truly sorry for all the ways I personally hurt people by my words, my actions or inactions, directly or indirectly, during my time at Mars Hill Church from 2001-2007, especially as a part of leadership. And now, I am also very sorry for how my years of silence regarding the spiritual abuse that I suffered have indirectly contributed to the abuse of other precious people. Though truthfully, I don’t think I could have written about it any sooner.

What started with a beautiful beginning - three families sent from Antioch Bible Church in Kirkland to plant a “daughter church” in Seattle that would be authentic and relevant to reach the lost - has turned into the personal ministry of one very ambitious man. Although it is still called a church, I think a more honest and accurate name might be “Mark Driscoll Ministries,” not unlike the name for Billy Graham’s organization, a man who Mark has said he greatly admires. I think what we are seeing demonstrates a confused ecclesiology and I fear this is also being taught to many other young church planters through the Acts 29 Network who want to “have” a church just like Mark’s.

The amalgamation of church and personal ministry did not happen overnight. The church began committed to certain distinctives, like biblical eldership, and core values like “meaning, truth, beauty and community” and then one driven, talented individual eventually monopolized power, pushed all dissenters away, and turned the church into a “City within a City” where he functions like a king because he believes this is the best way to “grow the numbers.” And in this case, Mark has proven that to be true, drawing in thousands with his entertaining (and regrettably often crass and inappropriate) speaking. I realize that many believe this is great and see no problem with it. But I would never have agreed to this if it had been openly stated - and I believe many others would have felt the same. I believe this was spiritually abusive toward all the members of the church at that time. And, apparently, a thousand or so members had problems with it as well and chose not to renew their membership in 2008 after the leadership cancelled everyone’s membership and asked them to reinstate as members under the new bylaws.

So here we are over four years later, finally able, willing, and convicted to share our story. Why? Why does it matter now?

We remained quiet for over four years hoping there would be evidence of self-correction and maturity and that we might be able to cover over the gross injustice we experienced with love. But it appears things have only grown worse.

In Acts, Chapter 20, the Apostle Paul pleaded with the Ephesian elders to pay attention and guard the flock. This admonition, along with the mounting stories of abuse and misconduct coming out of Mars Hill Church, has added to our conviction. We believe that to remain quiet now would be unloving and disobedient to God.

As my husband stated earlier – if we fail to remember our history, we leave it for others to re-write. And, unfortunately, some of that has occurred.

And, in Mark's own words from his book, *Vintage Jesus*:

People are not perfect. As sinners we need to be gracious, patient, and merciful with one another just as God is with us or the church will spend all of its time doing nothing but having church discipline trials. It is worth stressing, however, that we cannot simply overlook an offense if doing so is motivated by our cowardice, fear of conflict, and/or lack of concern for someone and their sanctification. In the end, it is the glory of God, the reputation of Jesus, the well-being of the church, and the holiness of the individual that must outweigh any personal desires for a life of ease that avoids dealing with sin biblically. Sometimes God in his providential love for us allows us to be involved in dealing with another's sin as part of our sanctification and growth. It is good for us and for the sinner, the church, and the reputation of the gospel if we respond willingly to the task God has set before us.

What happened to us was very wrong. The way it was publicly described by Mark and the elders at the time was completely exaggerated and deceptive. The way the media and blogs have since reported on it has many holes and errors. Now it is open and plain to everyone.

If Mark and the organizations he leads do not change, I fear many more will be hurt, Mark and his family included. To not speak is to not love or care and shows no thought or consideration for those who have been wounded and those who will be in the future. We are witnesses. There is a pattern. There is a history. There is an ethos of authoritarianism and abuse. Mark is the unquestioned head of Mars Hill Church and the Acts 29 Network. His elders have no way to hold him accountable. Those under him likely fear him and want to garner his favor so they don't dare say nor do anything that might anger him. This is tragic.

Perhaps at some point, with enough outcry and exposure, Mark will come to his senses, own his harmful behavior, and get the help he needs to change. I hope so. Our common Enemy can make terrible use of our weaknesses and blind spots. Our Lord's harshest words were for leaders who used their status, power, the Scriptures, and God's people for their own self-aggrandizement. Surely this is not what Mark meant to do.

A Christianity which perpetuates the exaltation of mere men to god-like status, while belittling and wounding so many of God's children in the process, is completely antithetical to what Jesus taught and is just as harmful to the leaders as it is to those who follow. Sadly, this is not the love of Jesus Christ or the power of the gospel we are called to demonstrate to one another and to the world.

