

AFTER CHURCH HURT

HEALING IN THE
CARE OF THE
GOOD SHEPHERD



TIMOTHY ST. JOHN
FOREWORD BY JONATHAN HOLMES



“Read this, and the first thing you will notice is a hint of rest in your soul. You are understood; you are given words that were hard to find before. Just as questions are forming in your mind, Tim is talking about them. This book is from a wise, experienced, and compassionate guide.”

Edward T. Welch, CCEF Faculty; author of *The Humility Project for Men*

“Timothy St. John has given the church exactly what it needs—a biblically faithful guide through one of our most painful realities. His careful grounding in Scripture provides both theological depth and pastoral wisdom for those hurt by the very communities meant to care for them. This book fills a critical gap, offering hope and practical direction for a problem that has long been ignored in our churches.”

Chris Moles, Author of *The Heart of Domestic Abuse*

“If you’ve been hurt by church shepherds and just want to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd again, this book directs your heart there. Don’t give up on the church. Jesus didn’t.”

Jeremy Pierre, Dean, The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Ministry
Lawrence & Charlotte Hoover
Professor of Biblical Counseling & Practical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Timothy St. John is one of the most gentle and compassionate pastors I know. And it’s with his characteristic gentleness that he addresses the incredibly sensitive topic of church hurt. I’m confident anyone who has experienced this pain will feel seen and known by reading this timely resource.”

Scott Mehl, Pastor, Cornerstone Church, West Los Angeles; managing director, The Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship

“*After Church Hurt* is a much-needed and trustworthy guide for those wounded by people entrusted with their care. With biblical clarity and pastoral gentleness, Timothy St. John offers hope and

wise direction toward healing, renewed trust, and the gracious presence of the Good Shepherd.”

Darby Strickland, CCEF Faculty; author of *Is It Abuse?*

“Tim St. John walks alongside the wounded without fostering victimhood or isolation from Christ’s gift of the local church. These pages offer healing balm for the hurting and humble instruction for leaders seeking healthier church culture.”

Paul Tautges, Pastor; counselor; author of *Remade: Embracing Your Complete Identity in Christ*

“As I read this book, I felt the wrong and deep injustice of each situation described. But then I knew I had to finish the rest of *After Church Hurt*. I needed to know how to care for people like the Good Shepherd does and make sure our church was a safe place for the hurting. Timothy St. John has equipped the wider evangelical church with his years of experience and wisdom, and we are better for it.”

Deepak Reju, Senior Pastor, Ogletown Baptist Church; author of *On Guard*

“I’m grateful that my friend Timothy St. John has written this book to help churches be safer, counselors be better equipped to help those who have been harmed, and church members be drawn closer to the care of the Good Shepherd. If you are a pastor, church leader, counselor, or a person who has been harmed, this book is a clear and helpful guide toward grace, healing, and reconnection.”

Greg Wilson, LPC Supervisor; counselor; coauthor of *When Home Hurts*

“In *After Church Hurt*, Tim St. John helps church leaders assess their shepherding, educates brothers and sisters to recognize and respond helpfully when church hurt occurs, and ministers to those who have experienced a range of harm from church leaders. Tim’s book is a redemptive gift to the church.”

Kirsten Christianson, Biblical Counselor; congregational care consultant

“Timothy St. John helps people honestly navigate the disorienting dynamics of church hurt with understanding, biblical clarity, and kindness. Whether the reader has been affected by an unbiblical church culture from church leadership or even while serving in leadership, this book offers practical insights to process their experience under the ultimate authority of Jesus Christ, our gracious Shepherd, Redeemer, and Friend.”

Joe Keller, Executive Pastor, Grace Baptist Church,
Santa Clarita, CA

“Tim St. John is thoroughly biblical, consistently practical, and unwavering in his love and compassion. It is for these reasons I can wholeheartedly endorse his book, which takes that same heart and looks at the hard but needed topic of church hurt.”

Kim Kira, Preaching Pastor, Lighthouse Community
Church, Torrance, CA

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Healing in the Care
of the Good Shepherd

Timothy St. John



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To my wife, Jee:

Thank you for making our home a place of care
where we can safely graze and grow
in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

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Foreword

I HAVE A sense—maybe more than a sense—that you’ve picked up this book for one of a few deeply personal reasons:

- You’ve been hurt by the church.
- You care for someone who has.
- Or you love the church and feel the weight of sorrow when others are wounded by it.

Does any of that resonate with you?

If so, you’re in the right place. The pages ahead speak directly to these painful and complex realities. My friend and brother, Tim St. John, has spent years walking closely with people in each of these places—offering presence, understanding, and hope. And like many of those he walks with, Tim also knows what it’s like to carry wounds from the church.

There’s something powerful about being truly seen and known—especially when it comes to pain. That’s part of what makes this book so meaningful. Tim doesn’t shy away from the difficult tension at the heart of this topic: the church, which should be a place of healing, is sometimes where deep wounds are formed. He handles this truth gently but honestly, holding together both the pain and the hope with wisdom and care.

Too often, when confronted with stories of church hurt, we’re tempted toward extremes. We may reject the church

entirely, believing it beyond redemption. Or, in an effort to protect the church, we may downplay real harm. Tim avoids both. He names the pain clearly and compassionately, all while reminding us that grace is still at work—even in the hardest places.

Throughout this book, you'll be invited into a space that feels much like Tim's counseling room: a place marked by honesty, empathy, and hope. His insights are not abstract. They come from decades of walking with people, listening to their stories, and guiding them toward healing. And through it all, Tim gently leads us back to the loving presence of our Good Shepherd.

This is not just theory for Tim—it's what he lives, and how he loves. I know, because I've experienced his care firsthand. His compassion, wisdom, and steady presence have been a gift in my life, and I trust they will be for you as well.

So take a breath, open your heart, and read on.

You are not alone.

With hope,

Jonathan D. Holmes

Executive Director, Fieldstone Counseling

Introduction

“YOU ARE SAFE here.” Let the weight of those words linger on your mind for a moment. How do you respond to an assurance of safety? Do these words bring relief? Do they raise suspicion in your mind because, after what you’ve been through, nothing feels safe to you? Psalm 4 ends by proclaiming the hope, “You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.” The care of God is not a promise that life will be free from danger or sorrow. But it is a promise of his steadfast love no matter what we face. He is near, he is trustworthy, and he will never abandon us (Hebrews 13:5).

The Church Is *Supposed* to Be God’s Community of Care

To remind us of his promise to make us dwell in safety, God has given us a church family led by shepherds who are called to watch over, feed, and protect the flock. Colossians 3:12–14 makes it clear that your local church is meant to be a beautiful extension of God’s committed care. Tragically, instead of experiencing the safety of God’s love within the church, many find themselves in constant danger, navigating a minefield of sin from the very family that was meant to care for them.

I serve as a counseling pastor at Lighthouse Community Church in Torrance, California. Over the years, it’s been a privilege to walk with people who come to our ministry carrying the weight of church hurt. We’ve noticed this burden surfacing more frequently in counseling conversations, revealing a

growing need for resources to care for those who are suffering in this way. By church hurt, I'm not simply talking about when someone is sinned against in the church; rather, it refers to *any unrepentant sin that is minimized, normalized, or promoted by a church culture and its leadership*. If either the congregation or its leaders were willing to address the sin, there would be a clear path forward. But when sin is condoned in this way, those hurt by it are left without a safe place to bring their pain. The process Jesus outlines in Matthew 18:15–17 feels impossible to follow because there's no one to bring with you to the next step. Instead, you carry the hurt alone, often fearing what might happen if you ask for help.

As we approach this topic, there may be a spectrum of ways that you relate to it, so I want to say a few words to each of you:

- If you have faced church hurt, thank you for having the courage to read this. As we discuss this topic, I hope that you experience the Spirit of God strengthening your heart with what is true about who you are and who your God is.
- If you are trying to help someone who has experienced the darkness of church hurt, thank you. Many who experience this pain lose their communities and have great fears about rebuilding them elsewhere. Without your pursuit of their hearts, they would likely not know how to share this burden.
- Perhaps you're reading this because you've sinned against members of your church. I'm thankful you're reading this too. I hope you find clear steps toward real repentance and change that will help your church grow to love more like Christ.
- Last, perhaps you've only heard about church hurt and are suspicious of it. It may sound like another way to maximize suffering, encourage victim mindsets, and

minimize sin. My great hope is that we would stay close to Scripture in how we define and discuss it so that you can both clearly identify it and be in a position to help those who have suffered in this way.

Facing the Reality of Church Hurt Without Dismissing the Entire Body of Believers

I personally want to say that I praise God for his bride, the church. Christ loves his bride, and so should every member of the body of Christ. We cannot love the head of the body (Christ himself) and despise other parts he has created. With a topic like church hurt, I want to make it clear that we are not going to throw stones at the bride of Christ or diminish the importance of the church in any way. It grieves me how the blaring pain of church hurt often drowns out the sweet song of grace coming from Christians who seek to care for us amid our suffering. Many of us have precious memories of the church, but they seem locked and inaccessible in the aftermath of all the pain and broken trust. Painful memories fill our minds with even the mention of church, and we never want to go anywhere near that type of suffering again. Our church hurt becomes the most pronounced category and reduces our experience within a church to the suffering we endured. We look back through the lens of pain and only see the faces of those who delighted in harming us rather than a story of grace and redemption.

We need to acknowledge the temptation to let church hurt dominate our entire perspective on life in the body of Christ. But we also need to be honest: For some people, the stories they carry from their church experience are almost entirely stories of pain. Some church cultures operate in ways that distort Christ's love. They may be marked by legalism, abuse, or neglect, and repeatedly fail to reflect the care of Jesus. In those places, people may struggle to recall any experience of grace

within the church itself. Yet this doesn't mean God's grace was absent. His grace may have appeared in other ways: perhaps through people outside the harmful system or through the clarity he provided by exposing the abuse for what it was. As we face the reality of church hurt, I want to help us avoid reducing our entire spiritual story to the pain inflicted by others. While the wounds run deep, God's redemptive love for us can never be thwarted or even interrupted. As we walk through this book, we'll learn how to anchor our stories of suffering within the greater story of the gospel, where Christ meets us not only through a healthy community but also in seasons of isolation and injustice.

We know God did not design his church to protect or promote sin but to proclaim the gospel through making disciples who increasingly turn from sin and love like Christ. There is a beautiful, caring intimacy between believers who are deeply committed to the gospel and one another's good.

Believers Need the Church, and the Church Needs You

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:20–21,

As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

Discipleship can only flourish in the church when this is the understanding of longing for one another and the desire to serve one another. As Edward T. Welch beautifully summarizes, church relationships say we are all “needy and needed.”¹ Paul continues in verses 22–26 to describe this culture of care within the church:

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of

the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more representable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

The word “honor” is mentioned four different times in these verses to describe the dynamic we should have with one another in the church. How do we honor one another? We care, we weep, we rejoice, we live with understanding of each other, and we love like Christ. But what happens when this honoring and caring culture is missing? What happens when that attitude of honor is replaced with suspicion, bitterness, disinterest, ingratitude, pride, apathy, and self-centeredness? What happens when a culture of care is replaced with unwarranted correction, gossip, canceling, mocking, abuse, and neglect? What is particularly horrific is when these sins are not despised, but exalted in the name of some greater spiritual agenda.

Painful Portraits of Church Hurt

This is how I arrived at this definition of church hurt: *any unrepentant sin that is minimized, normalized, or promoted by a church's culture and its leadership*. A church's culture is always shaped by the values, priorities, and theology of its leaders. This includes not only pastors, staff, elders, deacons, and board members, but also those in unofficial positions of influence. These might be long-standing members, individuals deeply involved in ministry, or people whose personalities or reputations carry significant weight in the church. When church

hurt occurs, it often happens because someone entrusted by God with authority and influence, someone called to honor others and build them up through care and discipleship, has instead corrupted that role and weaponized it for harm. Here are some painful portraits of church hurt I've seen in my own counseling or through supervision of others:

1. **Sexual Abuse and Broken Trust.** A youth volunteer who was also a doctor sexually abused middle school boys under the guise of offering "free medical checkups" in his home. The abuse went on for years before the victims finally came forward. When they reported the abuse to church leadership, they were met with silence and defensiveness. Some leaders questioned why they hadn't spoken up sooner. Others minimized the connection between the abuse and the church since it happened in the volunteer's home, not on church property. The boys walked away feeling unheard and spiritually abandoned. Even after the perpetrator was imprisoned, the victims struggled to trust church leadership again. Abuse by spiritual leaders uniquely damages faith because it distorts the very place meant to offer safety and shepherding. Even when abuse happens outside church walls, if the church responds with indifference or blame-shifting, it compounds the pain and deepens spiritual disillusionment.
2. **Mocking and Public Shaming.** A husband and wife were repeatedly mocked for the way they dressed, sometimes through subtle jabs from members of the congregation and other times directly from the pulpit. The wife, in particular, felt constantly scrutinized by the community. On one occasion, the husband was sent home by church leaders for

wearing what they considered inappropriate shoes to the service. Over time, the couple felt humiliated and alienated, and their experience of church shifted from worship and fellowship to fear of judgment and public embarrassment.

3. **Deception in Leadership.** An associate pastor was told he was being “transitioned into a new ministry role,” but two months later, the leadership dissolved that ministry entirely. When he asked the executive pastor whether the plan had always been to eliminate the ministry, the executive pastor admitted, “Yeah, we knew.” Hoping to process what had happened, the associate pastor sought care from other leaders in the church and even from close friends in the congregation, but most avoided the conversation altogether. Some warned him to “let it go” to avoid creating division. Left with no pathway for honest dialogue or biblical confrontation, the associate pastor quietly left not only the church but also vocational ministry altogether.
4. **Financial Neglect and a Culture of Silence.** One pastor served in a church that severely underpaid him, despite the church having the means to provide more. The elders emphasized that poverty was a kingdom-minded virtue, especially for pastors. When the pastor mentioned his family’s needs during an elders’ meeting, his concerns were dismissed as selfish. One elder rebuked him, saying, “We’re called to be living sacrifices for Christ, not servants of your comfort.” Eventually, after living on food stamps and working multiple side jobs while still falling into debt, the pastor resigned. Wanting to leave quietly, he told the church, “God is calling us elsewhere.” He carried guilt for what he had put his

family through. In a church culture like this, raising practical concerns was seen as unspiritual.

5. **Verbal Abuse and Staff Intimidation.** An associate pastor was regularly mocked and belittled by his senior pastor during staff meetings. In private, the senior pastor frequently yelled at him and used profanity to criticize his performance. After months of enduring this, the associate pastor went to the elder board to ask for help. The elders acknowledged the senior pastor's harshness but told him to "consider it part of the sanctification process." They advised him to submit, be patient, and avoid creating unnecessary tension. The stress of the situation escalated until the associate pastor suffered a heart attack. Abuse from spiritual leaders becomes especially damaging when other leaders tolerate or spiritualize it, leaving the victim with no safe recourse.
6. **Cruelty and Neglect.** A family with an autistic child asked for accommodations so their child could attend the children's ministry. Instead of working with them, the church required the parents to stay with their son every week, effectively barring them from attending the service together. The parents pleaded with leadership and asked small group members for support, but were repeatedly told, "That's just the way it is." No one offered help or advocacy. In another case, a man struggling with same-sex attraction courageously reached out for pastoral counseling. The pastor told him he deserved to be stoned and refused to meet with him again. When he shared this with others in the church, several members expressed sympathy privately but no one was willing to confront the pastor or offer an alternative path of care. Both situations left the

individuals isolated and abandoned by the very community meant to embody Christ's compassion.

7. **Overwork.** An associate pastor was praised for working 70–80 hours a week, a schedule which meant neglecting his family and personal health. Leadership constantly framed this as faithfulness, quoting Scripture about self-sacrifice while never asking about his soul, his family life, or his joy in Christ. The pastor tried to share his exhaustion during staff prayer times, but his comments were brushed aside with reminders to “not grow weary of doing good” (Galatians 6:9). No one offered rest, help, or relief. Over time, he internalized the idea that burnout was just part of Christian maturity. Years later, disillusioned and burned out, he entered counseling because ministry had come to feel like a treadmill of performance instead of an overflow of worship.
8. **Forcing Ministry.** A single mother, already stretched thin by work and childcare, was pressured to take on a demanding ministry role. When she hesitated, church leaders accused her of being selfish and “not trusting God enough.” She was told that refusal to serve revealed a lukewarm heart toward Christ. Wanting to be faithful, she pushed herself to the breaking point, eventually burning out and questioning her faith altogether. When churches equate spiritual maturity with unrelenting service, they can inadvertently break the bruised reeds they are called to support.
9. **Mandatory Offerings.** A young professional who was new to the faith found herself in a church where members were expected to give a minimum percentage of their income and were shamed if they didn't meet the standard. The pastor openly commended

high donors during services, while those who gave less were spoken of in vague but accusatory terms, like “greedy” or “ungrateful.” This created a culture of competition and resentment, leaving her feeling like her worth to the church was tied mainly to her giving.

10. **Forced Marriage.** A pastor of a small church in Japan pressured a young man to marry a woman in the congregation, fearing the church would shrink if he left. The young man had considered moving to a different city to pursue career and life goals, but the pastor used Scriptures about submitting to church leadership to coerce him into staying. Over time, it became clear that the pastor’s decisions were driven by fear of financial instability and a pattern of control. He prioritized institutional survival over the well-being and calling of individuals.

These are just a few examples I have encountered in my own counseling ministry or discussed with other biblical counselors. But pause for a moment and consider the depth of hopelessness many of these individuals felt. Some lived in places where no other churches were available within driving distance. Yet even more devastating than the sin committed against them was often the silence of their communities. Imagine suffering deep wounds and then being met with indifference, where no one pursues your heart, no one listens to your story, and correction comes without understanding. In cultures like these, external performance and appearance are often valued more than sincere worship. Over time, people in these environments may adopt a form of discipleship that prioritizes conformity over relationship, using shame to produce an appearance of godliness while neglecting the true power of the Spirit (2 Timothy 3:5).

As you can see, church hurt is not always the result of one catastrophic event. More often, it comes from the cumulative effect of unrepentant sin over time. Spiritual authority is used selfishly, sin is normalized or excused, and vulnerable people are dismissed rather than cared for. Some stories involve blatant abuses of power, while others expose subtle cultural distortions where performance is prized over grace. In counseling, part of the work is helping people sort through these painful experiences and discern: What actually happened? What did the church do or fail to do? Which parts of the pain came from sinful systems or leadership, and which parts arose from personal expectations, fears, or misunderstandings? Both elements matter for healing, but distinguishing them is key to navigating biblical care.

This is also why church hurt leaves such lasting scars. It's rarely the result of just one person sinning and seeking forgiveness. While a single grievous sin can cause deep pain, what makes church hurt so destructive is the presence of pervasive patterns of sin that are minimized, rationalized, and protected over time. When someone tries to share what they've suffered, they are often met with a chorus of Job's counselors, shaming them with words like, "Maybe this is God's way of humbling you because you thought too highly of yourself."

Beneath all the examples lies an even deeper hurt: They all lost their community. The worst time to leave a church is during a trial because that loss often brings a deeper grief than the other pains. Even when the community has caused great harm, years of investment in relationships and building a discipleship community are not easily abandoned. There are often others who have been hurt as well, and the thought of leaving them behind feels unbearable. In seasons of suffering, the church is meant to be a place where you lean in, receive grace, and find help to persevere. But when the community of care becomes the source of suffering, where do you go?

Throughout this book, you will encounter stories of suffering that may tempt you to minimize your own pain or the sin that caused it. However, please know that your suffering is real and deeply matters to God. Scripture never diminishes one person's pain by comparing it to another's. Instead, it invites every member of God's flock to experience his tender care when we hurt. As Psalm 34:18 reminds us, "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." As you read, I hope you experience his nearness and find rest in his care for you.

A Word for the Helper

When someone takes the courageous step to seek help for the hurts they've suffered in their church, expect that, as the helper, you might be one of the first people they have confided in about what happened. Victims of church hurt often remain silent for a long time. There is fear in trying to rebuild community: fear of speaking out against a church, especially one that preaches the gospel; fear of not being believed; fear of being hurt again; fear that perhaps they were in the wrong all along; and a sense of hopelessness that speaking up won't make any difference. Often, a victim's community responds with silence in the face of their pain out of blindness to the suffering that occurred, out of fear of facing suffering themselves, out of self-centered disinterest, or even out of complicity with the harm. That silence after suffering can feel like a denial of everything that occurred.

I say this because when someone takes the step to seek biblical counseling after being hurt by their church, it is both a great honor and a unique opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ. As a counselor, you have the chance to not only offer guidance but also to create a relational context of love and honor that helps them experience what a healthy church family dynamic can feel like. Consider the freedom they may

feel when you genuinely value their voice, especially after often being questioned or accused rather than heard. Imagine the hope that begins to emerge when you affirm God's grace at work in someone who has mostly received correction. Think of the safety you provide when you address sin with gratitude for their openness and with gentleness rather than pride or harshness. These interactions not only guide and disciple them but also teach them how to grow more like Christ.

If you are a helper, please know that one of the most important aspects in the healing process is how you consistently convey the love of Christ to those who have been hurt by their church. Here are some simple steps I recommend as you prepare to bring the love of Christ to those hurt by their church:

- **Know yourself.** Before attempting to care for someone who has suffered, it's essential to understand yourself. What are your strengths, weaknesses, biases, and fears? How do you typically respond to suffering, both in yourself and others? Can you describe the counseling moments when your heart is more engaged, distracted, fearful, withdrawn, or even aggravated? Seek feedback from those you've previously cared for and trusted friends about how you handled their stories of suffering. Ask if they noticed any personal blind spots or preferences you hold that might have hindered your ability to care. Are there ways you could have demonstrated Christ's love more clearly? Scripture stresses the importance of self-awareness and humility: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Psalm 139:23–24). Without a clear understanding of ourselves, we risk harming those God has called us to love.

- **Move slowly and patiently.** Wherever your counselee is on their journey of suffering, take time to understand and respect their current pace. Remember that their mind may be racing to find solutions, they may be minimizing or avoiding the reality of their suffering, or they may feel paralyzed by the pain and unsure how to invite you in. Whatever is happening in their heart, we must remember the call in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 to be patient with everyone. Regardless of the degree of pain, we must recognize that God does not compare suffering. One person's anxiety may take weeks to work through, while another's may take a lifetime.
- **Have a triage for probing suffering.** Where do you begin asking questions? Start by looking for diminished capacities due to suffering. This information is vital for understanding how to help them slowly move forward. What changes have they faced? What daily activities have been diminished or lost because of their suffering? How would they describe their pain? What is it like for them? Who has cared for them well, and how have they been hurt by caregivers? For example, one lady serving in a children's outreach ministry was attacked by parents who were on drugs. The parents were put in jail, but as she tried to process the pain of what happened, one of her ministry leaders told her, "This is what you signed up for." We must stay alert to additional waves of suffering like these that may come after someone has already been hurt. Also, watch for pain shared in small, almost unnoticed details. Sometimes, they drop a bit of information in passing because they don't know how to express it. Listen for a brief comment about chronic pain, a passing word about caring for a loved one,

or a quick mention of a relationship conflict. If they mention a layer of suffering like that, acknowledge it, thank them for sharing it, and offer your listening ear if they'd ever like to talk more about it. Reaffirm that you want to understand their whole story because God cares for every pain they feel. Pay special attention to how they experienced suffering from people attempting to help. This could reveal specific fears they have about receiving care or counseling from you.

- **Church hurt is often not the presenting problem.** In counseling, I've noticed that the presenting issue is rarely "church hurt." People usually seek help for one of the effects they are struggling with, such as depression, anxiety, or an addiction they've turned to in an attempt to numb or distract themselves from what has happened. Other challenges to addressing church hurt may include the belief that their suffering is the result of their own sin, especially if they were accused of complaining, being discontent, or disrespecting leadership when they tried to speak out. They might say they don't want to talk about the past and would rather just move forward and start fresh. In their minds, digging it up feels too painful or like it won't change anything anyway. Whatever starting point they provide, it's important to meet them where they are and walk with them slowly toward Christ.
- **Offer grace-filled summaries as they share.** Every counselor should know that sharing thoughtful summaries while you listen during a session shows your genuine engagement and care for someone. But how we summarize matters. Simply repeating their words in a robotic or detached way can come across as cold and unfeeling. Instead, let your tone, body posture,

and eye contact communicate that their words matter deeply to you. Beyond these gestures, take natural pauses in the conversation to highlight God's grace at work in them despite the struggles they've faced. For example, you might say, "It's incredible how God strengthened you to respond with kindness in that moment of cruelty." Or, "Your love in the face of so much wrong proclaims the mercy of Christ to them and is such an example for my own heart. Thank you for sharing this with me." Every story of a believer's suffering will be punctuated with God's grace, but we must take our time to point it out so they can see God's grace is with them and working through them. This not only demonstrates you're listening, but also honors them along the way.