

GATEWAY TO FREEDOM



 **GOOD**
 **FOR**
 **NOTHING**

Gateway to Freedom

G2F has been developed and launched in response to people, including myself and my family, who have experienced or witnessed negative behaviour in a variety of Christian Church environments.

First and foremost it is our desire that you, your family and friends find both answers and remedy for the many reasons people no longer engage with or attend a Christian denomination or local church.

Our desire is to reconnect people to God by building your relationship with Him. G2F seeks to give both comfort, answers and direction to those who, as a result of experiencing unfortunate circumstances and experiences within church, no longer attend.

You may simply no longer wish to be involved in a local church for reasons that involve church/life relevance, tedious religious traditions or more commonly nowadays, you have too many other distractions in life.

Gateway to Freedom's focus is on repairing the damage caused by people within Christian churches, denominations and organisations that sadly, by act or omission, forgo their God ordained responsibility to fairly, equitably and lovingly shepherd those people God has brought into their care. 'G2F' will seek to identify this behaviour and most importantly aim to rebuild the relationship between the abused, the church and God.

People leave church for many different reasons. We will focus on the increasing incidence of narcissistic behaviour, bullying and intimidation that sadly occurs too often within the Christian Church environment. In most instances this sort of behaviour is exhibited by an increasing number of church pastors and those in leadership positions.

Often this type of behaviour results in psychological, emotional, and spiritual abuse of the victim(s). It is the goal of this initiative to give a voice to the ever-increasing number of people who have been or are currently trying to deal with this type of behaviour.

By sharing your story with G2F we pray that your experience will be helpful not only for you but also to others who have or are experiencing similar behaviour. It is the goal of G2F to be an advocate for you in a meaningful and compassionate way minus the corporate speak some churches are only too quick to respond with. We want to avoid the 'yada, yada' and 'circling of the wagons' response so often heard when some churches are approached to respond to allegations of this type.

G2F acknowledges that people leave church or 'church hop' for many reasons, some major, some minor. Whilst the reasons can be of deep discomfort to the aggrieved it is the response of church hierarchy and leadership teams that either allay or increase the chance of animosity occurring between parties.

Yes, we may have 'unrealistic or high expectations', and yes, we can be offended if a pastor fails to greet us properly. Yes, we can be upset due to a disagreement on theological interpretation. Let's not even go down the Covid pandemic, vax, no vax, mask, no mask path as reasons for discontent in the pews. Often issues such as these can be resolved with a touch of humility and sound reasoning.

There are many reasons some pastors and church leaders exhibit unsavoury and unethical behaviour. Have they been challenged on transparency and governance issues. Perhaps the issues relate to financial management, power or greed.

It is how these and many other issues and concerns are poorly responded to by many pastors and leaders that is a cause for much concern, but you probably already know that which is why you are still reading this page.

"May God richly bless you as you enter the Gateway to Freedom".

Church administration and leadership may appear bereft of love, kindness, and compassion in dealing with people who have approached them claiming 'something isn't right'.

It is our endeavour to engage churches, individuals, and leadership with transparency, integrity and genuine compassion and understanding.

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1. Why Gateway to Freedom?

G2F has been developed and launched in response to the ever-increasing number of people, including myself and my family, who have experienced or witnessed negative behaviour in a variety of Christian Church environments.

The behaviour I refer to has been referred to as emotional and/or psychological abuse. In the most serious of incidents, it can also lead to physical abuse such as an assault or by being physically threatened.

Whilst the incidence of sexual abuse within churches is well known and documented, G2F acknowledges that this serious form of abuse already receives significant attention in the church, community, policing, and judicial world. Therefore, whilst not in any way taking anything away from the actions of those who sexually abuse through the church environment, G2F at this point, will focus on the topic of emotional and psychological abuse.

What we need to see is an embrace of truth that is truly done in love - with compassion, grace, and generosity, seeking reconciliation and refusing to be divisive.

In our culture people leave church for many reasons. It is therefore difficult to reconcile this against the long held belief that unity is an important part of our Christian faith.

We are to level accurate and discerning judgements on what goes on in the church. We shouldn't pass over truth for the sake of peace. Sometimes the loving thing to do is to speak truth and speak it boldly. On the other side, we find those who refuse to speak critically for fear of offending others or being viewed as judgemental.

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G2F believes we all need to:

- Find healing, reconciliation, and restoration. Survivors need healing whilst church leaders need to safeguard their churches and organisations, cultures, and systems from exhibiting abusive behaviour.

G2F wants to:

- Be the platform for your story. Your eyes need to be open to the overt ways some pastors and leaders sow deceit and doubt in you, co-opting you into silence.
- Be an advocate for victims of endemic abuse within sacred institutions.

In the last five years alone, my family and I have had the misfortune of becoming victim to the ever-increasing incidence of emotional and psychological abuse within the church environment. Bullying and harassment receives significant attention within the broader community particularly in the workplace. Sadly, my awareness of this form of abuse within many Christian churches is not limited to the experiences of me and my family. Numerous victims of abuse or direct witnesses to incidents of abuse, have confided in me their stories of abuse which sometimes beggar belief.

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another”.

John 13:15

Such love is not self-generated or merely external but comes from an abiding relationship with Jesus and is first and foremost an issue of the heart.

2. Why people leave churches

People give up on church for many different reasons.

Abuse of Power

Some are devastated by the abuse of power in leadership, and in a state of disillusionment and fear they flee. This kind of departure from the church can entail an exodus from church altogether.

Internal Disconnection

Many people have left the church internally but physically remain.

Not Relevant

Church sadly, has for many, become another ineffectual part of normal life. Ultimately, many have come to believe that the church doesn't really matter.

Destroy Church Community

We have all had front row seats in church over the years to witness lives transformed, relationships healed, and the outcast of society loved. However, many have also had enough time there to see pastors and leaders abuse their members and destroy the lives of staff and church communities who they see as a threat to their authority.

Manipulation

The abuse of power seems pervasive, committed by the very people we expect to love us and care for us the most. There have been many who have been abused, misled, and manipulated by 'shepherds' who turned out to be wolves.

Slow Separation

Some people have a slow undefined divorce from the church.

Church not Necessary

The kind of people who leave often remain committed to Christ; and many, in fact, leave to do great things for the kingdom. The church just doesn't seem necessary to achieve their goals.

Leave Church Altogether

Abuses have caused people to leave the church altogether, It is difficult to return to the house where you have been abused. We are not created to pursue power as an end, but to rather pursue God, the powerful one, and abide in his power to bless the world. A way of power that exists is good, true, and beautiful; but there is also a way of power that is evil, false, and ugly.

3. How to recognise abuse

It is becoming increasingly rare to find someone who has not experienced spiritual abuse within the church. The abuse to which I refer is not limited to that metered out by pastors, but can also be perpetrated by church leaders, leadership teams and even church members. These individuals and/or groups behave in a way that can only be described as ungodly and against all the precepts of why a church and the Christian community exists.

To find a path to grow understanding and authentic forgiveness of abusers, we must first understand their toxic and abusive systems.

It is not unusual to:

- find pastors using their congregations as platforms to advance their own influence and profile
- discover scandals of power and abuse in the church that have been hidden to protect the 'right people' from getting in trouble
- witness narcissism in pastors
- witness self-glorification
- find silencing techniques used to keep the truth from coming out
- ignore behaviour of pastors if the number of conversions is up and more baptisms are happening.

Some of the worst forms of abuse are psychological. Abuse starts with language, words that lead to captivity and confusion.

Abusive power is acquired and retained through deception. You may think that abuse happens to others but not you. All you may know is that something's not right and feels 'off'.

Most pastors these days desire to proclaim the Gospel and shepherd God's people. Sadly, there are also those who harbor the desire in their heart for personal significance, fame, and influence. This can be achieved by leveraging talents and capitalising on relationships. These thoughts are akin to using God as a tool to have life on one's own terms.

1 Corinthians 12:12 (KJV) For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

The number one temptation for many pastors today is the power of personality. It is called an evil power because many pastors depend on their own personality to attract people. It has become personality versus the force of the Gospel in Jesus Christ alone. How often are we bothered by someone wielding his or her own personality, but look the other way because it is a cause we believe in.

The sermon can be used to prop up the idol of personality and glorify the pastor. Baptisms and membership can be tallied to indicate congratulatory growth on the ministry scoreboard. It is in this light that individual members bask in the feeling that something is happening.

According to scripture pride, uncontrolled anger, and domineering leadership are unquestionably 'immoral' (see Mark 7:21-22 & Galatians 5:19-21), and 1 Peter 5: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble".

Church leadership based on abuse will often resort to telling you to 'follow biblical principles' as if the church leaders were saying: 'we are God's agents, we know God's will for you, if you don't comply, you will be acting against God's will'. Instead of entering the way of weakness, many leaders try to use God to become someone powerful.

Isolation is the key to success of abuse. The abuser ensures that you are severed from sources of help, that ensures no-one will hear your cry for help. They will dismantle your connection to supportive relationships, institutions, and sources of understanding in their attempts to isolate you.

Abusive organisations like churches often use bible passages to dismantle your strength Matthew 18 or 1 Corinthians 6 are their main references.

Dr ML King focussed on standing against a system - not attacking a particular person. If he attempted to attack and undermine the person, he would lose the ability to befriend him. He also states, "we must learn that it is possible to stand up courageously and positively against an evil system and yet not resist it with physical weapons and inner feelings of hatred".

Our resistance should expose attitudes, actions, and systems of oppression, no matter how insignificant we may believe they are. Such resistance is called for. Not only as we observe injustice in the world around us, but also as we discover it within the walls of our church. Love calls us to do difficult things like forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. Love demands courage and greatness, but it does so in the very places we are afraid of.

The great danger, of course, is that even in the church we begin to see the way of weakness as foolish. We all too easily embrace the worldly way of power and call it God's way.

4. Examples of abuse

Abuse takes many forms; the following examples are provided to give you some understanding of the size of the problem. All the following incidents are either from my personal experience, related by a trusted victim or direct witness of the abuse.

Example 1

Financial and leadership inconsistencies were raised with a senior pastor and leader(s) of a church. Subsequently, as a direct result of raising these concerns, the person was labelled within the congregation as divisive. Church friends and acquaintances were advised by leadership to cease all social contact with him. He was also publicly derided and humiliated during Sunday sermons. His right to lead a home connect group was rescinded and members of the group were offered transfers to other groups.

On refusing transfers to other home groups, the church members were summoned individually to appear before the senior pastors and leadership. At the meetings their membership was threatened to be cancelled if they didn't submit.

Example 2

A loving and kind couple had been attending a church with their young children for a few years and had developed loving and fond friendships. The couple spoke to leadership of their concerns regarding the sincerity, integrity and transparency of the pastor and leadership within the church. The family decided to leave the church after much soul searching when they realised their thoughts and feelings had fallen on deaf ears.

Upon hearing the couple were attending church for their final service the senior pastor and his wife approached the wife/mother of the family at a social event after the service. In full view of some 50 people enjoying Sunday lunch, the pastor's wife with lowered voice began a verbal tirade at the young mum. Berating her for being disloyal, troublesome and a poor example of what women in the church should be.

The young mum burst into tears and was overcome at the embarrassing situation she found herself in. Sadly, none of the onlookers intervened simply because they thought the pastor's wife was wishing her well and was praying for her and her family.

Example 3

A mature age couple were summoned to meet with the pastors and leadership team of a church. They took umbrage at the senior pastors handling of the situation which appeared to be one of stalling and avoiding blame. When they continued to raise their concerns about the behaviour of leadership, the senior pastor became enraged and physically launched at the couple and was yelling at them. He (the pastor) was restrained by a member of leadership who took him aside and tried to calm him.

He was told if he didn't calm down the meeting would be cancelled. As a result of the outburst the couple, in particular the wife, was distraught and could not be consoled. Sadly, at no point was an apology, comforting or explanation forthcoming from the senior pastor or leadership.

Example 4

The senior pastor of a church became aware that several of his congregation (some 20-30 people) were unhappy with the apparent domineering and bullying tactics employed by him and his leadership team in the day-to-day management of church business and Sunday services. Rather than approach the predicament prayerfully, with love and humility the senior pastor resorted to 'divide and conquer' tactics

During subsequent sermons, the senior pastor told the congregation that he had the power to change the church constitution whenever and however he so directed. He preached that anyone who did not submit to his power and control were no longer welcome on 'his train' and that they would be quickly replaced by newcomers. This response resulted in a further 30-40 people leaving the church.

Example 5

At another church a long serving couple (both church members) had been attending a home group. The leaders of the group often encouraged people to speak their minds about any issues either personal or in relation to church matters. Attendees were reminded that the group was a 'safe place', and any discussion was strictly confidential.

Often conversation turned to matters related to concerns members had with church leadership including perceived narcissism, nepotism, and financial and governance inconsistencies. The group leaders often raised these topics for further conversation and encouraged open and honest 'chat'.

To the surprise of two members of the group, they were subsequently contacted by the senior pastor who requested a personal meeting with the couple. He advised the couple that he was aware of the nature of the complaints and issues being discussed and that he required a meeting to sort the matter out.

The couple refused the offer of the meeting on the grounds that the group leaders had in fact raised the topics on the proviso that it was strictly confidential. The senior pastor said he encouraged home group leaders to bring to him any issues discussed within the group so he could "keep an eye on things".

When the offer of a meeting with leadership was declined the couple were subsequently ostracised socially and within the church environment as they were labelled as 'divisive and gossips'.

Example 6

A senior pastor was approached by members of his congregation about his Sunday message, they mentioned to him that his message was almost identical to a podcast they had heard recently from a pastor overseas.

The pastor admitted he had copied the message and said it would not happen again. The people who brought the matter to his attention thought this a gross breach of trust and transparency and left the church.

It was only a few months later that 'as chance would have it' on two occasions the senior pastor again preached two messages (sermons) that were in essence an exact repeat of another pastor's podcast sermon, this time from the United States. The parishioners are no longer at the church as the pastor appeared unrepentant and not able to change his ways.

Example 7

During the most critical time of the current world pandemic the Federal Government (Australia) provided 'Job-keeper' payments/grants to staff and organisations who met specific criteria. The church to which I refer requested the grants based on financial accounts from a month in the previous year. Other than a decrease in that month the church financials were very healthy.

Regardless of this the full time pastor and a majority of church part-time staff who in most instances worked only one or two days a week received triple and in one instance quadruple pay increases for several months in addition to their own private permanent work income.

When church administration was approached about this matter that it 'did not appear to pass neither the 'pub or sniff' test of church transparency and good governance the reply was 'we met the criteria so good luck to them'.

Those involved in taking this matter to church leadership had severe repercussions including the senior pastor bragging that he relished the opportunity to 'turn his back' when the people responsible for raising the matter approached him for a friendly greeting after church services.

5. Understanding toxic leaders

Many pastors and church leaders nowadays use their gifts to gain more power, pursuing their own significance, power, and position. Control and success become an obsession for many pastors built of their own belief in their own work ethic, talent, and confidence. Pastors and leaders can either lead in a domineering manner or by the example of Jesus through shepherding and embracing weakness.

Godly direction is lost when:

- pastors and leaders use the church as a personal platform for fame and influence
- view ministry as an arena of performance
- use people of the church as tools to accomplish their own big dreams
- view others as competition.

Pastors and leaders should reflect Christ by:

- giving their life for the sake of the church
- view ministry as an arena of love and service
- embrace the congregation as people to love not to use as tools.

Churches sadly aren't immune to toxic leaders, who are increasingly not hard to find. Toxic leaders subvert systems designed to control them. They don't develop people they see as a threat.

Many churches often desire the toxic style of pastor/leader. This is how cults are formed, a cult is a community that is closed around the figure of a 'guru' and built on fear. We can easily become cult-like when we surround a Christian guru and end up following that person rather than Christ.

We must stand up against domineering, manipulative, and power-hungry leadership.

Ministry is about bringing the life of God into the lives of other people.

People's perception of the purpose of Christian life and ministry has changed from one of faithfulness to success. The truth helps us to move on from confusion to clarity and from captivity to freedom.

6. Tactics used by abusers

Some have compared getting the truth from an abuser is like nailing jelly to the wall, if caught they will use any tactic necessary to wriggle free, to evade accusation, to save face, and to preserve their power and influence.

Impression Management

Impression management is used by abusers as part of the process to creating, influencing, or manipulating an image held by an audience.

Power

The chief desire of abusive individuals and leaders in organisations is to gain and retain power. As their power grows, they are free to abuse others with greater frequency and less resistance.

Manipulation/Grooming

Whilst many pastors and leaders serve with integrity, sacred roles are, however, vulnerable to abuse. They begin to see people as objects to be manipulated, shaped, and moulded to fit their own agenda.

Narcissistic Leaders

The sanctity we ascribe to leadership roles within churches can be dangerous, but the danger is compounded when narcissistic leaders find their identity in the role and use it as justification for domination.

Tribalism

Tribalism can pervade churches if they are started and managed by close friends and family. The tendency is to protect close family and friends when dark secrets and abusive behaviour come to light. To 'circle the wagons', so to speak. They often choose to defend their image rather than confront the leader(s) or protect the vulnerable. The abusive organisation will always shift more and more power and control to the top as a way of protecting those most important to the tribe. An indicator of tribal culture taking hold is when a crisis happens. The leadership take greater control of all decisions and communications, whilst assuring their audience that they have legitimate claim to continued trust despite the power grab.

Control

An indicator of a deceptive alliance is when an abusive leader or board attempts to control a crisis by insisting on one-on-one meetings with those they perceive as a threat. These meetings are often designed to control your behaviour.

Disrespecting Authority

Often when someone raises issues or concerns to leaders and boards, they are accused of being confused, bitter or disrespecting authority. This is when they begin to control by dismantling your internal world. This involves you questioning your beliefs and doubting your emotions.

Dismantling Tactics

Dismantling tactics are used to target and control a person through actions including intimidation, humiliation, and sometimes outright violence to produce feelings of fear and shame. Dismantling tactics are, at their core, assaults on beauty, on the image of who God created you to be.

Humiliation

Abusive leaders demean an individual or group of people from the pulpit, it can go unchallenged or uncorrected. Or worse, met with laughter – a key indicator that humiliation is taking place. In any community run by a tyrannical leader(s) these so-called leaders humiliate people in public. Perpetrating humiliation has the broader effect to control others in that community.

Deception

Once you are charmed, dismantled, and alone, the abuser advances and you are deceived with fear and shame. You can become confused with thoughts like, I don't know what to think anymore, maybe I have a problem or how did things come to this.

Those who remain by an abuser's side tend to be those who are willing to insincerely praise their leader and unquestionably align themselves with their leader's agenda, often in the hope that they too might share in the power and adoration.

7. The Church Image

There is a term called – Evangelical Industrial Complex – a grand machine with cultural and economic force that involves celebrity pastors, networks, conferences, and books. Many churches nowadays seek pastors who have eloquence and personality. Churches hope the pastor will stand out in the larger Christian scene. Much is made of the pastor being the one to bring in the unchurched with personality and verve. This makes the congregation feel important.

Churches celebrate what they have done, without talking about what God is doing. This reveals a subtle, yet evident, self-glorification within the church. Abusers abuse through manipulation and resist accountability and transparency. Many church organisations have a 'game plan' to manage their image in a time of crisis and to self-preserve at all costs.

8. The Way Forward

G2F offers a path toward authentic forgiveness, healing, and freedom. You must know that reconciliation and restoration are always possible. This initiative has been developed to provide a platform to hear people's stories and a pathway for churches to stand by your side.

Victims must be helped to identify tactics of manipulation and misuse of power. The purpose of advocating for victims of abuse is to stop the epidemic of abuse within our sacred institutions.

Don't doubt your ability to fight back, G2F encourages you to talk about it, seek help from a trusted friend or professional that is able to help you. It may be daunting but you must try.

Even if you don't have the words to describe what happened or is happening to you, simply say – 'Something's not right'.

Freedom comes by understanding the language and behaviour of abusers. The abuser might be the leader of a church or related organisation you have come to love, and respect. Enabling abuse means allowing it the power it needs to control others. The best antidote to deception is truth. Silence grants evil exactly what it needs to survive. G2F wants you to walk the pathway that leads to the 'gateway to freedom', bring clarity to your confusion and be supported as you take those first steps to freedom.

If you don't think you can tell anyone, take a personal inventory:

- where have I experienced lies?
- what has caused hurt?
- what has made me angry?
- when have I felt humiliated?

Until you know what is true, it will be difficult to know what to do. Freedom from trauma and abuse requires truth and empowerment.

9. Healing: Heart of the Church

Jesus' life was marked, not by success, domination, and victory, but by love. The word of God came down to us and lived amongst us as a slave. God revealed himself as a small helpless child, as a refugee in Egypt. He moved from power to powerlessness, from greatness to smallness, and from strength to weakness.

The heart of the gospel is to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, speak well of those who speak badly of you, pray for those who persecute you.

The way of the Lamb is committed to worship, pursues God in the ordinary, is faithful in hiddenness and humbly and sacrificially serves.

A pastor or leadership has chosen the way of the lamb when he:

- gives his life for his church
- views ministry as an arena of love and service
- embraces the congregation as people to know and love not to use as tools
- views prayer and care as the centrepiece of their work, not an interruption.

Leading and succeeding in ministry means to serve. The goal is not generating a great and powerful ministry but becoming people who serve like Jesus.

Christian leadership must always embody a different form of leadership than in the world. Those considered leaders in God's kingdom are those defined by wisdom, love, and service.

We are called to individual acts of generosity, reconciliation, and non-divisive resistance so that we can partake in a community that embodies these things and is known by its love.

Generosity is a form of resistance. A heart that is formed by greed, pride, self-centredness, and anger will very quickly adopt forms of living that affirm the powers of the world.

A pastor and leader(s) should be above reproach, relationally faithful, lacking anger or quick temper. They should be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.

10. Call to Action

G2F hopes to give voice to the silenced and wounded people. Choosing to expose an abuser, especially one with power, carries great risk. Therefore, a victim often will not speak out.

If you are at the point of wanting to walk the pathway to the 'gateway to freedom' from abuse, confusion and captivity but fear the consequences, know that you are not alone and that your feelings are normal.

Any space like G2F that affords you the opportunity to tell your story in an unrushed manner will be helpful to you. If telling someone else is not something you are ready for, consider writing it down.

Writing your experience(s) down can be a courageous act of resistance and survival.

Surviving is not simple or easy, many ruins need to be rebuilt. Many words need to be found if you can't shout, find a way to whisper.

G2F can't tell you what to do, every situation is complex, but every act you take to resist the charm, stop the dismantling, and reclaim your voice is an act that will bring you closer to opening the 'GATEWAY TO FREEDOM'.

You are not crazy; you are not alone. You can regain what has been taken from you.

In addition to listening, encouraging and advocating for you, Good For Nothing Ministries intends to conduct free events which focus on giving you the opportunity to join with other people in a similar situation. We look forward to offering you worship, discussion and support opportunities such as guest speakers and Q & A's focussed on finding and entering the 'Gateway to Freedom'.

Knit into the body of Christ is where your joy is found, we want to help you on that journey. Christian flourishing is found as part of Christ's body 'His Church'. We want to help you find a Christ centred church.

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to the authors of the following books that not only confirmed my concerns, but also inspired me to develop and launch Gateway to Freedom.

Had I not happened upon these books I am sure I would have continued life in the belief that what I (and many others) experienced at the hands of tyrannical, narcissistic church pastors and leaders was a 'one off'. A significant portion of the content within the text of G2F is a re-presentation of the content of the two books acknowledged below. This was done to allow readers to access a summary of what I believe to be the core content required for such an initiative (G2F).

If not for the author(s) zeal and foresight I would not have had the opportunity through G2F to shed light on the immense and complicated nature of emotional and psychological abuse metred out by many so called 'shepherds of God'.

The author(s) ability to identify, reason out, and focus on the concept of healing has allowed Gateway to Freedom the opportunity to shine a light on the path we need to follow which ultimately begins when we first think 'somethings not right'.

THE WAY OF THE DRAGON OR THE WAY OF THE LAMB

Authors James Goggin & Kyle Stroble – Harper Collins Publishers 'C' 2017

SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT

Wade Mullen – Publishers – Wordserve Literary Group 'C' 2020

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