

The Clergy Project supports ministers who struggle with their beliefs



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Those of us who grew up in the Church, who went to Sunday School, youth groups, Bible studies, mission trips and prayer meetings, know that Christian faith can become your whole life. There is deep satisfaction knowing that the “church family” is your community and God is your companion.

Some of us are “called into the ministry,” choosing to serve the church and the world as ordained clergy. We go to seminary to study Hebrew, Greek, biblical theology, religious history, church government, sacraments, preaching and much more. If we complete three or four years of course work and pass ordination exams, we may be awarded with a master of divinity degree and sent off to find a pastorate.

Along this vocational path, some discover that working in a congregation is not where they feel they need to be. They have skills for teaching or counseling or directing a nonprofit. Their “congregation” is not in a church building but in an agency, a school, prison, hospital or hospice, a university, the military or on the street.

These untidy, secular congregations are wonderfully uncomfortable settings where a chaplain may be more appropriate than a minister. Since chaplains are out among people of many faiths as well as atheists, agnostics and freethinkers, their “mission” can transform into something very different.

Chaplains tend to be out on the “edges” where faith issues are not so clear; they have many things in common with pastors (priests and rabbis too) who serve more traditional congregations yet find their faith is morphing into something very different than what faith or ministry has always looked like.

Some discover over time that they no longer believe what they are “supposed” to believe. Maybe they question some passages in the Bible or some church teaching just doesn’t make sense any longer. Maybe they aren’t sure any more if the dogmas, prayers or sacraments hold the same meaning for them or for their world. By the way, congregational clergy can share these same questions.

Even back in seminary, many of us had big questions about theology and the church. We were constantly grappling with god issues. In fact, many of our professors encouraged this vigorous engagement with theological concerns. Those who avoid hard, honest thinking out of fear they may doubt their cherished beliefs, might judge these professors, but most of us found it energizing.

This can lead to a critical, disruptive stage of faith that can shake a person to the core. When your whole life, your identity, your vocation, everything has centered around God, faith and congregation, what do you do when it all begins to evaporate?

In 2011, a small group of ministers shared their loss of faith with each other. They knew that there were other clergy in ministries across the country who carried a heart-wrenching secret: They did not believe anymore. Where would they find support? The



COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

Clergy Project was formed (clergyproject.org).

The Clergy Project’s mission is “to provide support, community, and hope to current and former religious professionals who no longer believe in the supernatural.” I joined in 2012, and there are more than 700 members in the online community.

Is a pastor who doesn’t believe everything in the Bible or church teachings being dishonest? From my experience with The Clergy Project, it is clear many who still serve congregations struggle with this heart-wrenching question. They are professionals, trained to be truthful and live a life of integrity. Not only do they love serving others, their livelihoods (including pensions) depend on the ministry.

Can you imagine the painful dilemma they feel in this impossible situation? Some risk losing significant relationships by “coming out” as nonbelievers.

To my way of thinking, no one “loses” their faith — they choose to let it go; they make a rational decision to move from believing to not believing. This can be gradual over years or happen suddenly, for instance when one rejects the doctrine of hell, atonement or the virgin birth. An unraveling occurs and they have to admit their faith has no grounding.

There are many good people who are trained counselors, teachers and speakers but the church is no longer their home or family. If we have compassion and curiosity, maybe they can show us how to have the courage to be more honest and truthful.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and Interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and freethinker. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, are new to Asheville, but not new to the issues common in all communities. Learn more at chighland.com.



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