



God Hears Her Podcast

Episode 76 - Abuse in the Church

Elisa Morgan and Eryn Eddy with Dr. Amanda Benckhuysen

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[Music]

Voice: You're listening to *God Hears Her*. A podcast for women where we explore the stunning truth that God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His. Find out how these realities free you today on *God Hears Her*.

Eryn: Welcome to *God Hears Her*. I'm Eryn Eddy.

Elisa: And I'm Elisa Morgan. We recently had Dr. Amanda Benckhuysen on the show to talk about the rich history of women in the church and the importance of women to God.

Eryn: Unfortunately, I wasn't able to be a part of this conversation, but we didn't want to pass up this opportunity. Dr. Amanda has joined us again to talk about a topic that tends to be ignored in the church—the topic of abuse. Her current role is as the Director of Safe Church Ministry for the Christian Reformed Church, and she has so much insight, but before we get into the show, if you or someone you know is being abused, there are options for help. Call 1-800-799-7233 or visit thehotline.org. You are not alone. You are seen, valued, and loved.



Elisa: Yes, thank you, Eryn. And just a quick note too for those of you who have experienced abuse in the past, this episode could be triggering for you. For those who haven't listened to our previous episode with Dr. Amanda, she is the author of *The Gospel According to Eve* and *Immigrants, the Bible, and You*. She's also a scholar, speaker, teacher, wife, mother, and follower of Jesus. For 15 years, she was a mentor to seminary students, and it was during that season where she learned how common abuse is and it impacts a lot of people.

Eryn: Let's learn more on this episode of *God Hears Her*.

Elisa: So, Amanda, we've talked previously about your stunning [Laughing] understanding of God's love for you and His wooing you into actual ministry and going to seminary and discovering these incredible, very early mothers of the church, if you will...

Amanda: Yes. Yeah.

Elisa: ...who brought a different perspective to interpreting Scripture, and you know, I just want to encourage our listeners, if you haven't heard that, that it's such a rich conversation um it...it's got roots both in how God sees us and how He reveals our giftedness and woos us forward to invest it. But I wanted...if you could just pick up your story, how did you move from this seminary focus where you got your PhD and you became a prof into your current work, which is terribly interesting and needed, dealing with abuse in the church?

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah, so currently I serve as the Director of Safe Church Ministry for the Christian Reformed Church, which is a ministry that equips the churches in abuse awareness prevention and response, and that's a new position for me, so I'm...I'm still getting my feet wet and finding my way, but as I think about my journey, I think the seeds for this were planted quite a long time ago, so actually after I went through seminary and graduated with my Master of Divinity, I spent a number of years in campus ministry at the University of Michigan as the Christian Reformed campus minister there on that campus.

Elisa: And that's where...that's where you first discovered God in a really personal way, right? During that season for yourself or a little bit younger?

Amanda: So I had come to know Jesus more fully during a...through campus ministry when it was in university, and it was one of the things that led me back into campus ministry...



Elisa: Ah.

Amanda: ...is like I wanted to sort of do for others what I had experienced, right? So...so that felt like a really important place to begin my ministry after...after graduating from seminary. And I can remember there was a young woman who came to visit me in my office, and she was taking an English class, and the English class was on sixteenth century literature or something like that, and they were studying the King James Version of the Bible.

Elisa: Uh huh.

Amanda: And she was not a Christian, did not grow up in a Christian home, and she came to me because she said, "I saw that your door was open, and I need some help trying to understand what this all means, because..."

Elisa: Wow.

Amanda: ...I'm reading this old King James language and just not getting it.

Elisa: It's tough. Mm-hmm.

Amanda: So we met a couple of times, and I sat down with her and we would read through the Scriptures that she was assigned, and we would talk about it and I would point out different things and um share with her some of the beauty of the language and the imagery she was encountering and try to give her a sense of sort the literary dimensions and the historical context and in any case, at one point, I just simply asked her like *So, you know, now that you've dipped your toe in...*

Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: *...you've read some of the Scriptures, what do you think, and do...do you ever see yourself becoming someone who would study the Bible, or would you consider being someone who might consider Christianity as...as something that would add meaning and value to your life? And...*

Elisa: Those are lovely questions.

Amanda: [Laughing] And ah she was very abrupt. [Laughing]



Elisa: Okay. Okay, running for the street there, yeah.

Amanda: Yeah, here answer actually took me aback. She said, “I would never become a Christian. I would never want the Bible to become authoritative in my life because it’s not good news for women.”

Elisa: Oh wow!

Amanda: Yeah. Ah so that was...that was a profound moment and a hard one.

Elisa: What did she mean by that?

Amanda: Well I think what she meant is that she had encountered so many people who were in churches or um who would point to different Scriptures and say, *See, women are subordinate to men.* Or *Women are of less value than men.* Or *Women are inferior.* [Laughing]

Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: And she was like *I’m not having any of it.*

Elisa: Not having it. Yep. Yep.

Amanda: *That’s not me. I don’t...I don’t believe it. I don’t want it. I...I don’t want to fight it. I just don’t want to be part of that culture.*

Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: But that kind of took me aback, because I also did not believe that women were inferior to men and yet...

Elisa: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Amanda: ...here I was a...a campus minister, sharing the good news of the gospel with others, and yet, this seemed to be a real stumbling block. And that was heartbreaking for me, and I just...I share that story because I think there are things in the Christian tradition and in Christian practice and in Christian cultures



that have been such huge stumbling blocks to the gospel, and they shouldn't be, because they're not actually of God, and I...abuse is one of them.

Elisa: Right. You know I'm...as you have this big topic of abuse...

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: ...that you're the Director of Safe Church to deal with, to identify it, to report it, to help people recover from it, to prevent it, I'm struck by the first example you give, which is pretty much any woman interacting with some people's interpretation of Scripture. But in the way you've described it, it strikes me that even reading Scripture and being exposed to some versions of interpretation can be abusive...

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: ...for women.

Amanda: It certainly can feel um not just off-putting, but triggering, damaging, right?

Elisa: Ah. Mm-hmm.

Amanda: If you have grown up in a situation where you have been treated as or told that you are somehow less than, you are inferior, than to...to go to the Scriptures where...or to a Christian community where we say *But God loves everyone*, you know, like God is a God of love, and to encounter there again this um sense of feeling small. Being made to feel small. Being made to feel less than what you...you believe that you are, right? Um that's...that can be very damaging.

Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: And I...I think we overlook it really quickly. Um as women, I don't know, it seems like we would overlook it because we want to diminish that reality. As...as men, I think we wouldn't believe it happens kind of a thing. Go back in your story now, and so this interaction was when you were a campus minister and then you end up going forward. Fill in that gap...



Amanda: Right.

Elisa: ...or so between what you did then and now what you're beginning to undertake.

Amanda: Yeah, so it was actually after I served in campus ministry for a while, and I went back and did my graduate studies and...and I...I became a professor of Old Testament. I served at two different seminaries and one of them was here at...at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids for the last 7 years, so I...I served in a teaching role for about 13 years total, and what struck me is during that time um because I was often one of a few female professors, like most of the faculty was still male, so I was one of the few safe people for women in those institutions, and I...I found I had a lot of women coming to me sharing stories of pasts where they were ah emotionally abused, some were sexually abused, some were spiritually abused, some were all of the above, and it just broke my heart. You know, a lot of them were coming to seminary in some ways to find healing, but also to channel their brokenness in a way that would redeem it. [Laughing]

Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: To allow God to redeem the brokenness so that God could use it to bring healing to others. And I admired them for that, and, you know, they were at various points on their journey towards healing. Some were really healthy by the time they got to seminary, but they had these stories that drove them. And others not as healthy and needed, you know, to spend more time in counseling, and you could see the...the...the impact that the abuse had had on their lives and continued to have on their lives. Like women who were clearly so gifted, so, you know, made in God's image, people of dignity and value and worth, and yet had been beaten down.

Elisa: Hmm.

Amanda: And it just broke my heart and...and this was done at the hands of those who claimed to love Jesus. [Laughing] And I...so this is...this for me is where, um yeah, I...I felt a need to kind of step in and say *Okay, if my...I can lend anything to this cause, I feel like I need to do this, because I think this is a place where we as a church are...are falling short. We...this is a sin that is compromising the integrity of the gospel and it's damaging people's lives in significant ways.* And so I just...I felt like we needed to give it more attention, and I think I'm not alone in that. I think there's a whole raft of people who are saying, *This is wrong, and it needs to change.* So.



Elisa: We see attention given to this issue in secular society. It feels a little like the church is late to the game ah both in owning it and in addressing it.

Amanda: Yeah, absolutely. I, you know, one of the things I've noted for my own circles is that when trust and loyalty run high, but accountability runs low, it's like the perfect situation for abuse.

Elisa: Yeah.

Amanda: And I think with ministry leaders we tend to make assumptions about the fact that they're going to conduct themselves in godly ways, and we assume that they have healthy boundaries, and we assume, you know, all good things about them, and I...I totally understand and appreciate that, but we're actually making higher assumptions about them than we would of others who are working out...outside of the church. So I tell the story that I once had an elder who was talking to me about *Well how do I...how do I help our ministry leaders understand what we expect in terms of conduct?* And I said, *Well we have a code of conduct. How about you have them sign a code of conduct and how about you walk it through it with them and how about you use it as a conversation piece for annual evaluations?* And he was kind of taken aback. He was like, *I own my own business. I have all my employees sign a code of conduct, but it never occurred to me...*It never occurred to him that he would have to ask, or that it would be a good idea, to ask ministry leaders in the church to sign a code of conduct, because he assumed that they would know how to behave, right? But I...I hear stories...

Elisa: Wow.

Amanda: ...in my current role all the time about ministry leaders who don't know how to behave very well, right?

Elisa: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Amanda: Um and I...

Elisa: Why...why don't we...why do we pull back from that? Do you think we're in denial? Do you think we're ashamed of our humanness? Um are we naïve, thinking that once you know Jesus, you're never going to sin again? You know, what kinds of issues keep us with our heads in the sand?



Amanda: That's such a good question. I...you know, I think some of it is we just don't want to believe it. Right? We don't want to believe that our leaders are broken, that they might have weaknesses, that they might engage in behaviors that we find deeply problematic. There's a kind of loyalty there toward our...our institutions and our leaders. I think there's also we feel like we're protecting the gospel when we don't speak up um if we can kind of brush it under the rug.

Elisa: Cover it up.

Amanda: Cover it up. Don't...

Elisa: Don't let it come out. Deal with it behind the scenes.

Amanda: Exactly.

[Music]

Elisa: When we come back, Dr. Amanda Benckhusen will share the statistics of abuse—the numbers are higher than you might think—and ways we can help when we think abuse is taking place. That's coming up on *God Hears Her*.

[Music]

Eryn: Thank you for listening to this *God Hears Her* podcast. Elisa and I love sharing this space with you, and we want to invite you to become an even bigger part of our *God Hears Her* community by signing up for our weekly email newsletters. We'll keep you updated on new podcasts, encouraging blog posts, exciting new products, and so much more. Just go to godhearsher.org and sign up today. That's godhearsher.org. Before we dive into the conversation, we just want to remind you to visit thehotline.org if you or someone you know is being abused or you suspect abuse is happening, call 1-800-799-7233. Now, let's get back to our conversation with Dr. Amanda Benckhuysen on this episode of *God Hears Her*.

Elisa: I don't know what the statistics are this particular day because they increase all the time, but the number of children who are abused or women who are abused, do you have those stats on you?



Amanda: Yeah, I think the Department of Justice has said one in three women experience sexual abuse at some point in their life, and one in six men. So um this is not just...I like to emphasize this. This is not just a woman's issue. Actually...

Elisa: That's good.

Amanda: ...this is a human issue, right? I mean it affects both men and women. It affects women more often, more frequently, but it affects men both directly and tendentially in their relationships with women.

Elisa: That's insightful.

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: And so just look around the room wherever you are, or you know if you're driving, look around the cars and you can do the math.

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: And...and, you know, the reality, this is an old statement, but it's just true *hurt people hurt people*.

Amanda: Right.

Elisa: And for those who know Christ and those who don't, when we have been hurt, unwittingly, we often act out our hurt.

Amanda: Right.

Elisa: And...and so those who are in ministry, those who are serving in our churches, we need to offer the help and the accountability that they can work through any hurt issues, so they don't continue those patterns. How would you direct those who are listening...just the two elements? One is if you've been abused.

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: How do you report that and how do you get help?



Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: And then the other one is how do you help someone you know who's been...

Amanda: Abused? Yeah, those are great questions. So if it is a child who you suspect of abuse, many states and in the United States and many provinces require those who hold specific roles, and one of them is a ministry leader, to...they hold them to mandatory reporting. So you have to report it to the police or to Child Protective Services or um, you have to...even if you just suspect it.

Elisa: So if you're working with someone and if you're in that kind of a role, it's your responsibility to report.

Amanda: Yeah, it absolutely is. Now there are some states that give a loophole for ministry leaders because of the confidentiality they want to respect in honor between a ministry leader and a person they may be counseling. But in our denomination, we are now saying we actually expect all of our ministry leaders to be mandatory reporters regardless of what the state says.

Elisa: Hmm.

Amanda: Um and that when you enter into a counseling relationship, you just state upfront, you know, *I will keep this all confidential, unless I have the need to report it by the code of my denomination because it involves abuse of a minor.*

Elisa: So you can check in with your own laws and what's...what you're responsible for if you're in that kind of a capacity.

Amanda: Yep.

Elisa: If you...if you are being abused or you have been abused, what recourse...what would you suggest, because lots of times those who've experienced abuse are not taken seriously, they're ignored, they're dismissed...

Amanda: Yeah.



Elisa: ...they're ridiculed, they're punished.

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah, so I think that's where every denomination right now is realizing *Wow! We need to do better.* Right? We need systems for reporting abuse. Um we need means of responding to abuse that are systematic, that um are survivor-centered, and so in our denomination, we do have a system where people alert someone in the congregation who is a Safe Church champion.

Elisa: Hmm.

Amanda: So we have Safe Church champions or Safe Church leaders in hopefully every congregation and then in every region who work with those who have been abused. But it doesn't always mean that their abuse will be taken seriously by the ministry leaders, right? Or by the churches themselves. So it is complicated, and sometimes reporting abuse (sighs)...I mean, I wish it were a better system, but sometimes it actually leads to more triggering.

Elisa: Hmm.

Amanda: And so, yeah, I think...I think this where the onus is on the church to do better, to provide those opportunities and those spaces for ah those who have been abused, to report in ways that are safe...

Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: ...and that will put the survivor first.

Elisa: When you talk about triggering...

Amanda: Mm-hmm.

Elisa: ...can you define that because I'm not sure everybody views it the same way.

Amanda: Yeah, so if the way that the...if they report abuse and it's responded to with the same sense of rejection or the same sense being made feel to be dismissed or to made to feel small or made to feel less than or as the abuse that they've experienced, then it's a trigger, right? Then they're triggered again, and all the emotions associated with that initial abuse come to the surface again.



Elisa: It feels like they're being re-abused.

Amanda: If they're being re-abused.

Elisa: Okay.

Amanda: Absolutely.

Elisa: And what would you say, you know, Amanda, as...as you look at this huge issue. You know, and you've...you've entered this world from a classroom world where you've been a professor and stuff, and you know honestly the needs in the classroom are just as severe as the needs in the church. I know that. I served as a Bible college professor too and one of only women.

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: And the women would come and that's fantastic. We need to realize that's a role God has had for us to help each other out, but...but what's your prayer, you know, as...as you undertake this assignment. What are you just really praying God accomplishes in you and...and through you?

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah, so let me backtrack for just a minute and just say if any of our listeners are in a situation where their life is actually in danger and they are experiencing domestic violence, my encouragement would simply be get out.

Elisa: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Amanda: There are resources within every community that can help those who are ah survivors or victims of domestic violence. Places that will help you...receive you, will counsel you, will encourage you, and will help you figure out how to...to go forward in a way that um keeps you safe, and I recognize this is an incredibly hard thing to do, and I recognize that some of our listeners may be in those kinds of relationships and perhaps they've tried to get out before.

Elisa: Mm-hmm. Mm hmm.

Amanda: This...this is not easy, and so for all of you who find yourself in that situation, let me just say, you are so brave.



Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: You are so brave, right? But God loves you. God values you. You have dignity and worth. And God longs for something better for you, and so our prayer for you is that you would again find ways, find the support systems that you need to get out of those relationships that are bringing you harm.

Elisa: Yeah, and we'll put some contact information in the show notes here so that you can access that.

Amanda: Yeah, absolutely. I think my prayer is that we as a church would recognize that part of what God longs for for Christian community is that it would be a safe place for people to find healing. We are all broken people. We are all impacted by sin one way or another. We're both sinners and we're impacted by the brokenness of the world. But God longs to bring healing to our communities and that is exactly what the cross is about. It's about taking all this sin and evil and brokenness um on Jesus and Him dying...His dying on the cross so that we can have new life. So I guess my hope is because I am also an ordained pastor, to be able to have a conversation with my fellow colleagues in ministry and say *Hey, can we make a commitment together to do better for the sake of Christian community, for the sake of God's vision for us to be a healing community?* That um we would work hard and be intentional about being places where those who have experienced abuse can come and know that they're going to be valued, know that they're going to feel safe, know that their story and their voice matters, know that they can find healing there and support. Yeah, so I...I think I'm more about corralling all these ministry leaders and saying *Let's do this together.* Because this is really important. Enough is enough. One in three women, right?

Elisa: Yep.

Amanda: One in three women. That's way too many people. One in six men.

Elisa: One in six men. Yeah. And to...to just also we need to be intentional to say if there's someone listening right now who is slipped into abusing...

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: ...there's help for you too.

Amanda: Absolutely.



Elisa: I mean, everyone of us, as you said, Amanda, is broken.

Amanda: Yeah.

Elisa: And...and we want to, you know, have all the arrows of our lives honestly pointing in the correct direction. It's where God and His Holy Spirit want to provide healing.

Amanda: Amen. Yeah, actually one of the things I...I've said to some of my colleagues is *You know, it is...it is hard to be a ministry leader. There are stresses and pressures in the job that can become overwhelming, and you lose sight of things like healthy boundaries, and you lose sight of establishing good practices around how you interact with others, and you can get testy. Or you can...you can think too highly of yourself. Like you can set yourself on a trajectory where...*

Elisa: Yeah. Yeah.

Amanda: *...if you're not held accountable, you begin to think too highly of yourself.* And I kind of joke with some people. I'll say, *Like how can you not think too highly of yourself when Sunday after Sunday you have 20 to 30 minutes of everybody's attention. Like you're the center of their world.* [Laughing] *How do you not think too highly of yourself, right?* But it's when you lose sight and lose perspective on those kinds of things, that you fall into really bad patterns in terms of the ways that you treat other people, and you begin to treat other people as less than you. Or, you know, you become emotionally abusive, and sometimes even sexually abusive. You take advantage of somebody else's vulnerability, and um you can find all kinds of ways to justify it, but actually I think what we need in ministry is more accountability. You know, more help as ministry leaders. People who will come alongside us and hold us accountable and tell us when we're not behaving in ways that we should behave, you know. That we're behaving in ways that are hurting and bringing harm to others. So yeah, I guess my hope is that there would be a greater awareness of our own propensity to sin and our own need for accountability and help in this.

Elisa: We need each other.

Amanda: We need each other! Amen.

Elisa: Every one of us.



Amanda: Absolutely.

Elisa: Yeah.

Amanda: Yeah.

[Music]

Elisa: Healing isn't impossible. God is with each and everyone of us and He can help us heal regardless of what we've done or what we've experienced. We're so thankful for this conversation with Dr. Amanda and the truth she's exposed about abuse within the church and ministries.

Eryn: It was such a good conversation and one that needed to happen. We can all work together and hold each other accountable to protect those who are hurting.

Elisa: Before we close out today's episode of *God Hear Her*, we want to remind you that the show notes are available in the podcast description. There's a link for more information about Dr. Amanda Benckhuysen and a link to order her books. There are also links to connect with Eryn and me on social. You can visit our website at godhearsher.org. That's godhearsher.org.

Eryn: Thank you for joining us and don't forget God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His.

[Music]

Elisa: Today's episode was engineered by Anne Steven and produced by Mary Jo Clark, Daniel Ryan Day, and Jade Gustafson. We also want to recognize Alecia and Rochelle for all their hard work. We appreciate you all. Thank you.

Eryn: God hears her is a production of Our Daily Bread Ministries.