

CALLING THE CHURCH TO COMPASSION

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of Flyingfreenow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 40 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I'm excited to have with me Megan Cox, a pastoral counselor and founder of the Give Her Wings non-profit ministry to abuser survivors. More recently, she founded the Give Her Wings Academy, which seeks to educate and equip people-helpers. That is what we are going to talk about today. Welcome, Megan.

MEGAN: Thank you, Natalie. I am so happy to be here. You know I just love you to pieces. I love Flying Free. Give Her Wings has always done our best to support your ministry because it is vital, and what you do is vital. The training that you are bringing forth and the help that you are giving people is just beyond priceless. So, I'm thrilled to be here. I always love when you and I get to talk.

NATALIE: Thanks, Megan. I feel the same way. I feel like if we start talking, we may never stop.

MEGAN: Well, we can dive right in whenever you're ready.

NATALIE: Today we have a great topic. We're going to be talking to people-helpers. If you are a survivor, have gotten through your healing process, and are thinking about being a people-helper, this will really help you and be beneficial. Or if you're still in the thick of your situation and would like to have a go-to resource that you can recommend to other people-helpers who might be working with you — maybe your pastor, an elder at your church, or a friend — you could link them to this podcast, and it will help them and support them in helping you and others like you. Then we will also have some links to special resources that people who listen to this podcast can access in the show notes. To find those show notes, go to flyingfreenow.com/40.

What we'll be doing today is talking about a problem that both Megan and I have seen. We have worked with literally hundreds of women of faith in abusive relationships, abuse of all kinds: physical abuse, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, and financial abuse. One of the main problems that really grieves us is that when these women go to their churches for help, instead of getting the kind of help and support they need, they are being re-abused in different ways. That's what we're going to address today. We will

address the problem of re-abuse: what it is, where it's coming from, why they experience these things, what is the result to their lives, and towards the end, we will address some solutions. Megan, what are you seeing as far as the problem of re-abuse? Why do you think this is happening to these women?

MEGAN: For those of you listening, Natalie and I both started and founded these ministries that we run because of this very problem. I was revictimized by not just one church but several churches. I know Natalie has a similar story. Like she said, we've heard from hundreds of women who have gone through this very same thing. Unfortunately, a lot of the times when women are revictimized by their churches, they never return to church again. Actually, I don't blame them. When I hear the stories of what they have gone through, I don't blame them.

The whole reason we started Give Her Wings was because we wanted to be the church to women who can't set foot in their churches anymore because of the abuse they suffered once they got there. Statistics have shown that often the revictimization that women experience at the hands of their families, churches, friends, and loved ones can cause more PTSD symptoms than the original abuse in their abusive marriages. It's heartbreaking, because it has been so taboo for so long.

We are just now seeing with the #MeToo movement, the #ChurchToo movement, and all of these movements that are coming to the forefront, that it seems like ministers, pastors, and churches are starting to say, "Oh! Maybe we do need to know something about this. Maybe we do need to do something about this." Sadly, I think that there is a great lack of education when it comes to abuse. It is its own entity.

I think for a long time churches have wanted to kind of sweep the topic of abuse to fit into some general sin problem. But it's not a general sin problem. It is a horrible affront to the living God. So education is one of the greatest needs for pastors and ministers. I know we have a lot to say about what we would like to see in churches. Some of the women we have served — their faith has been hanging by a thread. The only reason I can figure that they still believe in God is the perseverance of the saints, because they have been so bruised emotionally by the people who were supposed to be there to catch them. That is our calling as a church: to serve the widow and the orphan, the down-trodden and the oppressed. I think we've been failing in that. I'm hoping that the tide is turning soon.

NATALIE: You can see in these churches that are abandoning these women, they are well-meaning. They seem to want to help other kinds of people in need. They will reach out to people who are dying of cancer or to people who have lost their spouse. You

could be a woman whose spouse has died, and you will get all kinds of love and support. In some churches, you could be a woman whose husband cheated on you numerous times and then abandoned and divorced you. Then you will be supported and cared for. So it's okay if someone cheats on you, but it's not okay if they are abusing you in other ways or hurting you in other ways.

MEGAN: Yes. That is some sort of paradigm that they seem to have adopted theologically where they will help people who can't get free, but if she is strong and chooses to get free, they aren't going to help her. It's a really strange phenomenon, and it's too bad.

I wrote a blog post four or five years ago about the difference between when my parents died in a car accident twenty-five years ago and we received a thousand dinners we couldn't finish and so many flowers that we had to donate to the local nursing home, and when I left my ex-husband. I was branded. I was shunned. I was ostracized by those very same people because I chose to bring my children to safety. It was horrible! I doubted myself. I doubted my faith. I thought maybe God didn't love me.

That is what we see. That is a travesty in the kingdom of God for the church to say, "You chose to leave, so we're not going to support you, and we might even harass you." Well-intended, yes. I don't want this to be an indictment on the church, because we go to church and we love church. We love the bride of Christ. At the same time, I think it looks so messy to people. If they are hearing an abusive man who is very charming and very involved in service saying, "It was all her," and then she is very bravely saying, "It wasn't me. I didn't do that," but she looks like she's doubting herself and looks crazy — which is all due to all the various types of abuse within that marriage — then they don't know what to believe. So it makes it easier for them to say, "We're just not going to deal with this because we're not equipped in this area. We don't know what to believe. Maybe we can pick up the pieces later and help them."

Also, I think we've been stuck in a theology of holding marriage above and beyond the well-being of God's children and even the right to life. So we have that going on. I think people are starting to wake up and say, "I think God values this woman's life more than He upholds this institution." After all, Jesus died for people, not for institutions. In every generation there seems to be something that we are hyper-focused on. In Jesus's time, what were they focused on? They had this whole thing about the Sabbath. "Don't work on the Sabbath. Don't heal on the Sabbath. He did this on the Sabbath. What about the ox on the Sabbath?" That was their whole thing.

My personal theory that I've thought a lot about is that we ushered in Focus on the

Family fifty or sixty years ago. We've ushered in all these incredible reformations to help hold marriages and families together. But we have overcorrected. As a human race, we are great at over-correcting. We tend to do that like crazy. We over-correct, and then things become idols. Then things go wrong because we have overcorrected. We have this idol: marriage has become an idol. Don't get me wrong! My husband and I uphold marriage. In fact, we uphold it so much that we don't believe that abusive marriages are covenantal marriages. That's how high we hold marriage.

NATALIE: Yeah.

MEGAN: It becomes this idol that we have. Then things fall apart and we don't know what to do, because we can't really see outside of that. We need a reframe. As God's people, we need reframes all over the place and all the time, because we haven't figured it all out. Having that humility... I would define humility as having the ability to say, "I am not doing this right. This is not working for me. We have a problem. This isn't working for us. Our way isn't best. Maybe there is a better way, a higher way — God's way." It is being able to say, "I need to read something about this. Maybe I need to look outside of just the authors from my denomination or seminary. Maybe I need to listen to people and stories. Maybe I need to focus less on being 'right' and fixing things and being more concerned about being kind and showing mercy," because that is how God is.

NATALIE: I think the bottom line as Christians for us is that we are loving people the way Christ loves us. If you are an individual who is looking a woman in the eyes and saying, "You don't know God," because that woman is going to file for divorce from an abusive husband and you don't want to believe that — you so badly don't want to believe that man is abusive because he is so nice to you — that is a problem. The foundation behind that is not love.

MEGAN: I would even say, Natalie, that there's a lot of arrogance there. I mean, what they are saying is, "I haven't experienced that, so it didn't happen."

NATALIE: Right, exactly!

MEGAN: That's a pretty arrogant statement!

NATALIE: Exactly. To even say to someone that they do or don't know God... I had an elder, who doesn't even know me personally, say that to me. The only information he had about me was what my ex-husband had told him and what he had observed about me at a point in my life when I was attempting to get free, and I was asserting myself

rather than just hiding and trying to make everything seem like it was okay on the outside.

One of the things I wrote in my book is that many times the victim will get to a place in her life where she is ready to get out. The only way out is to either commit suicide, commit murder (hopefully she won't do that), or to file for divorce. This could go both ways. It could be the man who is the victim. Usually the one who is perpetrating the abuse on the other person wants to stay in the marriage and wants the marriage to work. Why? Because that is where their control is. If they lose control of that person, then they have lost their game. They are going to want to keep the marriage intact.

So the abuser's goal and the church's goal line up. That's one of the reasons why the church ends up re-abusing the woman again, because the church is aligned with the abuser at that point in time, and the focus is on the marriage. If the focus was more on loving this man and this woman — loving both in the ways that they each need to be loved — that would mean being honest, telling the truth, and acknowledging that this marriage may not be able to be saved. A marriage is two people coming together and working cooperatively; it's not one person taking power-over and controlling another human being in an abusive fashion. That's not a marriage — that's being a concubine or a slave.

MEGAN: I hear that from women who say, "I felt like a prostitute." I think we need to hear that. We need to hear their voices when they say, "I feel like a concubine or a prostitute." I would even go a step further and say that not only might their marriage not be able to be saved, but it may have died a very long time ago. You just said something so wise about the abuser's agenda and the church's agenda being aligned in that moment, and now she is the outcast — or he. Usually it is the female, but it can also be the male.

NATALIE: Megan, both you and I have been divorced and are now remarried, and we have healthy marriages now. I would say, and I'm sure you would say this too, that our former marriages reflected what the enemy does to a child of God. They accuse. They badger. They criticize. They cut down. And they lie. Our current marriages represent more of what Christ is. To the other person, Christ represents love and hope and peace. He builds up, encourages, and sets them free. One of the things I heard a lot in my marriage was that marriage is a representation of Christ and the church, so if you get a divorce, then you are not bringing glory to God. Inside my head I thought, "My marriage is so not a representation of Christ and the church."

MEGAN: Yes. I hope my marriage was not a representation of Christ and the church,

because that would be a really black mark on Christ's character.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's blasphemous!

MEGAN: Yes. A God-glorifying marriage like the ones you and I gratefully have now is a whole different world. It is life-giving. Out of good theology should come good fruit. In my mind I cannot imagine the universal church as a whole saying, "We need to repent as a people! What have we done to these women? What have we done to marriages?" I can't imagine that happening, but I still hope that it will happen, because God does care about the individual. God said to the Pharisees, "I meant for you to be one when I created you that way in the garden of Eden. I meant for you to be one." Then I can almost hear Him say, "But obviously that didn't happen." I think He grieves the fact that as humans, we cannot pull that off because we've married someone who is not willing to try to do that with us. You cannot force your spouse to.

Then women are put in this impossible situation of... It's almost as if they put the job of salvation on the woman and submission. How can those two fit together? They cannot! It is just logical. At the same time and theologically, it is not our job. We can't save anybody. People are drawn by the Holy Spirit. For us to give control or power or let our husband control us — that is disobedient. When God says, "Be controlled by the Holy Spirit," that means be controlled by the Holy Spirit and not another human being. So there's that.

NATALIE: I always thought that your authority was God's voice in your life. God would speak through your authority. That creates all kinds of problems, then, when you are married. It also creates problems in your church, because if your church leaders are telling you that you need to do this, this, and this, then you think it is God.

But here's the other thing. We're seeing a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit's ability to work in individual Christian's lives. When I filed for divorce, I knew 150%, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God was directing me to do that, or I wouldn't have done it. It took four years for me to come to that place where I finally did. In fact, when I made that decision, I was on my face on the floor of a hotel room saying, "I'm sorry, God, that I have not obeyed You in this. But now, I'm going to."

Two days later I went in and filed. It was a huge burden lifted, because I felt God had been trying to get me to do it for a long time, but I was listening to the voices of all these people around me. Now, if you are a pastor or an elder listening to this, you might be thinking, "Woah! She is a deceived person." No! I have the Holy Spirit living inside of me, and you need to trust God enough to know that the Holy Spirit can direct

my life and my circumstance and may direct them differently than He directs your life and your circumstances. Until we can open our eyes and acknowledge that God is bigger than our little brains and our little paradigms...

MEGAN: That takes humility.

NATALIE: It does. It takes an extreme amount of humility. Here's the other thing. Let's say that I was wrong. Let's say that I really was deluded and deceived, and I made the wrong choice and fell down the slippery slope into sin. (By the way, right now my relationship with God is deeper and better than ever, even though it looks very different now than it did prior to this whole thing that happened.) But let's say I had been delusional. What good would it still do to condemn me and excommunicate me if that was the case?

MEGAN: Our policy is to believe women. We've never had a woman lie to us, which is spectacular, in seven years of ministry. But my thinking is that if she's not being honest, she still needs help. If someone can come up with some sort of intricate lie that her husband is abusing her, then there is still something really wrong with her and I should still love her and help her. There has got to be compassion. But that kind of condemnation is never in God's character. I have a very similar story to yours, Natalie, and I think any woman who is a godly woman like you is not going to just pick up and walk away from a marriage willy-nilly because she just isn't happy or whatever...

NATALIE: With nine kids.

MEGAN: ...with nine children, because we want to obey Him. That decision, for me, was the most agonizing decision I've ever made in my life. I took my four children and left Europe and came back here with one-hundred euros in my pocket and zero support. That's how bad it was. I still was told that I was misled, that I was confused, that I don't know what the truth is — all those same things. When we talk to women who come to us and say, "I think I'm being abused," or women who are through the divorce and are trying to rebuild their lives, but they don't know what to do and don't trust themselves, we pointedly do not tell them what to do. We ask them, "What is God telling you?" because she needs to begin to trust the Holy Spirit's work in her life. You've heard us say this a thousand times: "You have a sound mind. God has given you a sound mind. The Holy Spirit lives in you and He will lead you."

It would be easy to just tell her what we think is best for her. But pastors, ministers, and lay people who are listening, let her make the decision. Companion her. Draw out from her what she feels God might be telling her. Then affirm it. I've never really talked to a

Christian who says something super, crazy, off-the-wall sinful that she feels God is telling her to do. That hasn't happened. I'm sure that's out there.

NATALIE: Yeah, there is this thinking that if we support a woman, then another woman is going to come along and say God is telling her to...

MEGAN: That is so archaic. That is like Queen Esther. No, not Queen Esther.

NATALIE: Vashti.

MEGAN: Yes, Queen Vashti. We must make an example of her. Where are we, in Syria or Phoenicia?

NATALIE: This has been a problem throughout history. We always want to exaggerate. If we don't get our way, then we are going to exaggerate and say, "If you get your way, then this horrible, horrible thing is going to happen!" You mentioned the word "companioning." We were talking about that a little bit before the podcast. Tell us what that word means to you.

MEGAN: It is one of our core values at Give Her Wings. We have three core values: dignity, companioning, and a culture of storytelling. The storytelling is mainly to give our mammas — we call them our mammas — to give women a voice to be able to share their story and to just let them share it. It might be all over the place. It could be succinct. It could have a beginning, middle, and end. It may never end. They might not even know what the end is yet. That's important, and we include that in our Give Her Wings Academy. We include survivor stories so that these women can have a voice. It is very powerful, so lots of storytelling.

Then dignity. That is upholding all the image of God in every person we meet, recognizing that, and giving everybody that dignity. We don't treat people like anything to be used or an asset. We want them to have dignity.

But companioning is my favorite part of what we do, because that's very different than counseling. It lets believers off the hook as far as "I don't know what to say," and "I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing." We talk a lot about companionship among our team members. Really, that is saying, "You, my friend and sister, are walking through a very dark, tangled forest. I want to take your hand and walk through it with you." We can't fix that forest. We can't fix the problems. We do our best to help financially, as you know, because we are a non-profit, and we help women financially. But the best thing we can do is ask questions, listen to their story, and draw out what is hurting them the most.

When I do my pastoral counseling, I will ask... For example, if you say to me, "I'm so scared," I would ask, "What are you most scared of? Let's talk about that." Suddenly you're not alone anymore, because you have a companion who hears your greatest fear. I'm not going to judge you on being afraid of that. I'm not going to try to fix it and say, "Well, you know, if you were a stronger Christian, then you wouldn't be afraid," because Jesus was afraid.

So here's the thing. Companionship is holding her hand and walking with her, with proper boundaries, of course. Not overdoing it. Not giving in to compassion fatigue. Not feeling like it's our job and responsibility to fix everything. But just being there. If there are any pastors listening, and I hope there are, that's the best thing that you can do for a woman who is saying she is being abused. You don't have to panic on the inside. You don't have to hear every single angle of the story from every person involved in her life. God has called us to compassion, and He's called us to love. Listening to her is one of the greatest acts of love that you can give, because chances are that she hasn't had a voice in a very long time. She might not even know how to express herself.

NATALIE: Right. Let's close by talking about some of the ways that they can get help as far as training and education. We'll start by talking about your new academy, which filled up really fast this last fall and will be opening again in March of 2020. (My goodness, that's a long time from now.) Why don't you talk about that a little bit? We're going to have Megan back again early next year to talk about this again in more detail. Just give an overview and let them know where they can go to sign up to get on the waiting list so they can be one of the first to hop on board next time it opens.

MEGAN: Thank you for bringing that up, because we are excited about Give Her Wings Academy. It really took off. We decided to keep each cohort at one-hundred and fifty people. We developed it because we recognized that pastors and ministers don't know what to do, and there are so many women that have a heart for helping other women. There are so many men that have a heart for helping women who've been abused. Again, I do want to point out that men are also abused. Our ministry just happens to be directed toward women, because that's who we are and who we know. There are other resources for men out there.

We started our pilot group five months ago. We have male pastors on there. We have female pastors on there. We have survivors on there. We have people who feel called and feel led to minister to this marginalized group of people — those who are victims of abuse. It got more and more comprehensive, so it is actually a year-long certification process. We cover everything! We have expert advocates and pastors. We have

theologians and authors and the whole gamut. We frame it all in a healthy theology, thanks to Jimmy Hinton, who was invaluable. We have Joseph Pote. We have Natalie. We have Leslie Vernick. We have a whole bunch of amazing people, men and women, who provide these lectures.

The Academy is \$25 a month, which is incredibly affordable, and all the proceeds go towards helping victims of abuse on our non-profit side. So it is a win-win because you earn a certification with a lot of experts, but you are also helping victims of abuse as you are doing it. That is my favorite part of the whole Academy, because it funnels that money into the non-profit and we're able to help more women financially who have found themselves with little to no recourse, in destitute situations, and cannot find help anywhere else. It's exciting!

I've learned so much as I've done this Academy. I've learned so much about theology. I've learned practical tips. I've learned about legal options. I've learned about how to help children whose parents are going through a divorce or who have been abused themselves. I've learned about secondary trauma and trauma bonding. I've learned about sociopaths. I've learned about parental alienation. I could go on and on. It is a wonderful program.

NATALIE: Here's the thing. Abuse is extraordinarily complex. There are so many different layers to abuse. I remember the church that excommunicated me. They had a person come in and train them one weekend on domestic violence issues — a one weekend training. If you could picture abuse as being like an iceberg, that is like a snowflake on the top of an iceberg. That is just not going to cut it. The thing I love most about the Academy... When we learn, we learn best by hearing things repeatedly in different ways, from different perspectives, and from hearing stories. I love that the Academy is not just experts, but you are getting stories from real people. You are getting it spread out in small doses over an entire year so that by the time you are done, you have been not only introduced to all these different advocates... By the way, these advocates all have their own resources so you can dig in deeper. If you want to dig into sex abuse in church, you can follow up with Jimmy Hinton. If you want to dig in deeper on trauma or children...

MEGAN: You can access all of that. On every single lecture is a lengthy list of resources, suggested reading, reading materials, and journaling questions. Also, Natalie, I forgot to tell you this, but we do role-playing as well. What do you do if a woman comes to you and says, "I don't know if this is abuse, but my husband smacked my child last night"? What do you say? We do that as presentations for people who take the Academy, because sometimes you just need the words. Also...

NATALIE: You're getting excited.

MEGAN: I know. I'm getting louder and more excited. We are creating a package for churches so that a whole church team or a whole group of people who want to learn about domestic violence can take a faith-based certification course so they can bring that into their churches.

NATALIE: That is so wonderful! Then people like me, who are looking for a safe church... Are you going to have a database eventually of churches who are certified?

MEGAN: Yes. Thank you for reminding me of that. Any minister who goes through the certification process and completes it, their church will be added to our database on our website, which, of course, we would share with you on Flying Free, of a safe place to go, a church that understands abuse, a church where you won't be condemned for having the courage to step out of an abusive situation.

NATALIE: Beautiful! Well, Megan, we're going to wrap this up. Thank you so much.

MEGAN: Do you want the link?

NATALIE: Yes, say the link.

MEGAN: It is <https://www.giveherwings.com/curriculum>

NATALIE: Okay. I will put that link in the show notes as well. Alright, thank you so much for being on the Flying Free Podcast, Megan. For the rest of you, until next time, fly free!