

Letter of Public Apology – Todd Atkinson

On May 13, 2024, the College of Bishops of the ACNA rendered their sentence. I would like to thank all those who participated in this process. I wish to own everything I am able, in the form of a public apology.

Before I begin my apology, I wish to address the ACNA's decision concerning my relationship with minors. I wholeheartedly deny being in inappropriate relationships or circumstances with minors. The way the decision of the ACNA is written is ambiguous, suggestive, and defamatory and it is not the truth. Had the allegations been true, which they are not, the statutory authorities in Alberta would have been mobilized to address the allegations. This did not occur because there were no inappropriate relationships with minors.

I was appointed Lead Pastor of River of Life Church (later to become Via Church, Lethbridge) in 2006. Our largest growth sector was among millennials who came with three strong desires. They wanted to be taught the Gospel, to be supported in their 'calling', and to experience an 'authentic Christ-centered community.' As their pastor, I earnestly tried to meet these needs. I deeply regret where I fell short.

Those who were expressing a desire for 'community' had a distinctive understanding of that word. By community, they meant doing daily life with close-knit, almost family-esque friendships. Many of them were geographically or emotionally distant from their biological families. The hashtag *#myviafamily* was used frequently on social media. Some of those who came to Via related to me as a spiritual father figure. I have many Father's Day messages from these individuals verifying this is what some wanted from me. The point at which this became most problematic was when over time, and to a few individuals, I began acting more like a surrogate father¹ than a spiritual father.

In 2015, prior to joining the ACNA, I invited an ACNA bishop to investigate the nature of my spiritual fathering within Via. The investigation was completed in 2016 and concluded that I was guilty of 'emotional co-dependency.' I accepted this conclusion. I remain grateful to that investigator who went above and beyond. Not only did he identify my errors, but he helped me to understand them and their impacts. Afterwards, I issued apologies, both privately and publicly, to everyone I understood was affected. I stepped away from ministry for a year to seek counsel and personal growth. Never again did I act as a surrogate father to anyone.

I would like to do more than simply re-express the apologies I issued in 2015/16. I have had nine years to reflect and to grow as a person, and my understanding of the issues has likewise grown. By acting in fatherly ways towards people, I wanted so badly to do some good, but I accept that this created injury.

¹ <https://dictionary.apa.org/father-surrogate>

At that time I sincerely believed that what I was doing would strengthen marriages and families. Now, I can see that what I was doing drew emotional energy in my direction which hurt marriages and families. I was hoping to point these people to the Heavenly Father where they would find healing but instead created dependency upon myself rather than God. I was preoccupied with the good I wanted to see happen and I was blind to the concerning things that were actually happening. When concerns were raised, it was never my intention to ignore them. Rather, I interpreted them as “I’ll have to try harder” or “There is something here for me to learn or improve upon.” I should have promptly stopped, not tried to improve, and not waited until I was asked to stop.

Interpreting the concerns the way I did could only have had one effect – it would have made those affected feel ignored, whether that was my intention or not. To have felt ignored, or that your concerns were not taken seriously when it came to the welfare of families, would have been unbearable for you. A few felt they needed to leave Via altogether because of this. I didn’t fully appreciate this until I too was displaced from my community, friends, and place of belonging. Now, I understand your experience more fully. I am desperately sorry for ALL of this. My remorse is deeper than I can put here in words.

I had a reasonably good idea about pastoral boundaries when it came to the larger congregation, but I treated these instances, where someone was looking to me as a father figure, as an exception. Unfortunately, in those instances, I contravened normal pastoral boundaries. I extended excessive affirmation, attention, attachment, affection, communication, and generosity to those individuals. These actions caused tension, confusion, and sometimes conflict within these families. That level of attention should have been reserved solely for my own children. This excessive behaviour towards those outside of my own family was entirely inexcusable, and I am heartbroken thinking back upon what I did, how blind I was at that time, and the damage I caused people whom I loved.

To all those hurt in any way by my misguided fathering efforts, the individuals themselves, their spouses, and their children, I beg your forgiveness. I have no defence – I was wholly in the wrong and I am communicating that before the world. I would have expressed my repentance earlier but was required by the ACNA not to communicate with you. I am so sorry if that silence appeared like a lack of remorse.

To those who were directly affected by the above issues, together with those who had to witness them, I realize that this behaviour caused a breakdown of trust in my leadership. You came to Lethbridge because you trusted me to teach you the Gospel, to advance your calling, and to provide you with a loving community. To all of you who previously belonged to Via, I am desperately sorry for acting in a way that no longer deserved your trust. Through losing trust I have come to appreciate how invaluable trust truly is and how it must be safeguarded.

The mistakes I made during my years of leadership at River of Life Church and Via Church Lethbridge were not limited to spiritual fathering. Whereas a handful of people were directly

affected by my acting as a father figure, many more people were affected by my unhealed places and general lack of maturity.

I was attempting to follow what has been called a 'Jesus model of ministry' (Jesus ministered to crowds but gave his most concentrated and personal attention to a group of 12). However, when I followed that model, or my version of it, it gave the church in Lethbridge a sense that there was an inner circle, and that most of them were excluded from it, which created hard feelings. People could not tell if they were in or out of that inner circle, if they needed to do something to get into it, or if they had done something wrong to be put out of it. This kind of social uncertainty was hurtful to people in our community, and now, after having experienced a great deal of isolation and exclusion myself, I am deeply sympathetic and sorry that this was your experience. I earnestly wanted everyone in Via to feel seen, valued, and loved. I sincerely apologise for every occasion when you felt the reverse.

Another area of personal weakness was the way I did conflict. I disliked conflict and didn't feel confident in it. This caused me to be either overly passive or to come on too strongly. I want to apologize for every instance where I didn't listen well, where I disagreed poorly, where I offered excuses rather than responses, where I was sharp, impatient, or ungracious. Sometimes, when I felt someone wasn't taking my point, I would say it more strongly. That strength was hurtful to people. I could also be very defensive when disagreed with. This caused insecurity in people. They were unsure if, in disagreement, they were going to get empathetic Todd or defensive Todd.

Constitutionally, Via Lethbridge was a board-led² church, so all major decisions and future direction were settled by the local governing board. As the Lead Pastor, I was then tasked to communicate, teach, and execute those decisions made by the board. When people asked questions about this, I somehow felt the need to defend the decisions of the board. Defensiveness in this form, added to my own personal defensiveness, made for very unhealthy conflict. I publicly repent of this, and its impacts upon people. Pastors must be excellent at doing conflict, and I was poor at it. I am saddened knowing that people were hurt in this way.³

One of the factors that drove a lot of unhealth in our church was my personal need for external validation. When someone would say something like, 'We're so glad to have you as our pastor', or 'You're like the father I never had' I took that as a confirmation that I was doing something good and helpful (even when it wasn't). I wanted and needed to hear things that made me feel like I was making a positive difference, and that I was a success in ministry. When someone would come to our church feeling let down by their last church, their previous leaders, their parents, or by life in general, I felt obligated to do everything in my power to provide those people with a positive experience to help them heal from their negative experiences. This caused me to do too much, to be too large in people's lives, to overextend, to be excessive. And

² We were locally governed by an elected board. After we became Anglican, this was called the vestry.

³ I have since spent a year training as a mediator in the hope that I might turn an area of personal weakness into one of strength.

because I could only offer that much attention to a limited number of people, it hurt and excluded those who didn't receive that level of attention. It made them feel like I had favourites and that they were inferior. I set out to build a thoroughly Christ-centered church but somewhere along the line, it became too much about me, my efforts, and my success. To all those who were previously part of Via, I am so very sorry that I needed so much validation, for the ways I went about gaining it, and for becoming too large in our church. We came together around a common vision that was important to us all. Watching Via, which we had built together, crumble and lose her way, was a heart-rending disappointment for many of you. The loss of a treasured dream is a deep grief indeed. Please, please forgive me for my large part in that!⁴

In 2003-2006 we grew from 260 average Sunday attendance (ASA) on a Sunday to 850. In 2006 I was appointed Lead Pastor, but I was in over my head in many ways and didn't know it. I was underqualified to lead such a large and wonderful church. That inexperience had a real impact on the church.

I learned of a church growth strategy called 'staffing for growth' that I thought might help us break the 1000 ASA mark. The board approved 5 new staff at my request. Soon after, when we began to lose people from our congregation, our finances suffered as a result. We were left with a very large staff and a shrinking budget. Practically, this meant that the church could not afford so many staff which meant staff wages were unreasonably low for many years. I am just so sorry for the financial tightness and corresponding anxiety this would have caused staff families.

River of Life Church went through a huge metamorphosis in a short period of time. From a change in Lead Pastors, through to a "Three-Stream" style of worship⁵, to our becoming Anglican (and scores of small changes within these large milestones). Big changes in a church take a toll on the congregation. A portion of our congregation would have been pleased to remain as River of Life Church. Another portion was at home in the Three-Stream emphasis. Others welcomed us becoming fully Anglican. With each change I introduced, a percentage of our people felt unheard and excluded. Most of these eventually left our church. It was also incredibly painful for those who remained to see their friends and family leaving the church. I want to apologize to those who left our congregation and those who remained. That was too much change in too short a span of time for any congregation to handle, and I feel a deep sadness for the loss of relationships you suffered. I am especially sensitive to those who were seniors in our church. These changes undoubtedly made you feel like your spiritual home had been taken from you. I am so sorry.

⁴ In 2019 I began training as a Spiritual Director and learned so much about being intentionally small in people's lives so that they can experience God's largeness. This training also had a welcome emphasis on keeping emotional boundaries.

⁵ An approach to worship involving three emphases: Scripture, Spirit, and Sacraments. This has also been called 'Convergence' because it was perceived as a coming together or converging of emphases from the Evangelical, Charismatic, and Historic Churches.

Prior to reading the allegations, I was not aware that some aspects of my leadership style had been experienced so negatively. Because I loved the way Jesus trained his disciples, I tried to follow that model and I did live in close proximity to those I led. Consequently, you saw my good days and my bad days alike, my strengths and my weaknesses, my bright emotions and my dark ones. If I was hurt, insecure, or uncertain, I could easily become quiet (I didn't want to say something I later regretted). On other occasions, if I was upset, that was not hidden from you. What I did not understand at the time was the way you felt controlled by my emotional responses. Thank you for making me aware of that. Please, forgive me for the negative impact this had upon you! I don't expect I will ever get the opportunity to be a leader again, but I would have looked forward to doing this differently in the future.

I was advised that an open letter should only be a paragraph or two. I regret my letter being so lengthy but if it was shorter, I might have run the risk of it sounding insincere, which would not bring healing. Even at this length, it pains me to know I will have missed some grievances.

Those of you who belonged to Via churches, it is to you that I am directing this letter. You know the messages that burned in my heart. One of them was, *"that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish."*⁶ It was (and remains) my passion to see Jesus have a glorious church that reflects his radiant nature. In my efforts to help remove some of the blemishes, I'm afraid I only ended up adding some, and that distresses me greatly. It is my hope that this letter of apology will address many of those and that even through my public repentance, Jesus' church may be made a little more beautiful.⁷ I spent 36 years proclaiming the Gospel and now I stand in need of that same Gospel. To all those who have felt hurt by my leadership, I humbly ask that you extend to me the forgiveness, mercy, and restoration that is extended to us in the Gospel.

Todd Atkinson

June 09, 2024

Feast Day of St. Columba, instigator of Irish civil war who then became Abbot of Iona and Missionary to the Scots, 597.

Copies sent to:

ACNA Archbishop Steve Wood & the ACNA College of Bishops
Vestry of Christ the Redeemer Church (formerly Via Church Lethbridge)

⁶ Ephesians 5:27 ASV

⁷ Luke 18:13

