

# Push Back the Dark: Companionship for Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

*Elizabeth M. Altmaier* | Reviewed by *Anna Snyder*

In her book *Push Back the Dark: Companionship for Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, Dr. Elizabeth Altmaier combines her professional career as a psychologist and professor with her personal experience as a survivor of child sexual abuse to offer this approachable guide for churches supporting adults who experienced child sexual abuse. At the beginning of the book, Dr. Altmaier thoughtfully explains her decision to use the term “victim” rather than “survivor” to describe those who experienced sexual abuse as children, as the word “victim” more accurately describes what was done to the child and the power differential of the abuse.

Dr. Altmaier carefully explores the complicated, sensitive topic of sexual abuse by providing foundational information about child development, the dynamics of abuse, and the ways trauma plays out over a lifetime. Her book is geared to the lay person who is walking alongside someone, and is not intended to replace professional therapy and treatment. Each chapter is laid out in an organized manner, first identifying the chapter’s objectives, next the chapter’s content, and finally a “case” to read through to put into practice what the chapter offered. Many chapters offer a “toolkit” of resources related to the content. This format may seem redundant or overly academic to some, but it provides clarity and a strong roadmap for readers.

While not a primary focus, Dr. Altmaier acknowledges the ways in which traditional church patriarchy may harm individuals who experience sexual abuse by not providing the care and support they need. This occurs because the patriarchal church is an environment in which primary power and control is given to some and taken from others. Dr. Altmaier consistently implores churches to believe victims, support them, and not inflict shame or further harm by insisting the victim simply forgive the abuser.

I have only two criticisms to offer. First, Dr. Altmaier would have benefited from acknowledging that adult victims of child sex abuse come from many stories and experiences. Her book assumed that the victims are just now, as adults, disclosing the abuse to their loved ones. This overlooks many individuals who have already disclosed abuse, and may have spent years trying to work through it already. The advice offered to “first time disclosers” may be confusing to those who have lived a different story. Second, Dr. Altmaier’s case examples include questions to prompt the reader to think through the application the chapter, but do not include answers or further guidance. It would be helpful to have additional information after the initial questions to confirm that readers are on the right track, or to point them to accurate information. This would help increase confidence and the transfer of learning.

As a clinical social worker who has worked in the field of child welfare for over nine years, I have encountered hundreds of children who have experienced sexual abuse, as well as countless adults I suspected or knew had been abused. While there are resources for working with children, until this book, I had not encountered a book geared to the lay person who desires to support and walk alongside an adult. This book provides detailed and accessible information that hopefully will help churches develop policies, programs, and the openness to support those who need someone to walk alongside them in their journey out of the darkness.

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ANNA SNYDER met her husband Ryan while attending Miami University and they were married shortly after graduating in 2007. They enjoy cooking, spending time with friends, drinking coffee, sharing life together, and learning about/advocating for social justice issues. Anna currently works in a juvenile detention center providing mental health services and counseling.