

# ANNA TOLF

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November 13, 2022

## **An Open Letter to the Arbor Community**

I am writing to you to share my story knowing that, while it is my story, it is also our collective story. I am hoping that we can find true healing as we understand the truth of our whole, embodied history, even when it is hard.

In November 2020, I met with the Elder Board. During that meeting, I did my best to disclose one of the darkest, most traumatic and confusing experiences of my life. What I later came to understand about my experience is that I was a victim of Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse. In describing my experience, I was desperately seeking safety.

In January of 2021, the Elder Board and Church Leadership of Arbor held a Family Meeting to address the issue I had presented them with. The statement presented to the church body by Arbor leadership at the time inaccurately labeled the sexual contact as “consensual.” Now, almost two full years later, Arbor leadership has done the arduous work to bring correction to the narrative and provide the congregation with a statement that embodies and communicates the truth of what happened.

Words cannot convey the depth of pain I experienced in that devastating season of my life, nor is it possible to erase the imprint of that pain. However, I am grateful for the place we find ourselves today. For the last 10 months, I have studied, worked and wept alongside the members of Arbor leadership in this pursuit of truth. There has been a lot of healing and reconciliation as a result of their willingness to re-engage with my experience and provide the compassionate space for us to learn and heal together. During this process, they humbly sought the counsel of experts in the area of clergy abuse who were able to provide a biblical lens through which to view the events which took place. I want to thank Pastor Ryan for the critical role he played in providing a safe course to navigate the corrected narrative.

In addition to a corrected narrative being provided to the Arbor community, my desire has been to bring an understanding of abuse dynamics to the leadership of Arbor. My hope in doing this work is, not only to prevent future incidents of abuse from occurring, but to equip Arbor in such a way as to be an informed and respected leader in this area to support other church leaders when victims come forward. I now believe Arbor to be a safe place for victims of abuse.

## **My Story**

For six months during 2020, my boss and pastor exploited my emotional vulnerability through unwanted sexual advances which created a hostile work environment and ultimately led to sexual and spiritual abuse. The abuse was severe and pervasive. I had experienced countless interactions with the pastor over the course of my nearly five years of volunteerism and employment at Arbor that I can now see as red flags resembling grooming behavior. However, the overtly inappropriate actions came when I was experiencing the trauma that resulted from the on-going, months-long infidelity of my husband of 18 years. This betrayal culminated in an annihilation of my internal world. As my home life was imploding, I viewed my church family

and my place of employment as the safe place where I could both receive help and experience acceptance. Like a dental patient who arrives at the dental office in excruciating pain seeking relief, I arrived in my pastor's office in overwhelming trauma expecting spiritual care. Instead, I experienced behaviors that were predatory in nature and motivated by a self-serving desire, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

With the dissolution of my marriage came an intense custody battle which required that I demonstrate my ability to provide for my children through employment. Instability, in any sense, could mean less access to my kids. I feared that if I disclosed what was happening at work, both my financial stability as a newly single mom and my standing before the court would be jeopardized. It was not safe to disclose. As a result, I was trapped in a perpetual cycle of abuse. Everyday, I learned to disassociate, or separate and lock away, the abuse from my day-to-day experience so I could continue to function in my job and as a mother.

In November of 2020, I willingly and wholeheartedly participated in the investigation conducted by Arbor's lawyers. I believe the intention of Arbor leadership was to seek a just outcome; however, due to attorney-client privilege there was no opportunity for an unbiased investigation. The law firm was not a neutral third party. While the investigation brought many facts to the surface, what the interpretation and conclusion lacked was a truly objective, let alone, biblical perspective that was abuse and trauma informed.

On top of the trauma of infidelity by my husband and close friend, as well as the sexual and spiritual abuse by my pastor and boss, a third layer of trauma came when I became aware of the statement that was to be issued by Arbor that was both a mis-representation of the truth and lacked any acknowledgement of my victimization and voice. My attempts to re-engage the Elder Board were met with, what seemed to me at the time, indifference and inaction. I perceived their response to be motivated by concern for the self-preservation of the church. I felt like I was drowning in a tsunami of silence leaving me to suffer in isolation.

When the face of God, through the people representing God, was conflated with abuse, the spiritual wound was deep and very difficult to heal. In all the pain, this injury was, and still is, the hardest to access and repair. It may never fully heal.

## **Moving Forward**

After stepping away from my dream and calling of serving as a pastor, I enrolled in a graduate program in counseling psychology with an emphasis in trauma and abuse. I have found a degree of healing for my story through opportunities I have had to connect with other abuse survivors. This has led to my role as the Co-Founder and Co-Director of *Restored Voices Collective* (<https://www.restoredvoicescollective.com>), a nonprofit established to help survivors understand their story, connect in community and reclaim their voice. We offer care to women from all over the world who are at various stages of healing from Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse. If you, or anyone you know, is a survivor of this type of abuse, you can reach out through the website and you will be provided with a confidential and safe way to begin to make sense of what happened to you. You do not have to suffer by yourself. Abuse happens in isolation, but healing happens in relationships.

Collectively, as we seek to follow the commands of Christ to love our neighbors well, should we find ourselves as a bystander to an abuse disclosure or similar injustice, may we consider the words of Judith Herman in her seminal work "Trauma and Recovery,"

*"It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering."*

In reflection, I am grateful to still be here; that was not always a certainty. Additionally, I am hopeful that we can change how we, as a society and as a church, engage with those in our midst who have experienced sexual abuse. My hope and prayer is that my story may be able to be used in service towards that end.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anna Tolf". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned below the word "Peace,".