

The Divorced Christian Woman Podcast with Natalie Hoffman, Season 2, Episode 8 - Church Relationships After Divorce: Reclaiming Your Spiritual Community

Heads up, friend: What you're about to read is a raw, unedited transcript straight from the robots. That means you'll find some weird words, funky punctuation, and moments that make you go, "Huh?" If you want the real experience (and to actually know what's going on), I recommend reading the polished article, listening to the full episode, or watching it on 1.5x speed with captions on. Your brain will thank you.

Natalie: What happens to your faith community after divorce? In this episode of the divorced Christian Woman Podcast, I'm joined by fellow coaches and friends, Diana, Stacey and Marie, as we talk honestly about church relationships. After divorce, we're gonna talk about navigating support and abandonment, reclaiming spiritual community, and learning to hear God's voice.

Beyond the walls of the institution. If you have ever felt alone, judged, or unsure of where you belong, this conversation will give you hope and direction.

Joining me today are my friends and fellow coaches, Diana, Stacey, and Marie. They are all divorced Christian women, and we are gonna be talking about church relationships after divorce and reclaiming a spiritual community. So before we get into our discussion, why don't you each briefly introduce yourselves to us and tell us about the work that you do with Christian women in your private practices, as well as in your role in the Flying Free and Flying higher community spaces.

Stacey: Hi, my name is Stacey Wynn. I am, um, a professionally certified coach. I have a master of divinity that I, I earned after my divorce, so a plug for going back to school and those things that we are really interested in doing. Um, I work with women outside of my, my corporate role, I'm just a, a corporate leader and a corporate coach as well.

But in my private practice, I work with women who are navigating transitions in life. Be those. Career, just life transitions, um, but predominantly faith related issues. So I work in a world that I lovingly call deconstruction. Other people don't understand that term all the time, so you can call it spiritual formation if you'd like, but that's the, the world that I live in.

It's, it's. People who are, um, kind of tearing apart their beliefs from the teachings that they've received and noticing things that they no longer want to align or feel aligned with, and how they find God and fate through those moments. So that's the work that I do, um, here too. And in our c.

Natalie: Yeah. And, um, since that's really what we're gonna be talking about today, a lot of it, um, I'm sure you'll have a chance to share some of the things that you do more specifically as we go on, on, in this conversation.

Mm-hmm. Marie, what about you?

Marie: Yes, so I have been a part of this program since 2020 and, uh, I've had the opportunity to. Um, teach some courses. I'm an ordained chaplain. I'm a trained spiritual director. I got my master's in Christian Spiritual Formation and Leadership in 2023 from Friends University. So the work that I like to do with women in this community and even business leaders is to provide that kind of soul care.

A lot of times, um, we don't get through therapy or coaching. It's, it is a different kind of care. But, um, yeah, I love to do that with people. The same thing that Stacey was talking about. A lot of people come to me because they no longer sense a connection with God and they are wanting that back, and so I help.

I listen, I'm a soul companion, basically a trained listener. Holy listening is what some people call it too. Mm-hmm.

Natalie: That's so beautiful. Diana,

Diana: I'm Diana Swillinger. I love having Stacey and Marie in my life because I need the help with my own spiritual walk. I've gone through my own deconstruction process, but I'm gonna be hanging on there every word here today.

Um, I. Uh, you know, I was married for almost 30 years and I was miserable in my marriage. I was depressed, I had anxiety. I had turned to drinking. I stopped drinking, and I was so beside myself until one day a mentor said to me, she just

gave me a label of an emotion one day, and she said, Diana, I think you're discouraged.

And I was like, oh my gosh, I am discouraged. And it sent me in this. Uh, amazing journey to figure out what does it mean that I could name my emotion and then feel better? 'cause I felt excited when she told me I was discouraged because I'm like, I could do something with that, I went deep dive into cognitive behavioral therapy and a whole bunch of things and I became an advanced certified life coach.

I'm now considered a master level coach just because of the hours that I have put in on coaching over the last eight years, but I coach people in what helped me, cognitive behavioral therapy. And so I have one-on-one coaching, group coaching, and I now have trained, uh, dozens of coaches in the tools that I use at the Renew Your Mind Institute.

So if any of this stuff sounds exciting to you, you can find me on my podcast, the Renew Your Mind podcast, and then my website is RYM podcast.com. And there's a bunch of resources there as well as recent episodes and ways that you can connect with me. So I've been a part of Flying Free and Flying higher for over four years now because even as a life coach, my marriage was falling apart and I needed Natalie's program.

And so it was a godsend for me. And again, thank so thankful for all the women here who've helped me along the way.

Natalie: Yeah. In this podcast, whenever you hear women saying this community, they are referring to Flying hire. Um, and all three of these women have taught courses inside of Flying hire. Um, they've offered coaching.

They offer coaching in the private forum. You can get it if you're a part of Flying hire, you have access to a private forum. You can ask these women questions anytime. Um, and then they've also done some group coaching. Actually we do group coaching every month in Flying hire as well. So, um. Flying higher is something where you, you pay a monthly fee, it's \$59 a month, and you get access to everything.

You get access to all of the archives, the huge libraries. We've been doing this for several years. There's all kinds of courses on just about everything you can imagine to equip you as a divorce Christian woman. So you can learn more by going to join Flying hire.com. Alright, here we go. How did your relationships within your church change?

After you were divorced?

Stacey: Yeah. I'll kick us off here and say that everything about church, my experience with church changed and um. To be really specific. At the time, the, the time I was divorcing, I was part of a lar, a mega church, and the overarching teacher teachings of that church were not, uh, they didn't, they no longer felt safe for me.

Now, my own campus that I went to, I felt very safe with my. My pastor there and he, he did things like, uh, offer to, um, make sure that if he saw my husband coming in for the same church service, that he would ask him to attend the another one, um, or he would let me know. He saw him. So I wasn't triggered by that unexpected sight of running into my husband at church.

So in the time that I was still going to church, I felt like I was safe and could be protected to just do church on my own. Um, I quickly found out that, uh. Where I was in my spiritual journey was outgrowing the church building. And that's flat out how I felt. You know, I, I, my faith became something that I could no longer hold inside that container.

So, uh, I love Diana Butler Bass's book called Freeing Jesus, because that's kind of what she says in the book. She followed Jesus out of church, and, and I feel like I did too. And as a result of that, I found new relationships. I lost relationships. Um, Brian McLaren talks about stages of faith. Well, and the fact is that once we, um, move a little bit further in our, in our faith, we can look back on our journey with compassion and see people who are where we were and understand that.

It doesn't happen in the other direction because we are now, we've moved outside of that protected bubble and there's just no capacity for understanding that yet. So relationships become really tricky and community does too. And I imagine we'll talk more about that today.

Marie: My separation and divorce happened during the para pandemic. So it actually made it easier to step away from the church, which I, you know, I never could have named it then, but it was a necessary part of my healing, uh, and what I needed to do. So I just never went back to that particular church, um, that, that.

The time period was so important to me because I actually learned how to hear God's voice instead of all the other voices telling me what they think I should do or their interpretation of the Bible about my situation. So I didn't do it for that

reason, but stepping away I could realize, oh my gosh, I'm getting more in tune with God and his voice in me.

Instead of being confused with all these other voices on the outside, so, yeah.

Natalie: Okay. Can, do you have any stories that you could share about either feeling supported by church friends or, or maybe abandoned by them?

Stacey: I will share a few things that did not feel good for me and um. I do that because I, I, I hope that listeners, you know, when we find ourselves in tricky situations, talking about subjects with people that we don't know really well and we're leaning heavily in on faith and trying to, um, perhaps make.

Statements that we intend to, we, we hope that they go over well and they make people feel better. You know, in the end it's really about connecting and listening to other people. So what isn't helpful and what wasn't helpful for me, um, were comments like, you know, if you have more sex with your husband, your marriage is gonna get, get better.

Or, um, you know, just sending scripture verses about whatever, just hope in hopes of lifting, you know, lifting my spirits. Um, I think that what's really helpful is not a book and it's often not. Uh, Christian counseling, in fact, I would say 99.9% of the time, uh, find a secular therapist and a secular counselor because we can oversize what we're going through and it makes it even more difficult.

So, um, just try to be real with people and try not to always apply scripture and text and, and church language around it, and just listen and be there and support and find out what the true needs are that we have in that moment.

Natalie: Yeah, I, I have to sh jump in and share something here. Um, I had an experience with an elder and his wife, and they would both send me lengthy emails that were filled with, they would write out the en entire chap, like, not chapters, but verse passages, and, and then they would use very flowery religious kind of language.

But, but their emails were full of just toxic manipulation and shaming and all kinds of nasty stuff. But it was. It was, you know, it had so many flowers and unicorns and rainbows all interspersed throughout the whole thing like it, but, but you could see it, it was so obvious and that just, it left such a horrible, icky taste in my mouth for scripture.

It was so hard to see scripture superimposed on that kind of backdrop. But yeah, and now even now, I get really, I get a little bit. Eh, if someone says something to me and throws a Bible verse in there, I'm just like, please don't throw a Bible verse in there to try to make your point. It's just, it's, I've got too much trauma around that.

Marie: Yeah. Well, I have plenty of stories of both really, of support and, um, ones where I felt abandoned. Looking back, I can see, excuse me, how the advice given. Is a reflection of the kind of God they serve.

Natalie: Yeah.

Marie: God littley. So if their God is a transactional, harsh task master only concerned with our behavior, then their advice was, and I'm, I'm not kidding, have give him more respect, more sex, more home-cooked meals, better homeschooled kids and a clean house, and have a fit body.

And lipstick on while doing it. Yeah. In other words, act a certain way. And this God, little g God will bless you. Um, so the most helpful support that I had was a listening ear, a listening ear. No advice given, no religious checklist. Follow, uh, these, the people didn't try to fix my situation. They were just there to listen and tend to my heart.

The way that they tended it was by listening and being a support and there just a presence. Um, they would let me be angry or cry or whatever without a verse to say. You know, well, you know, think about these things and you don't have to be sad because you know what y'all were just talking about, putting verses on it.

But, and I would guess that these people that were the most supportive of me and the most, uh, tender and gracious were they know God, the God who cares deeply for his children and sits with us in our pain. 'cause that's what they were doing.

Natalie: Yes. I love that. I will say that that is one of the main themes of my book, in my book, all The Scary Little Gods to help, uh, to show my own story, but to help women to identify scary little gods in their lives that are causing that when we, you know, it's, we're so big as Christians on not worshiping idols, right?

And yet we worship idols all the time. Small God or Gods with a small G. So how do you identify those and recognize. That your beliefs and how you're showing up in your life is a result of your beliefs about who God is, and you're

not the only one doing it. Everyone around you is doing it. So you can, everyone around you is reflecting by their behaviors and their choices, the God that they're worshiping, and it's either God, capital G, or it's Gods small Gs.

And, um, I think that's super important. Once you can identify that, then you can kind, then you, then you don't have to take it personally when they're saying things like that. You can just go, well, they don't wor we don't worship the same God, so of course we're not on the same page. Right. All right. So how do you navigate relationships with church leaders who might not under like my elder and his wife, who might not understand or support divorced women?

Stacey: Yeah. Um, there are so many churches out there. All you gotta do is drive through your town and look around or towns that are, uh, you know, joining yours. And there are so many churches. There are online communities, so we do not have to go to a church where we have to train pastors on how to support us as divorced women or divorcing women.

Uh, there are plenty of places out there where divorce is seen as a very real and necessary tool. In the modern world. Yeah. And sometimes we need it and it has nothing to do with our identity in Christ. It has nothing to do with our faith or anything else. God doesn't hate us when we get divorces. So, um, we need to leave churches that are requiring us to train them or going through some process of, oh, tell me what you need from me.

Uh, and then not following through. Yeah. So just, I think we're better served to leave.

Natalie: I'm so glad you said that. 'cause I, there are, and I hear this a lot, where people think, well, I need to help my church understand, or they kind of want me to help them to understand. And yet you're not necessarily in a place where that's your, where you, where that's your responsibility.

That can be very traumatizing. Especially when they just end up ultimately dismissing you in the first place. Mm-hmm. I know there's people who. Really feel called to help churches understand this. Um, I'm not one of them, but you know, if people are called to do that, then okay, just know that just like the disciples had to go through, go through towns and share the good news of Christ, um, not all, not all towns were willing to hear that.

And then Jesus said, you know, they're not right now. They're not in a good place for to hear that. So it shake your. Shake the dust off of your sandals. Not meaning, you know, not in a bad way, just it's time to move on and move to the

next town. Move to something new where, where someone actually might be more receptive.

Marie: Mm-hmm.

Natalie: Marie?

Marie: Yeah. My view is if they're willing to hold space for different beliefs with respect. Um, then I'm willing to have a dialogue, but I will not knowingly attend a church, which, which holds to patriarchal or um, complementarian beliefs. I, I say knowingly 'cause I did that accidentally two years ago.

And then the message was very obvious where they stood that and that I, I hold that stance because I wholeheartedly believe that those teachings are not at all what Jesus taught. Absolutely not. He was not about patriarchy or complementarianism. So that's why I have that stance. I love this quote I heard recently from Parker Palmer.

I will no longer conspire in my own diminishment.

Natalie: That's great.

Marie: And, and I see so many people attending these churches and say, well, there's not really another one out there that you know, is gonna teach this way. So it's almost that like they overlook it. Oh, they can do that, but I'm no longer going to conspire in my own de diminishment.

And those churches diminish women.

Natalie: Yeah. Yeah. And by the way, um, on Sunday mornings, every other Sunday morning women in Flying higher have an opportunity to attend a live Bible study. Where we are going through right now, we're currently going through Luke, we went through Romans earlier this year and it is power packed Bible study.

We have amazing discussions. And then, so that's like church for a lot of us. Then Sunday nights, Stacey has a, um, you don't have to be part of Flying hire to be part of her group. Her group is free on Sunday nights. She does a deconstruction group, which I think you're gonna talk about. I think you're gonna talk about that in a couple of questions.

So I'll let you talk about more about that then. But, um, we're gonna skip over a question, ladies, that we, that I had said we were gonna ask and we're gonna go to, um. This question, how do you know when a church relationship is, or a church actually in general is restorative versus unhealthy and toxic? You know, because they, I mean, just kind of like with our, in our past relationships, we maybe thought it was okay, but then it turned out that it was actually quite toxic.

And how do you decide whether to stay connected with people from your old church community or to step away entirely? And then maybe for if anyone, I don't, I know I have left church altogether. Um, but what was the hardest relationship to let go of? If, if you have anything to share on that.

Marie: Yeah, well I wrote a blog series called Why I Left Giant Church Incorporated, which addresses this and actually is the story of my family and I leaving a church that we had been part of for almost a decade.

Um, I'll say the hardest part, uh, for me was when my family and I realized that the relationships within that community were conditional. Yeah. Um, when we left, a lot of them, specifically the church staff, no longer had use of us. Yeah. And, uh, I'll never forget the moment that my youngest daughter, minutes after we had met with the pastors, um, to tell them we were leaving, but minutes after that she called to let me know that she had been removed.

From the church intern GroupMe app, which she had been an intern for almost two years and on, unbelievable by one of the executive pastors. They removed her within minutes and it, it was a digital form of a shun. That's what it felt like to a 15-year-old girl that had dedicated her life and just, I mean, she was there like at seven in the morning on Sundays and just, and, um, yeah, they just had no use of her anymore and so just removed her from the app.

Natalie: Well, it's almost like they wanted to preempt preemptively do that to say, you know, like an exercise of power. Like, well, we'll remove you then. You can't be the one to leave. We are going to be the ones that, that reminds me of my situation. I was excommunicated, but I actually tried two years before they officially voted to voted me out.

I tried to remove my membership. I sent an official letter, um, and asked to be removed from membership, and they sent me a letter back and said, no, because you are living in sin. You cannot remove yourself from membership, we will remove you from membership if you don't, if you don't repent. And so I just, it honestly, I mean, part of me was like, it was shocked first of all, because it was

so, it was so first, I think it's kind of immature for one thing, but also it just felt so evil.

It just felt so hateful and evil and, and then, and then the other part of me just felt like, well. I guess my gut feeling here all along was correct. It was right all along and they're showing up exactly when push comes to shove, they will show their true colors, and it was very fascinating to me. So tell me what relationships outside of church then have filled that gap for you, and how do, how do they look different from that traditional fellowship that we're so used to?

Um, do you have any creative forms of spiritual connection that have been life giving for you over the past few years?

Stacey: Well, I. Do back in 2019. Um, and it kind of started and, and Flying Free, Flying higher where, uh, I know I noticed that there were a lot of conversations going on about faith questions and kind of, uh, wilderness journeys and feeling disconnected from God or, or church or communities and those conversations.

Um, we took out of the community and I started a Facebook group called The Deconstruction Zone, and it now has, I just checked over 800 people in it.

Natalie: Oh, wow. Over 800. Yes.

Stacey: But each Sunday night, they're just a small group, so 15 to 20 women that come on Sunday nights, and we've met since 2019 and it is a place where we talk about.

Theological questions. We talk about life. We just, uh. Has to be, you know, always some new people, some old people, a great mix, but it's just a judgment free zone where we can show up as we will and respect one another and truly listen and, and have curiosity and ask questions. Uh, and so that's been hugely, um, life giving to me.

Not only because I get to facilitate that group and feel, you know, my calling as a shepherd. Um, which I, I love that term so much more than pastor, but I, I, I get to shepherd there and I also am, uh. Fed week after week there. It's just a, a beautiful space. So for anyone who thinks that, you know, they don't have availability in their small towns, wherever they live to have anything like that, there are online opportunities to gather.

And that's an example. And we'd love to have you, if that feels like a place that you'd like to be.

Natalie: So would they, if you're on Facebook, then they could just go to, they could do a search for deconstruction zones and they would able to find that group.

Stacey: It's in my link tree. So the link, um, that takes you to all the stuff that I do, you'll see that.

And if you're not on Facebook, as many people are opting not to be, there's just a straight zoom registration.

Natalie: Okay. Oh good. Oh, that's good to know. Yeah, I love that. I know more and more people are getting off of Facebook. Mm-hmm. Which I can completely understand. Okay, Marie?

Marie: Yeah. This community. I don't know, I've said this a lot in a previous podcast, but this community, the kaleidoscope here in Flying Free and Flying higher has filled that gap for me.

Um, I've also led small line book studies, attended grad school, which, you know, I know that's an expensive form of community, but I mean, I have continuous relationships with those that I met in my cohorts. I'm part of a mastermind group. I have pickleball friends, and of course I've talked about my, my Meetup group.

I do attend a little church now, but I understand better now the necessity and value of having a variety of connections and relationships because I think we all can relate where we basically, our church community. Was it like it was our marriage? Our children and our church, or that's how it was for me.

And so I didn't have a lot of a broad, you know, uh, diversity of relationships. And so now I have. Relationships with people from all different backgrounds, political stances, experience. I mean, my social life now is more closely aligned with what the early church looked like than what I ever experienced in my decades of going to church.

Seriously, it, it is a beautiful depiction of the early church as described in Acts two. Paul's words in Galatians 3:28 that where it says There is neither Jew nor Greek slave, nor free male, nor female for you are all in one in Christ Jesus. And I'm, you don't have to be in a church building to experience that.

In fact, I, that's part of our work right, is to not. Contain it in a church building, right? It is. To go out into the world. And so, um, I know that Diane, you, Diana, you built, you have filled the gaps too. I love. Yeah. Let me,

Diana: yeah, let tell you. So it's a little different actually. And I also wanna say, just back on, knowing whether it's a relationship you wanna keep, I can't help it.

My coaching brain, brain always wants to ask yourself some questions here. If it's a relationship you wanna keep. Or get rid of, could be toxic and you might wanna get rid of it, or you're looking to add new relationships and you're testing out new, um, communities and relationships. You can ask yourself questions like, how did that interaction make me feel?

Does being with this person, am I feeling supported? Am I feeling challenged? If I'm feeling challenged, am I feeling challenged in a good way or a bad way? Do am I leaving feeling confused or conflicted, or am I leaving feeling empowered and wiser? So whether it's an existing relationship that you might need to let go of or you're exploring new ones.

And so what I've done in exploring new ones, I haven't, I've continued to go to a life group occasionally at church, and I don't always vibe with everything they say. But I love the women in it and I bring a different perspective now for sure than I used to. And I offer it selectively so I don't overpower anyone.

And I'll often present questions like I do hear a lot. And so I've enjoyed that. But I haven't gone to regular church Sundays, uh, for a couple years now until I stepped into one a few weeks ago because my friend was speaking and it was a wonderful interracial. On purpose, interracial church, and I had a great experience, so maybe I'll go back, but what I've done to fill my gap has been one-on-one.

I as an introvert. And in Enneagram three with a wing four, my Wing four is a deep feeler. I just crave saying and exploring very deep concepts with people, which is hard to do in group settings. So I've cultivated, and these friends, they're not friends with each other, but I have my own little group of friends that don't know each other that I can go to one-on-one and I can say the deepest things to them.

I can be like. What if Jesus dying in the cross didn't mean what we think it meant? What if it meant this? And I'm just exploring it and they're like, interesting. And, um, if, if I'm terrified of something, if I have deep fears, if I feel I had one friend I sent a message to this weekend and she was like.

Could you be a little more passionate? Because I had someone say to me, if you ever date again, you better make sure they're a believer. That's what triggered it. And I'm like, I need to talk someone to someone about this right now. And I needed a friendship, somebody who was safe and understand where I was spiritually.

And so I sent her a message and I'm like, they're wrong now. It doesn't, didn't even matter what I ultimately meant. 'cause I, in the end, I said, who cares if they're a believer? I want 'em to not be an a-hole. That's where I landed in that moment. But it was safe to explore. 'cause that's a spiritual side. Do I wanna be connected in a relationship in the future with a man who's a believer or a not believer?

And it's a safe place to explore all that. So it can be one-on-one. I took a, I took many years to develop these and I'm very passionate about them, these friendships, and they suit my personality style. And it's filled a spiritual gap too when I think about having, um, fellowship with believers. I can get it in this one-on-one.

It's not always a group.

Natalie: Good. Okay. Let's talk about, um, trusting other spiritual leaders after we've been hurt or dismissed by past ones and maybe. Maybe this doesn't relate to all of us if we have kind of moved on from church, but for people who are maybe looking for a new church, I know we've gotten this question in the forum a lot.

How do I know? How do I, you know, build trust in another spiritual leader? What boundaries do I need to protect myself from getting hurt again by another group of spiritual leaders? Stacey, you had a great answer to this. That actually is a little bit of, spins it on its head a little bit. Can you tell us about that?

Stacey: Sure. I think we really have to. Embrace the fact that, uh, you know, we say these things all the time. Every person has, has a personal relationship to God. So we truly have to believe that, not just say it. Yeah. So we each have our own leadership. So we're each spiritual leaders of our own journey, and we need to see ourselves as our own spiritual leaders.

And, and that, I think when we step into that and we reclaim our agency so to speak, then we rely less on this need to have someone tell us what to do or give us the right answer or you know, you know, we have less of that need so we can have a healthy detachment. To leaders and even to communities and churches

because we don't need them to tell us what to do, but we can find a place where we want to be, where we want to grow together and journey together.

And we, and it, I think it helps our discernment and radar to tell is someone trying to take that. My spiritual leadership away from me or control me or manipulate me in some way. And then that can help us recognize when we're in, uh, a place that maybe doesn't deserve us.

Diana: Yeah. In the same way, Stacey, I think, um, we also don't want to put, put them in a position.

Like we're the one putting them in a position above us and we're like, they've got wisdom that I don't, they have some special, they went to seminary or they've dipped into theology way more than me. So I must elevate them with their spiritual knowledge and wisdom above me, because then we don't check in with ourselves.

So I would say, let's not put the spiritual leaders on pedestals. Absolutely. They're people.

Natalie: Yeah. Yeah. I have a good story about that. So one of my best friends from high school, she became a pastor. She's been a pastor for many years now. And we went, we recently went out for dinner with a couple of other good friends from high school.

So there were four of us sitting at a table and we were just laughing and joking and being our, you know, you kind of go back to that who you were back then. And we were just, we just let our natural, who we are, come out and it was so much fun and we were. Having such a blast. And all of a sudden, this group of people, it was two couples actually, they come over to our table and they're actually people who go to my friend's church.

They're like, you know, they're her parishioners, right? And so, and they come up and you can see the admiration in their eyes, and they're saying hi to her. And, oh, it's so fun to see you here, and these are your friends. And you could see. That they really looked up to her and respected her, and the rest of us were just going, what this is, it's just Kristen.

Like why, why are, it was just the weirdest, most surreal thing to see it from the perspective of. It's just Kristen. I mean, she's like a ham. She's like a, what's the word I'm looking for? A ham, I guess. You know, she's like super hysterical and she's constantly like being goofy, like really a goofy person.

And yet she has this persona as this pastor and, and it felt really good to think, man, you guys know her as your pastor and you have respect for her and stuff, but we know her as a person. As a really amazing, multidimensional person with flaws and strengths, and it felt really cool to think about it from that perspective also.

Okay. Let's talk about forgiveness a little bit. Um, how does forgiveness, what role does forgiveness play in just looking back at our. Like I can look back at the church that excommunicated me. Sometimes I'll run into people that actually left that church because of my excommunication. That was caused a rift at the time.

Um. But, you know, sometimes I'll also see people from a distance. I've never actually gone up to any of them that were part of, you know, the people that took a vote and actually voted me out. Um, and I sometimes, and I feel, I, I actually feel a lot of love for them and forgiveness towards them, even though they've never asked me or ever apologized.

I at least have that feeling or that sense inside of me, even though I don't feel comfortable going up to them and saying, mainly I think it's because I worry that they might, you know, shun me more or turn away. I actually have experienced that. So I think I have some evidence to support that that could possibly happen.

But how do we, what does forgiveness require of us when we look back on these relationships that have really harmed us in our former churches?

Marie: Yeah. Um, well, I'll look at forgiveness differently and, and, you know, I'm still thinking through this and trying to practice it, but Desmond Tutu wrote a book called The Book of Forgiveness, and, uh, it radically changed the way I look at forgiveness because a relationship is changed after an offense.

It just is. And so the it, he talks about how forgiveness provides the opportunity for the relationship to be renewed or released, but it can never be what it was. But the church always says, we need to restore this relationship. It is gonna be a new one. And you know, we all experience that in our marriages as well.

Like, oh no, the relationship needs to be restored. I mean, after. Grievance after grievance, betrayal after betrayal. They kept saying, but God can restore this. And you know, what tutu's, um, saying is let go of that idea of restoration. Instead you get to decide whether that relationship needs to be renewed or released.

And that just makes more sense, doesn't it? Yeah. So, um. He just goes into like, the renewal of a relationship is the creative act of love. And I've actually experienced that with a very good friend of mine who was at Giant Church Incorporated. And she was, she was never mean or anything like that, but she kind distanced herself from me.

Um, but we've come back together and I'm telling you. It is such a beautiful friendship now. Um, but we, we had to both work at this renewal, right? But the relationship is different than it was before. It can't help but be different. Um, so that's just how I look at it now, you know, and if we, we look at, um, you know, Jesus.

Parables about forgiveness. You know, when Peter talked about, Hey, how many times am I supposed to forgive? I love that Peter does this. 'cause he is just like, give me the checklist of what I'm supposed to do. You know? And Jesus makes it absolutely impossible. Basically saying 70 times seven. But then there's other parable about the unmerciful servant that really what Jesus is saying, it's not about the number of times, it's about the condition of our heart always.

Yeah. You know?

Stacey: Yeah.

Marie: And that's what, uh, you know. Jesus is always saying, look, forgiveness is more than a decision. It is a holy work. And where I would push back on the church and what a lot of the churches that we cannot teach is like it's a decision and something you've gotta do and like it's just that easy.

No. It is a holy work, meaning a wrestling out, an ironing out. It may take years, but it's a worthwhile endeavor. Right. And God is so tender and gracious with us in that process and he's not angry at us in it either. He is not so well 'cause

Natalie: He is. He is the great forgiver.

Marie: The greatest.

Natalie: Yes. Forgiver. Yes. So, so of course he's not angry.

It's so weird how much dissonance there is in our Christian traditional Christian teaching. Like, forgive, do all of this work that God doesn't even do. 'cause God's angry. You know, it, it doesn't make any sense.

Diana: When I was young, I used to feel like when, when somebody would offer to me, I'm sorry, I ended up.

Instead of saying, I forgive you, I would say it's okay. Does that sound familiar to anyone? When someone Yeah. Yeah. Especially when you're little. Yeah. I'm so sorry I did that. It's okay. So I realize now, no, forgiving does not mean it's okay. And I had a pastor hurt me very deeply once and created a big to do against me when I was a volunteer worship leader at a church.

And it, it just got way out of whack. And it was one of the darkest times of my life and I. Did what I could to bring the relationship to a place where I could forgive him, and it's over a decade later and it's still not okay, but I have forgiven him.

Natalie: Yeah,

Diana: I don't ever wanna have a conversation with him.

But I have forgiven him 'cause, but it's not okay. And I can land in that space. And then the other thing I, you know, when I think about, do I want to, um, was it renew or release, I think is what Mari said? Renew.

Marie: Renew, yeah. I only

Diana: will renew a relationship with somebody who is obviously repentant. So they, not only do they say they're sorry, they tell you why they thought it was wrong and what they're doing.

To fix that in themselves and what they're gonna do to reconcile and restore on their end, that's repentant. And then it's also gotten to a place where it feels safe for me to take a next step. And also renewing doesn't mean restoring back to, I love that word, instead of restore. It doesn't mean restoring back to what it was.

I love that. It just means I will consider, uh, bringing you back into a relationship with me in some. Format, and I think on a previous podcast, Stacey talked about the circles of influence and where people are in your circles. If they were in your inner circle or an inner circle, and there's been a big infraction, renewing that relationship, if you feel like it's okay to do it.

Doesn't mean they go back to the circle they were in before they could be back in. Mm-hmm. An outer circle. So you can still have some relationship with him,

but. You don't have to bring 'em in. And so yeah, I forgive you. It's still not okay. And now I'll decide what I wanna do with our relationship going forward.

Natalie: Yeah. So good. Let's talk about kids. Um, a lot of women listening to this are parents and how do we support the, our children spiritually. If we, maybe some of us aren't even going to church anymore, or maybe we're go kind of hopping around or maybe we're doing what some of us are doing, doing online things.

We can't bring our kids to, or, I mean, I don't think we would probably, I'm not gonna bring my kids into the Bible study that I do with the women on Sunday mornings, for example. So how do we support them spiritually? What are some ideas?

Stacey: Well, you know, it may sound really, uh, crazy and, and all, but I, I believe that Jesus meant what he said when he said his work was complete.

Um, he is, he is not coming for a do-over.

Natalie: Yeah.

Stacey: And through his resurrection separation, there's no separation between us and God. The, the Holy Spirit came at the moment, he died. The Holy Spirit's, the, the veil was torn in two. We have, we have God within us and each of us has a personal relationship with God.

So we have our, our relationship and our kids have theirs. And um, and, and I think that we have to learn about relationship. As we exit toxic church environments, we're embracing this idea that it doesn't mean that we have to know everything. And, and knowing and being certain isn't, isn't faith. So as we start to navigate those waters and really get more in touch with our own faith and, and what relationship means as a mother to children, um.

We give them space just like we give ourselves space to figure that out and, and releasing in those moments when we feel fearful, because I think Evangelicalism has made us fearful and, and responsible. The sense of responsibility as mothers that we're in charge of our children's faith journey, we have to let that go and cease having fear.

And I will tell you, and she wouldn't mind if I shared the story that during my divorce and, and this, um, place of feeling really isolated and my faith journey, my daughter came to me and said, I don't think I'm a Christian anymore. I don't

believe in God. And in that moment, um, I just. Decided that what was really important to me was being in relationship with her and, and, and not giving her any more anxiety or stress over it.

And I felt a comfort too, from the Holy Spirit. Like I don't, I'm not in charge of her faith journey, but I know that she's held just like I am, even in moments of doubt and questioning. So I just said to her, you know what the god that we used to follow at that church. I don't believe in that God either.

And I'm okay with you figuring it out just like I will too. So let's just keep talking about it.

Natalie: Yeah. Yeah. That's beautiful.

Marie: Um, yeah. I listen to my kids so much better because of that very thing, Stacey, because I no longer hold to the idea that I'm the one who needs to make sure they believe a certain way. Um. And that gives me so much freedom to love them well, they can rage, doubt, ask questions, disagree with me, and I'm a safe place to do that.

In fact, one of my kids just this week said, I don't even know what I think about this life and what it means anymore. You know, and, and then she's not in despair. She's just like, I don't even know. I mean, and that she can say that to me and she knows I'm not gonna, I'm just gonna listen. I'm listening with her.

And, and, and she can say that. And I think that is so much. Um. I think that is just a beautiful way of holding space for her and letting her see that I trust in Big G God. Yeah. Enough. And I believe his words by him saying He will never leave us. He is always with us to the end of the age. Do I believe that or not?

Yes. Yes I do. And he is with her. He is with her. He, it, his faithfulness doesn't, is not conditional based on our doing. 'cause then again, that's a conditional, very, um, transactional God, which is not the God we serve.

Natalie: Right, right. In the mirror Bible translation that we are going through in Flying higher. It is over and over and over again.

It compares the works-based law-based idea of God to what Christ did, and it uplifts the work of Christ as being all powerful, accomplishing everything for everyone. And this takes out what it, what it's been doing for us is it's been removing the fear factor. You know, the Bible talks a lot about not being afraid.

My greatest fear, I, I struggle with great anxiety as a child because I grew, well, I talk about this in my book, all the Scary Little Gods. But because of all of, there's so much religious anxiety. Because it was a very workspace, law-based religion that I, and it was, it was Christian, the Christian religion, right?

Um, but what that produced in me was tremendous fear over hell. And my kid's going to hell and my grandparents going to hell, and my relative's going to hell. And what that, what that fear does is it makes you then wanna go to people and say, you're wrong. You're wrong. And you need to know what's right so that you go to heaven and you need to do this and you need to do that.

And you need to pray the prayer, and you need to pray the prayer correctly. And you need to really mean it. And you need to, you know, and it, and like how do you control all, all of that? But that is what we see a lot in the Christian world is a lot of, um. Panic, like interfere, anxiety and panic over this kind of thing.

And then we, in order to take back control over what we feel like we have no control over, we show up in these ways with other people and we can come across. And what, what does that do? It makes people run. The other direction. They don't wanna be, they're, they don't, they don't. Number one, that does not sound like good news at all.

That sounds like freaky scary. And number two, like people, generally speaking, none of us wanna be told you're wrong and I'm right and you need to do what I say and all of that. People don't like that, but Jesus Christ, uh, we're in the Book of Luke right now. He actually came and taught purposefully, intentionally taught the exact opposite of that, and not only taught it, but he showed it and demonstrated it by his persona and by what he did and by the ways he interacted with people.

The Pharisees hated that. The religious leaders, of course, hated that because he was basically taking away the key for their control over the people, and that's exactly what Christ does. When we truly enter into our identity in Christ and we all have it, we just don't always believe it. But when we truly enter into that.

It removes that, that fear dissipates and then our, then when our child comes to us and says, well, I don't really believe in God anymore. We can, we don't have to panic and be afraid. Oh no, but you have to and shake their shoulders and you're gonna go to hell and all of that. We can go, it's okay because there's so many stories in the gospels that say Jesus Christ, he is the great shepherd and he.

Goes out if there's one lost lamb out there, the very last one, it's not over until the last one's in the fold. All of them, he doesn't like let some of them get lost and fall off cliffs. Every single last one is in the fold. There's so many stories in the gospels that show this concept, but. I just, I, I also have a couple of kids who said, I don't believe in God anymore, and I have so much hope.

I don't have to be afraid for them because again, just like you were saying, you guys, the, it's not about me and my control. It's not about them and what they do and how they're showing up. It's about what Jesus Christ already did. The work is finished. You're right. We are all held. Whether we recognize that and believe that in certain ways or not, that's irrelevant because it doesn't depend on us.

It depends on God and he already did it. That's the, that is the good news. That is the gospel that Jesus Christ came to bring. So I have to stop preaching now and let's close. Actually, you know what this, we probably just need to close right now 'cause, 'cause we're out of time. I still have to go to get on a roll.

I could talk about this stuff all the time. That

Marie: was a perfect

Diana: place

Marie: to end it.

Diana: It

Marie: was, it was beautiful. I love it when all of us get on this. It's like we're preaching, you know? Yeah, yeah.

Natalie: We're all, well, we're all passionate about it because we have, this has been forged in fires in our personal lives, like, like deep, dark.

Moments of the soul in the middle of the night when we have wrestled with is there a God and what kind of dark abyss are we falling into if, if we decide that there's not, and what is belief and what is faith and. And who is God and who are we and what is our point? We've, all four of us have wrestled with that.

So if you're listening and that's been where you've been at, just know that is part of the human experience and there's nothing wrong with that. That is good, that is healthy. And yes, it hurts. And yet it's part of your journey. It's part of the

story that you get to write. You are co-creating the story of your life with God, even if you're not, even if you don't believe in him.

He's still there with you. It's, I always tell my kids it's the storm. We don't, especially in a really dark thunderstorm or a hurricane, you don't see the sun at all. It is dark as night, and, but that doesn't mean that the sun is not there. It just means we can't see it. We can't feel it, and it can feel really, really frightening.

But God has us, and God has this just like God has this planet. And the, the sun is out there always shining on this planet. The God, our creator, whatever you wanna call this being who created us, we are held in his hands. And you are held no matter what You're, where you are in your faith journey. Alright, you, you guys, thank you so much for being with me and um, and thank you for listening.

If you wanna join Flying, hire and hang out with us, you can just go to join Flying hire.com. And until next time, why hire?