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*Dedicated to all the voices elevated in this book– the ones once hurt,  
now healed, because someone chose to love like Jesus.  
May we become like them.*



## Introduction

I first got the idea for Good Church Stories on a walk with a friend. She had experienced deconstruction firsthand through the life of a loved one. We frequently talk about church, church hurt, the gospel, purity culture, and all the other factors contributing to where the church (the western one, at least) is going. We are also home birth moms - we have our babies at home - and share a mutual appreciation for positive birth stories.

“What I wish existed,” I told her as we crunched down the path. “Is a compilation of ‘good birth stories,’ but for the church. Like... good church stories. Stories that tell us: it’s possible for church to be a healthy, loving, gracious place. Stories to heal.”

“I think that’s a great idea!” She replied. “I could see that being an encouragement to a lot of people.”

That’s what Good Church Stories became. These are your words, your stories, your experiences of church (which is, by biblical definition, the corporate group of people for whom Christ is Savior and Lord).

But in compiling Good Church Stories, there is opportunity for misunderstanding. Some might think I’m

diminishing hurtful experiences in the church by focusing on healthy ones. That in celebrating and uplifting the voices who have been blessed by Christians, I am ignoring stories of abuse. This is the furthest thing from my intent! Church hurt is real and deserves great compassion. It takes time to heal and to wrestle through what is biblical and what has been twisted by power and shame.

This brings me back to the birth story analogy. As a due date approaches, many women struggle with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty (I did!). Especially if you’ve been through a traumatic birth, the anxiety can feel insurmountable. While there will always be the risk of pain - and even trauma - when a baby is born, there is also opportunity for a peaceful, life-giving experience. Positive birth stories give hope for the latter while extending trust in God for the former. It’s a tension.

There is a similar tension when we talk about the church. The body of Christ is made up of flawed people. Sometimes the body is infiltrated by people who don’t follow Christ at all: abusers, manipulators, and liars who use the name of Christ as a cover for their sinful abuse. If you have been

abused by the church, I'm so sorry. My heart grieves for you.

The stories in this book are from people who experienced the goodness of Christ through their flawed, human churches. I don't propose these stories will change what happened to you, nor are they meant to diminish your own experience. But they are true - and they deserve to be heard. In some cases, they may be a step toward healing. I have been through church splits and hurt from fellow believers, and the wounds inflicted by Christians were healed by Christ... through other Christians. Good Church Stories may be a step toward that healing. If at any point you feel triggered or feel that the time isn't right to read these stories, there is no shame in setting the book aside.

For those who have not walked through church hurt, I hope this compilation inspires you to action. Perhaps that means being the change in a church that needs revival. Maybe it means rejecting apathy and getting out of your seat to love people who you don't know as well. Or maybe it means opening your home, your arms, and your heart to the people who need love. Read these stories with an open mind and spirit, prayerfully asking God what to do with the

truths you find.

My hope? That these Good Church Stories would inspire us to create more good church stories.

There can never be enough.

*Phyllicia Masonheimer*







## Praising Through the Pain

ANONYMOUS

There I was in the middle of church service praising and worshipping God... when suddenly I felt the familiar pain. I tried to convince myself it wasn't what I thought. I sat down thinking of what to do next. I didn't want to leave church because we were having communion service. So I told myself I would just wait it out, that it's usually not that bad the first few hours. As service continued I started to feel more pain, and I contemplated whether or not to go outside. Someone behind me noticed I was in an intense amount of pain, and the girl seated beside me did her best to keep me calm. By this point we were done with communion, and I was still experiencing severe pain; it was so bad I couldn't even stand up. I was restless through the rest of the service. When church was over, the girl seated beside me waited with me until I could get help. She tried to help me stand up. I just couldn't do it. Just as I was struggling to get up, another girl walked into church (I believe God sent her). Seeing what was going on she immediately understood,

and she literally carried me out of the sanctuary. Just for reference, I'm about 5'11" and this girl was a bit shorter than me, yet somehow she was able to lift me up. I was taken to another room in the church and a doctor there gave me some medications. Yet the two girls stayed with me to make sure everything was okay. This was a big church and I was pretty much a visitor, so they didn't really know me, yet they were so kind to me.

Looking back, I could have just left church a bit earlier; I still can't understand why I didn't just do that. But what I do know is that God already knew I would not leave church, and He set those two girls in place to help me just when I needed it the most. So I praise Him for that!



## Wedding Bells

**CHIYAME E.**

It was so beautiful to see how our church rallied around two of our members who were getting married. Everyone pitched in. From cooking the food, to the decorations, to the very last detail. Some members were ushers, others helped out with the music, and some people lent out their cars for free. They really made the couple feel so special and so loved. It reminded me of when the new believers in Acts were fellowshiping and sharing meals with each other. Getting to witness this also brings to mind Jesus' first public miracle at the wedding in Cana. It shows how much God really does care for us!





## Hope in the Hospital

KAITLYNN K.

My husband and I have three children. I had a difficult pregnancy with our last baby and almost lost her twice, which put me on bedrest for the last six months. A week prior to meeting our little girl, we found out she had a hole in her heart that would require open heart surgery in her first year of life. She also likely had Down Syndrome. Our world was very much turned upside down to say the least. Ten days later she made a premature entrance in the back of an ambulance and spent six weeks in the NICU. It was a scary and stressful time with my husband juggling work responsibilities and our 4 and 6 year old at home. About a week into Dorothy's NICU stay, we were contacted by a man who runs a special needs program at our church. We didn't know him, but he had heard of our situation through the prayer chain and got in touch with us to see what we needed. He asked if he could come visit us at the hospital and meet our special little girl. We did not have many visitors to see Dorothy... she was fragile and very susceptible to sickness until her heart was repaired, but my husband and

I were drained and exhausted, and human interaction was a welcome distraction. So we met Dave at the hospital. I'll never forget how enamored he was with our baby, how he sat and just listened like he had all the time in the world, how he talked about the everyday, how he encouraged us, how he shared his story about his own family and empathised with us. There was a lot of pity from people in the early days of Dorothy's diagnosis, but not from Dave. He was full of joy and delight in all of God's creation. I'm not sure how long he stayed, maybe an hour or more. After that he would text us to check in and see how little Dorothy was doing. He connected us with a meal coordinator at church to help ease our burden a bit as well. When Dorothy was discharged, Dave drove out to our house to see her again and to meet her siblings. He brought gifts for our other son and daughter, played with them on the floor, and held Dorothy for a long time until she fell asleep on him. We chatted about life, TV shows, church, etc.

Dorothy had her open heart surgery at four months old,

and the day after she was discharged from the hospital the whole country shut down because of Covid. We have not been able to attend church in person yet due to her higher risk of complications, nor have we gotten to see Dave since then, but he remains one of the handful of people who has held Dorothy or even been in our home since she was born. God used him in a great way during a difficult time, and I'm so thankful for authentic and compassionate people like him in the church.



## Finding Home

OLIVIA E.

Although I grew up in a Christian household, I did not grow up in the church. By the time I began high school, I had almost no friends and was starved for relationship and community. A church outside our neighborhood was opening, and I convinced my parents to go check it out. My family attended for the grand opening, but that was it. I kept going, and soon that church became my home and it's people my family. I served in the choir and worship team, acted in skits, and attended mission trips. Four years later I was graduating, and our church was honoring all the seniors. I begged and pleaded with my family to come for the church ceremony and my mom said she would do her best. On the Sunday of the graduation service I sat nervously, eagerly looking back at the doors for any sign of my parents or siblings. Finally, they called each senior up to the front and then asked us all to turn our backs to the congregation. They then asked our families to come up and lay hands to pray for us. My heart sank, and my cheeks burned with embarrassment as I saw other friends'

parents come forward out of my peripheral vision... and still no one came for me. My pastor began praying when suddenly... I felt a multitude of hands being laid on my head and shoulders and back. I dared to peek... and the entire worship team had come forward to pray for me. It turns out my family had been there all along.

Because of their faithfulness in showing up for me and caring for me over and over in those formative years, I was finally able to open up to someone (my worship director) about the abuse that was happening in my home. Within a few weeks of opening up, my mom, sister and I finally left my dad. Escaped, really. And it was once again because of this church and worship team that we had help when we did. We stayed in two different members' homes on a moments' notice. They provided us meals, comforted us, and prayed with us before we were able to fly out of state and move in with other family.



## Showered with Love

**KERRI M.**

In late September 2018, our family moved from Connecticut to western North Carolina. We had looked online for churches in the area, but nothing really seemed to click with us and our beliefs. However, upon driving around once we moved down, we saw several churches that look interesting to us. The first Sunday we were here, which was just three days after moving down, we visited the first church just about a mile from our house. We walked in and were immediately greeted so warmly it just touched our hearts. Then a young lady came up and greeted our children and offered to take them to the nursery and watch them during the message. I couldn't have been more embraced as a mom than in that moment. After that service the next week we tried another church, and the distinction between the two was just so obvious. We all knew we had to go back to the first church - it was home.

In the months to come we were not only warmly

welcomed, but we were embraced as family. Having just known me a few months, the ladies from the church held a baby shower for us because I was six months pregnant when we moved and had nothing for the new baby. He has since become the church baby - he goes from family to family on Sunday, and he is warmly welcomed and loved by all his grandmas at church. I couldn't be more sure that this is exactly where God wants us.

And to top it all off, the church has solid biblical expository preaching and teaching by a pastor who loves his congregation.



## Fire & Forgiveness

PAIGE

I was born and raised in a tiny town in northeast Alabama. I have spent most of my 29 years attending the same small church that my parents joined as newlyweds. I always thought I knew what “church family” meant. I had slumber parties with the other kids when we were growing up. Our church members even threw me a surprise 16th birthday party. They sent flowers and cards after I had surgery. We had family game nights in the fellowship hall. We even had two Christmas parties because we couldn’t fit all the fun into one night. I thought I knew how important these people were.

In 2011, one week before Thanksgiving, someone broke into my parents’ home to steal whatever valuables he could find. By the time he was finished he couldn’t remember where he left his coke can. His solution was to set three separate fires to ensure that nothing was left in the home. Within a couple hours everything was gone. I was an hour away from home when my mom called my fiancé (now husband) to have him bring me home. When we got home

the yard was full of cars, trucks, and a few fire engines. While I ran looking for my parents, I was met with so many familiar faces from church. We got to the house early in the afternoon, but we didn’t want to leave the yard until my sister got home from Atlanta. We didn’t want her to see the heap of memories by herself. There was nothing we could do but just stand there for hours. Our church surrounded us with love and prayers. We shared stories and laughed and cried together.

It’s important that you know my dad is a fixer. No matter what the problem is, he has to find a way to fix it. It was just about dark when a poor passerby happened to be driving a truck similar to the one that had been seen in our driveway hours before. My dad, desperate to solve the case, ran full speed to jump in a car so he could follow this truck and get its license plate number. I will never forget the moment our blood relatives and church relatives all looked around the huddle and without saying a word, those men went after my dad. Within seconds we had a troop of six or seven cars

pulling out of the drive way. Those guys were not going to let my dad go alone. It wasn't even five minutes later and the caravan came rolling in and all of those guys were giggling at how absurd the whole thing had been. They didn't have a plan, but they were going to figure it out together. They didn't get the license plate number because once they got close enough to see it, they knew it wasn't the same truck. As it got dark and cold, our huddle moved closer and closer to the smoldering pile. Soon we were standing on the front sidewalk just a few feet from the foundation blocks. At one point, someone reminded me that we should pray for this guy who destroyed our home. I knew that was the appropriate choice, but I was too angry and hurt to worry about him. The events of the day began to fully sink in. It had gotten eerily quiet. The only thing we could hear was the crackling of the remaining hot spots in the house and our sniffing. Every chemical that had been in the house was producing tiny flames of all different colors. It was both beautiful and heartbreaking.

Several of our closest friends from church stayed with us until my sister got home. When it got too cold to stay outside, we decided to go ahead and go to Walmart to get clothes and toiletries for the night. While we were at Walmart some church members had gone to buy hot chocolate and some of our favorite snacks to leave at my aunt and uncle's house for us. I remember it being so awkward. What are

you supposed to talk about when everything has just been taken from you? New pajamas aren't that comfortable when you are forced to buy them out of necessity. The warm mug of hot chocolate felt familiar and safe while everything else felt so wrong. I went to sleep that night on a pull-out sofa bed in my aunt's sunroom. I remember praying "Lord, don't let me hate him forever. I don't want to be angry the rest of my life." My sister offered to read me to sleep. I can't tell you what all she read because her first choice, Psalm chapter 30, sent me into a deep and restful sleep. I woke up the next morning to the sound of my sister and parents chatting. We made a fresh pot of coffee and watched the most beautiful sunrise together with a renewed sense of hope.

We were able to move into my parents' new home in August of 2012, just three weeks before my wedding. During the previous eight months we were renting a furnished home. We had bought clothes and a few things, but we never really felt settled. Building a new home in duress is far more stressful than exciting.

Our church threw us the biggest house warming party when we moved into the new house. They even stayed to help open everything and to get the dishes washed and put away. Because of the generosity and support from our church family, we felt like we finally had a second to catch our breath. Trust me, there is nothing like a fresh cup of hot chocolate in a new mug in your new home.



I know small churches are not everyone's cup of tea. However, I couldn't imagine not attending my small southern Baptist church. Most of the members have known me my whole life. I have spent the last twenty-nine years with them (minus the two years I lived out of state.) They have supported my family during some very tough times. In September of 2003 my paternal grandfather died after a battle with cancer. Two months later my maternal grandfather had surgery to remove a brain tumor. My family lost a business to an electrical fire in April of 2004. Fast forward to November of 2011 and my family lost our home to a case of arson. Throughout all of that, these people who I had come to love as family supported us. The day of the house fire, they all showed up to just stand with us in our yard. On what I thought was the worst day of my life, they were there. And then eight years later, I experienced the actual worst day of my life.

My husband and I had just closed on a house a few weeks prior, and we were knee deep in a full home remodel. We were working all day and then working at the house every evening. We were so optimistic and excited. I had just started a new Bible study, and that Wednesday morning I

was feeling so great. I was ready to teach my kids' class at church that night. I was going to get to work earlier than normal. It was like things had finally fallen into place. But that trip on cloud nine was cut way too short.

On my way to work I was involved in a car accident that resulted in the death of a pedestrian. It still seems unreal almost two years later. I thought losing everything in a house fire was devastating. I have never been more wrong in my life. I cannot begin to tell you how shattered I was. It took almost three hours to be released from the scene of the accident. By the time we got home, my pastor had called my husband to tell him that Bible study that night would be a dedicated prayer service.

Let me tell you, I did not want to go. I admired the members of my church. Most of them had watched me grow up. The kids and teens have only known me as their Sunday school teacher. I only ever wanted to make them proud. I couldn't fathom the idea of them looking at me while I felt so much shame and gut-wrenching guilt. We joke about wanting to curl up under a rock when we're embarrassed, but I wanted to dig a hole to the center of the earth and never see another person again.

My husband and I met with our pastor before the service. He gave me an out if I didn't want to stay. He offered to let us out the back door of the pastors' study and no one would have to know we were there. I will forever be thankful for

a husband who knows me better than I know myself. I can remember him telling me, "I know you want to leave, but you need this. You don't have to talk to anyone or look at them. But you need to be here." We went to the sanctuary early and sat on the front pew. I heard the door opening and closing behind me, but I couldn't look up. I think I stared at my feet the whole time. The only thing in front of me was the piano and a jumbo poster of the Ten Commandments (when we studied the Ten Commandments in my kids' class, I always pointed out that some were easier to keep than others. "Number six seems like an easy one to avoid," I would say with a shrug. "That number ten will get you though." Jokes on me.)

Remember when I said my church was small? Our Wednesday night Bible study usually had less than fifteen people. Now, I am sure some people knew why they called a special service. Quite a few didn't though, which was evident by the collective gasp after my pastor told them about my accident. All I wanted in that moment was to disappear, to get up and run away and never look back.

After the service when I finally looked up, I saw a full church house. Everyone was there. People who lived nearly an hour away were there. These people, my people, were not looking at me with judgement, but with love and compassion. I had absolutely no reason to expect otherwise, but fear is a powerful thing isn't it? Yet in my deepest

sorrow they were there. In a time where I felt so alone and worthless, they stood behind me offering unconditional love and encouragement. I got several texts and cards offering support. Honestly, there really isn't anything people can do to make that situation easier. No one knew how to help. No one knew what to say. So they did the only thing they knew to do, they prayed.

Not just for me, but also for my family and the family of the victim. I was afraid people would ask all kinds of questions but they haven't, even now. Every few weeks my husband tells me who has asked about my well-being. It's a comforting reminder that they are still here loving me through this.

Shame and guilt have a way of rooting into your heart and taking up residence. Those feelings can convince you that you are broken beyond repair. The longer we let ourselves dwell on those thoughts, the harder it becomes to manage them. We stop seeing them as emotions and we begin to view them as if they are our whole identity. If I hadn't gone to church that night, I don't know that I would have had the nerve to go on Sunday. It was awkward for a while. But now more than ever, going to my tiny church feels like I am exactly where I am supposed to be.





## Church Ladies

RACHEL M. A.

Much like the term “pantyhose,” “church ladies” seems dated, stuffy, restrictive. Church ladies, in our minds, are old and frumpy. They bake casseroles and swap tidbits of gossip wrapped in prayer requests. They are raised eyebrows and pursed lips, icons of judgment. The rest of us will never measure up.

At least, that’s how we stereotype church ladies. But as is the case with all stereotypes, reality is far more varied and vibrant than our mental typecasting can allow.

I grew up in church, surrounded by church ladies. They were my parents’ friends, my Sunday school teachers, and then my youth group leaders. Whenever I thought of them, it was with vague feelings of positivity, but without feelings of community. They were so much older than me. They didn’t know me; they just knew my family.

Only when I myself reached womanhood did I start to pay attention to the ladies in my church. I paid attention, and as I grew from a college student to a bride to a young newlywed, I began to form friendships with them for myself. These church ladies whom I befriended were so much more than

one-dimensional figures who filled the pews on Sundays. There is a single woman in her fifties who decorates and coordinates weddings like a professional, a widow who enjoys painting, a brilliant empty nester who homeschooled eight equally-brilliant children, a couple of grandmas who share my love of baking, a stay-at-home mom who is always eager to share a book or podcast recommendation, teachers who are quick to ask how things are going in my classroom. These women are diverse in their ages, vocations, and life circumstances, but united in their commitment to serving God, our church body, and our local community.

When we held a funeral, they were there with pulled pork and fluff salads. When a family had a medical emergency, they were there to provide childcare. When somebody knew somebody who needed a winter coat or apartment basics, they were there to chip in with cash or donate what they could. And when I was the one in need, they gave to me, too. When I went through a tumultuous breakup, my youth pastor’s wife gave me comfort and perspective. When I took a mission trip in college, they donated. When

I was two months from getting married with no idea where we would live or where I would get a job, they threw me a bridal shower so generous that I couldn't fit all the gifts into my car. When she heard we still didn't have an apartment three weeks before our wedding, one of these ladies put me in touch with someone she knew, and within forty-eight hours my husband and I signed the lease for our first place. When, in an unexpected turn of events, my parents moved away and I stayed in the town where I'd grown up, these church ladies became my community, providing me with the sense of belonging and stability I longed for.

In their company, I saw that each woman had her own sorrows and flaws. Not a single one was gifted in every arena or perfect in all spiritual disciplines. They were no superwomen, but they were supernaturally empowered to serve - and so was I.

I am among the younger ladies in my church, but I've always been told that I am not the future of the church; I am, right here and right now, the church. I am learning how to step into this role, and I have learned from these precious mentors how many forms the church can take. Sometimes it's a thoughtful, curious conversation. Sometimes it's an invitation. Sometimes it's a batch of muffins. Sometimes it's a willing set of hands to hold a baby, to wash dishes, to load a moving truck, to offer a packet of Kleenex. Sometimes it's the willingness to speak into a small group discussion, and

sometimes the openness to receive others' words and hearts. Always it is love that gives to other people and remembers its own origin in the lavish love of God.

This is what church ladies do.



## My Heart Heals

LIZZI B. R.

I have been a member of the same church for almost 36 years. Since birth. I have been in almost every teaching position, women's Bible study, vacation Bible school, and youth ministry. I have seen a few splits, the evil of divisive gossip, and spiritual abuse by the one in the pulpit. I have watched church family members slowly grow bitter, distant, and then leave after an onslaught of accusations.

The last few years I began to grow weary of "Sunday morning friendly." The "hi how are you?" I would keep on walking. No more connection, no further interaction. No interest in furthering community any deeper than Sunday morning.

I have been hurt by church "family."

Then the pandemic hit, and I retreated to my safe living room to worship with immediate family. No fake, empty smiles. No rejection of yet another "family member" not interested in anything more than, "hey how are you doing?"

I enjoyed it. I didn't want to leave it behind.

I wrestled in prayer with the attitude of my heart as in-person church services resumed. Not due to fear of Covid, but due to my lack of desire to be around "the people of God."

I finally returned (more out of obligation) with an earnest prayer for the Lord to change my heart. And what I found was beautiful. There were new faces and old faces, but their hearts had changed. They came open and eager. They now linger to "catch up," they gather for Bible studies in each other's homes. They text a "thinking about you, how are things going?" midweek. They love and teach my children. It feels like family. An actual caring family. It's been a year, and the bond only grows deeper. And slowly my heart heals.



## Growing in Christ

**ALLYSON R.**

My family and I recently started going to a new church. It has been three weeks so far, and we have felt so welcomed and loved. They have brought us into their lives already by showing hospitality. They have invited us to playdates, community groups, and girls' night get-togethers. I have never been to a church that has reached out to new attenders and soon-to-be members like this. They have truly shown us the love of Christ as a community. I'm excited to grow in Christ with them and make long-lasting friendships. God is so good.



## How Are We Doing?

**DARCY P.**

Anyone care to guess why this carseat is naked?(DING DING DING! Projectile vomit after the church pizza and ice cream social is correct!)

He got in the van saying he was hot. I thought he was just being whiny, but half a mile down the road proved otherwise. I tried to find a spot to pull over, my mind already racing with how we were going to clean him up and continue our half-hour drive home. “Go back to the church,” Cody said.

Someone saw us coming and met us at the door. As we rushed to the bathroom, Cody announced to the few people still lingering what had happened. An older mom rushed out and said, “Did he get it in his carseat? I’ll clean it,” without missing a beat or even waiting for an answer.

Her entire family sprung into action. While she and her husband unlatched the seat and carried it inside, her kids ran out to entertain E in the van. When we came out of the bathroom, they were joyfully washing the carseat at the

sink. The sight of it brought tears to my eyes.

They saw us. They knew our need. And they met it and blessed us immensely. In our state of need we could do absolutely nothing to repay them, only marvel at the grace being poured out.

This is who Christ is for sinners, and this is what His Church should be for our neighbors and for the world.

Church, how are we doing? Let’s be these people. Let’s be a listening ear, an outstretched (scrubbing) hand, a knowing hug, a safe conversation, a quiet presence... a little taste of heaven on earth. I want to hear more people say in their moment of need, “go back to the Church.”



## Fidget Toys

**AMBER D.**

My three-year-old son has always been pretty rascally. He is the kid who walked at 9 months, ran at 10 months, and hasn't slowed down since. He is headstrong and strong-willed. The first Sunday we took him to church, the Sunday school teacher was a bit shaken by the time we returned to pick him up. Z is a sweet boy, he is just a very active little man who isn't usually up for sitting quietly (we are working on this). He wants to move.

The next Sunday when we dropped him off at his class, the teacher was so welcoming and excited to see him. She explained to me that she had taken it upon herself to gather fidget toys for Z to use during the service to help keep him calm. It blessed us so much!

Not only did she care for our wild man, but she also cared for this momma's heart because I knew she was invested in my son and he wasn't just a "naughty child" to her.



## Love Out Loud

MARILYN D.

My brother and I grew up in a little country church in Southwest Ohio. The simple white church house offers a quaint, picturesque view of the spring-fed baptismal stream out back, and beyond the water are the headstones of those we have lost. Therein lies my brother, in the serene, tree-lined cemetery alongside where our other loved ones have been laid to rest.

We had a happy childhood with our close-knit anabaptist community surrounding us. Eventually we both married, starting families of our own. It was during this time my brother became discouraged and disillusioned with “religion,” wondering if his faith journey was headed in the right direction. He soon got his answer when our mother tragically died in a car accident and when his third-born was diagnosed with trisomy 21. Our church family rallied and responded with such heartfelt intensity that he finally knew he was home. Eventually, he was called to the ministry, shepherding the little flock he knew so well. His integrity and tenderness endeared him to his church family, but it was his humility that spoke the loudest. He truly was

a man of God, living what he preached.

In 2011, my dear brother went to be with Jesus as a result of a construction accident. As horrific as it was, it was the fierce compassion of our church family that made it bearable. Several thousand people came to pay their respects. Every need was met as we prepared for the funeral.

To shop for and iron the shirt my brother was to be buried in was the greatest honor of my life. Even the smallest details did not go unnoticed as a friend passed out gum and mints, hugging us with her thoughtfulness. However, the greatest needs were the ones met after the funeral.

My sister-in-law was overwhelmed by generosity that paid the debt on her house and car. She eventually had to turn down the benevolent funds that kept coming in. Her conscience would not allow her to keep money that was no longer needed. Meanwhile, the government was contributing. While living, my brother would not accept the assistance they offer for handicapped children. He felt it was his responsibility to provide. But after his death, my sister-in-law decided it would now be expedient to take

the monthly checks. Since he died on the job, worker's compensation was also there to relieve the family of the burden of a needed income.

These examples in themselves are beyond amazing, but what borders on the miraculous is the way God spoke to my sister-in-law in the heat of the fire. The day my brother died, she walked into the study and found his notebook on the desk. It was lying open to the most recent outline of his newly prepared sermon. At the top of the page was the title of the message: JEHOVAH JIREH - THE LORD WILL PROVIDE. And He truly did. God provided in ways we could never have imagined, all because a beautiful church family chose to love out loud.





## Faithful to Sustain

**DEBORAH S.**

I lost my 9-year-old son last February. At the time I went to a rather large church. I had spoken to the pastor's wife on occasion seeking advice for a counselor, and we interacted briefly while serving at the church, but I wouldn't say she knew me by name, only by face. But she was a very intentional person when interacting, always looking in your eyes and giving her full attention.

The morning of Jonathan's passing, she called me herself to listen and to pray. She followed up multiple times in the weeks after to see how we were doing.

Our church family was at our side immediately. My small group leader went to the funeral home with my mom and neighbor to make arrangements. Countless people came over, arranged a meal plan, prayed with us, let us cry without shame, encouraged us with comfort from the Lord.

During the process of planning his celebration of life, we were having a difficult time finding a venue that was big enough, available, etc. (our church did not have a building because we met in schools).

Through a round about story, it turned out that we

gathered in the father of my pastor's church. When he found out we were members of his son's church, he said there was nowhere else we should be. We were loved and cared for. The pastor even took my non-believing husband aside and spoke to him about Christ and the hope we have in Him.

We ended up moving to a smaller church last year, but we have remained in close friendship with many from that church. I ran into my pastor's wife randomly a few weeks ago, and she asked how our family was. She loved on us, and she said how happy she was to see us.

God was faithful to sustain us, due in part to many from that church. He has used the members of our smaller current church as well to show that you can step in to someone's story at any point and offer comfort, encouragement, and a listening ear.

We truly are a body and are united by Christ to be His hands and feet.

Thanks for allowing me to share of His goodness.



## Security

**KATI S.**

I walked into the church building for the Sunday night North Georgia Revival. I was ready to worship, glean from a sermon, and witness lives change in the baptismal pools. I've been going to this church since last August and have felt the roof peel back and the glory of Heaven come down.

I was about to walk through the crisp wooden doors into the main sanctuary hall to find my friends and snag a good seat when a security guard pulled me aside. He explained that at the morning service, a man had been standing a little too close to me and staring a little too long at me. I knew exactly which man he was talking about and shrugged my shoulders in reluctance and denial. I was at a church I called home and with a congregation I considered family; what could go wrong?

I hurried in, claimed my seat (by the aisle, of course) and walked up towards the altar for worship. I hugged the pastor's wife, Paula Jo, as the countdown ticked on the screen. Before I could register what was happening, the man walked past Paula Jo, grabbed my waist and then swiftly

disappeared into the crowd. I whipped my head around to see who had just touched me as the service was opening.

I froze.

Without missing a beat, Paula Jo took two steps and held my hand as she asked, "Did that man just grab you?" I was frozen. She asked again, keeping her voice steady as I gripped her wrist, if that man had really just grabbed me.

I knew the answer but I didn't want to believe it. I didn't want to believe that someone grabbed my waist within the four walls of my own church.

Suddenly, I was weeping as the memories flooded in with a vengeance: I was back in that hotel room, I had those bruises, I was in that police station. It felt as if the ground was falling out from under me. She kept repeating JESUS over and over in my ear as I remembered I was at church. I was safe. I was held. I was taken care of. I was loved.

Worship ended and I turned to go back to my seat. Two security guys stopped me and asked where I was sitting so they could keep an eye on me. I sat back down with my

friends. I have hardly any recollection of what the sermon was about, just that I ugly cried through its entirety. I just wanted to go home. I didn't want to be at church anymore.

The sermon ended, the baptisms began, and again we saw Heaven come down. I was on the serve team and took photos of the baptisms and the miracles in front of my very eyes until just past midnight then headed home.

I went to work on Monday morning feeling unsteady, my assumption of 'safe' having been shattered. I had been harassed in a bar before, assaulted at work, and now grabbed in church. Where was I safe?

Monday night, a security guy messaged me that the man would no longer be at the church anymore. What was intended to be a celebration of sincere caretaking sent me further downhill: Was this my fault? Was this an overreaction? Was it really that big of a deal? Doesn't this man need to go to church, too? And, I hate to admit it, is it because I curled my hair on Sunday night? Did I look like I wanted to be touched? (hello, father of lies)

"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5)

I immediately messaged Paula Jo and she affirmed what I knew in my heart to be true: I did nothing wrong. It doesn't matter if I curl my hair.

Wednesday, I messaged Paula Jo again to make sure there would be security present during the mid-week service. She said yes (of course), and an hour later the pastor called me.

"And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15)

He told me about his meeting with the pastors and elders, describing this situation as a piece of a bigger puzzle that hadn't affected only me. He told me the church has an incredible security team of people who aren't necessarily worship leaders or pastors, but protectors. Most have a military background and are lined up saying, 'put me in coach,' ready to protect the body of Christ. I reassured him and said I know the church had done nothing wrong. Everything was fine. He read between the lines and said, 'Kati, this is the church. This will be the safest place we can possibly make it. This will be a reflection of Heaven'.

I told him I trust him and I trust the church, but I don't feel super great about coming back tonight. If the man wanted to retaliate against me for him being removed from the church, he would.

My pastor said he understood. He told me when I got to the church to shoot him a message and he would make sure someone would walk me inside, sit nearby, and walk me back to my car when the night ends. All to make sure I know without a shadow of a doubt that I'm safe and protected.

Thankfully I already had a tissue in my hands before he said: "You are worth protecting." I knew I didn't need the extra security. I knew the church was safe. I really did trust them. But sometimes the longest distance is from our heads to our hearts.

As promised, I let them know when I was at church that night. The pastor saw me from across the sanctuary and shot a 'thumbs-up' to make sure I was okay. I was seen. I was safe. I was taken care of. I was loved. Deeply.

"God sends angels with special orders to protect you wherever you go, defending you from all harm" (Psalm 91:11)

Sure enough, after the service I met Angela, the very angel sent to protect me. On the way home, I cried and cried (and cried).

For what may be the first time, I felt the protective heart of the Father. The heart that cries out in defense (Isaiah 1:17), that stands guard at the gate (Habakkuk 2:1), that cares deeply about even the smallest details (Matthew 10:29-31).

Hear this: it would have been so easy for the church to turn their head the other way and say, 'he just grabbed you.' There's a laundry list of church scandals that widen the gap between sexual harassment and the response of the church. Would I have even spoken up if Paula Jo hadn't seen the whole thing? Would I have trusted they take me seriously even without knowing my story and my past?

All the institutions that have hushed secrecy in an attempt to protect the pristine image of the gospel instead missed the biggest opportunity to rise up as the body and exhibit justice and mercy and really, the love of Christ.

But, THIS CHURCH. This church isn't playing games. The pastors are shepherding their sheep with due diligence and protecting us from the wiles of the devil. Saying something is one thing, but their actions - quick and intentional - gave evidence to the integrity of their beliefs. They left no room for the enemy, no room for the lies that would ensue. Instead they leaned in and let Heaven come closer. This church truly created a sanctuary.

So...no, I don't need the extra security nor the reassurance that I'm safe inside my church when I know I'm in the hands of the Father; but this season revealed the protective, covenantal love of God like never before, and for that I'm grateful. The value of the Church and the body of Christ cannot be overstated. To hold up a mirror to Heaven and allow others to be seen, known, and loved is our calling and commission. Church is the context within which we live on mission together. May we do it well.

Join me in prayer: Lord, thank you for pastors and leaders who reflect your heart of grace, compassion, and love. May this church be an example of shepherds with hearts like Yours. May we be quick to protect, to defend, to comfort, and to love. May we continue to live as Heaven on earth.



## Living Proof

**ALIYAH B.**

My family left my childhood church when I was a junior in high school. We visited churches on and off and did home church, but my overall perspective was very resentful due to some church hurt. I was ready to be done with church; not with Jesus, but with the church. Some friends of mine lovingly pointed out how this perspective wasn't sustainable for life in Christ because the church is His body. So I finally decided to visit churches on my own (my parents weren't ready to try churches again) when I was a senior in high school.

It was difficult visiting churches on my own. I missed the support of my family, and I didn't feel at home in a lot of church spaces. However, I visited one church on a whim and felt such a peace there. As time went on, I kept visiting and eventually decided to meet with the pastor. During our meeting, I cried about my frustrations with the church, and he cried right there with me. I'd never felt my pain validated by a pastor in such a beautiful way. He also understood my

hopes and prayers for my family in a way few people do. Now, my family attends this church with me, even though it is new and fragile for them.

Due to my season of life, with college and Covid, I haven't been able to get very plugged in to my church yet. I am still a new member by most standards. My pastor sees a lot of new people, and I didn't expect him to check in on me when I left for college this past fall. But he kept checking in, and so did other people from the church. I went through one of the most difficult seasons of doubt and confusion during my first semester away from home, and my pastor was the first person I wanted to talk to about it. He received my fears and questions with so much grace. I felt seen and known by God through his kindness.

This is just one picture of how this church has loved a bitter 20 year old so incredibly well. God has shown Himself strong and compassionate through the church, and I am living proof of that.



## The Body of Christ

REBEKAH H.

As I write these words, we are mere days away from my husband's first deployment - a deployment that will take him away from me and our two young children for 6-7 months. He's been away at pre-deployment training for the past week and a half, and he will soon return home for a few days. But even in the midst of this short stint of out-of-state training, our local church family has already stepped up to love and serve us in amazing ways.

Our church first stepped up a few weeks back when our pastor called our family to the front of the church at the end of the service. That Sunday morning he led the congregation in a prayer for us. Afterwards, he welcomed to the front anyone who wanted to give us a word of encouragement. So many people lined up (even some I didn't even know!) to thank us for our service, to offer words of encouragement, and to state specific ways they wanted to "be the body of Christ" to us.

One man asked how our children were handling everything, and when I told him my mama heart was very

concerned for our 6-year-old daughter because of what a Daddy's girl she is, he said he would pray specifically for her heart. Our music minister begged me to allow him and others in the congregation to help and serve us as the church. They offered to do anything and everything they could to help - even things as seemingly small as moving furniture if we ever needed that done. Another family offered to take care of our lawn. One woman said she would set up a meal train as soon as Owen leaves on the deployment. Another lady offered to watch the kids for me anytime I just needed time to myself. To say their words of genuine empathy, care, and concern blew me away and blessed me deeply would be an understatement.

Even in the week and a half Owen was away for training one friend from church dropped off Chick-fil-a for me and the kiddos for dinner. Another family from church came out and mowed and weed-eated our entire yard. It nearly brings me to tears to write about this.

All that to say, as hard as I know this deployment season

will be, I am confident I will be able to withstand the hardships far better and more easily than I would otherwise have been able to, precisely because of our church body and their desire to truly be the hands and feet of Jesus. I've been grateful for the church for years, but never before have I been as grateful as I am right at this moment. I truly don't know what we would do without them.



## God's Faithfulness

STACY V.

I feel I could write a book because God has been so good to me through church. I was raised in what I now lovingly refer to as an IFB-lite church. Certainly, we had some of the negative aspects of IFB, but generally our pastor preached the Bible. I learned the value of faithfulness, and how those seeds - when planted well - grow deep roots. I made good friends that I have to this day. I met and married my husband.

I loved being at church, not because things were perfect, but because I loved serving God with the people there. I can look back now and see things that could have been done differently, but overall it was a church that, while not perfect, was faithful to God and His Word

Fast forward a few years and my husband and I end up serving in a very legalistic IFB church. Like most in the congregation, I was not Biblically literate, although I read my Bible from cover to cover every year because it was expected of me. This is the first of a few examples where God took something that could be construed as negative showed me the good. I am thankful I had read my Bible

through that many times, even if I sometimes did so begrudgingly to check a box. Today, I intentionally study the Word of God to know God. I am comfortable with the overall narrative of the Bible. I know the flow, the obscure stories, and where to find them.

While there were many things that were wrong about that ministry, I learned so many things about how to do ministry well and have fun doing it. It helped me understand the bond that is created when you serve together. In hindsight, God opened my eyes for what to watch for in future potential churches and ministries we would be involved in. While there was plenty of harm from serving in that ministry, I also see the good that came from it. Had those good seeds of faithfulness not been planted deep in my early life, I am not sure we would have weathered the storm of leaving. But thankfully we found somewhere else, and we began to heal.

Move forward a few more years and through a myriad of events my husband felt God calling him to start a church. We were sent out from our local church to plant a church.



